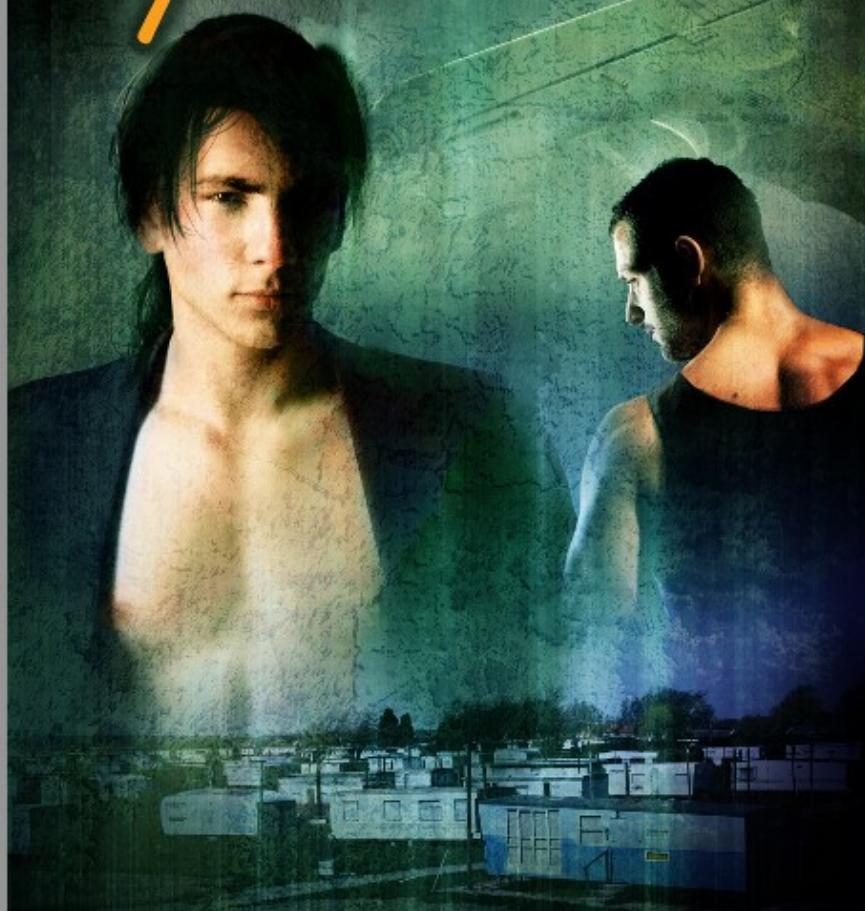


Clare London

72 HOURS



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Dreamspinner Press

Published by
Dreamspinner Press
4760 Preston Road
Suite 244-149
Frisco, TX 75034
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

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72 Hours
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Cover Art by Anne Cain annecain.art@gmail.com
Cover Design by Mara McKennen

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<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

ISBN: 978-1-61581-592-0

Printed in the United States of America
First Edition
September, 2010

eBook edition available
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-593-7

To all those who've bought, read, and supported my fiction in so many ways.

You've given me the precious and exciting opportunity to share it.

Monday 05:30

I WATCHED the five people stumbling up my path with bags and boxes, but I didn't go to help them at first. In fact, I didn't move from the doorway of my trailer at all. I just leaned against the open aluminum door, cultivating the nonchalant look. The nonchalant "I never asked you here in the first place" look.

Didn't work, of course.

It was so early in the morning that the sun had that pale white shine. The air was sharp and a little damp. There was no one else around except a wheeling bird high above us.

I couldn't mistake the twist of misery on Simon Wagner's face. He was genuinely distressed. His soft blond hair looked like he'd run his hands through it a million times this morning, and there were dark shadows sketched in under his baby-blue eyes. His whole expression said, "I'm confused. I'm pissed. I'm out of my depth here." It hit me as strongly as if I felt it myself. I had, of course, in other circumstances. He was a guy who'd always found a way under my defenses, and—just for that moment—my hostility wavered.

Judith Harrington was beside him. Her expression was less easy to read. Nothing new there, then. Even when I'd worked for her, I'd never dared assume I knew what she was really thinking. When she darted one of her glares at me, I stirred myself down the couple of rickety steps and sauntered along the path to take my share of the baggage. I lifted a couple of boxes off of Simon and his assistant, and I helped Judith balance her briefcase on the top of some packaged books. Then I also took two clothes bags off her assistant, Cissy, slinging them over my shoulder. But I refused to help the fifth visitor. I reckoned he was tough enough to take the whole damned lot himself.

We all tottered through the narrow doorway into the trailer, one by one, and piled the stuff in the corner of what I laughingly called my

living room. I had to wedge everything between my shaky, tubular steel-framed couch and the standard lamp that only worked, as far as I could tell, at its own whim. That was the only free space available. Our huffing and heaving brought down a couple of the pictures I'd tacked up on the wall behind the couch, but I didn't make a fuss about it. They were only cut out of magazines, after all.

Instead, I stared at the baggage invasion. Boxes of books and papers and maps, a couple of kit bags of presumably more personal things, a modest pile of clothing protected by thin plastic covers. A cardboard lid flapped shut suddenly, expelling a small puff of dust. A small enough collection of belongings, I guessed, for a single person. The sum total of a life, of twenty-three years. I could tell it had all been packed pretty hurriedly. Some of the boxes were charred slightly at the corners, and there was water damage on the book covers.

Looked pretty pathetic. I swallowed down a comment to that effect.

No one was talking, apart from breathing more heavily from the slight effort. Judith sank on to the couch with a tsking sound, which was probably her only concession to admitting pain. She had a weak ankle, and this removal business wouldn't have helped it. She fell once on a mission, when she'd hurtled down two full floors from an outside fire escape. But as I heard it, she struggled on to the end, supporting a wounded teammate out of the building with her and only then admitting she'd fractured a bone in her ankle. Tough cookie.

She made some small gesture with her hand to Cissy and Greg—Simon's assistant—and they backed off outside again to stand near the foot of the steps. They pulled the door closed behind them, but not completely. I breathed a little more steadily; it had been getting a tad crowded indoors. Just the four of us left, now. Someone cleared a dry throat.

Simon spoke first. He never could stand awkward silences. "It's not for long, Tanner, or so we hope. But there's nowhere else we could find, and no one else we dared ask. You know that, don't you?"

I caught Judith's look out of the corner of my eye and shrugged. "Things must be really bad. I'm not exactly Employee of the Month, am I?"

Simon scowled. "That's not what I mean, and you know it. He's in danger. We *all* are. However, the Department insists we involve as few people as possible outside of the core team. You're one of the very few that has adequate clearance." His voice was thick with repressed emotion. "One of the few that we can trust, dammit!"

I bit at my lip. "Tea, anyone? Beer?" Then I remembered there was no beer. I gave it up a while back. I found all sorts of maudlin feelings crept in when I allowed it around me. No one answered my question, at first, but neither did it stir them into any other action. The mutual glances being thrown around excluded me by their very existence. It reminded me of when I'd last been part of that clique. When I'd been a damned critical part.

And how I no longer *was*.

Simon sighed. "There's a hell of a lot to be done before any of us can rest again. Oh, and tea...? Yes please, for me and Judith. I'll give you a hand with it. Then we can talk everything through together. That okay with you, Tanner?"

"Yeah," I answered slowly, making sure my gaze stayed on him. "Sure it's okay."

SIMON made his way out to the kitchen area ahead of me, lifting aside the bead curtain with barely a glance. I kind of liked it, though purple and black wouldn't have been my first color choice if I'd decorated the place myself. I pushed after him, needing to get in there before he discovered just how few creature comforts I actually had. I reckoned I could remember where there were a few more tea bags left in a cracked pot; perhaps a couple of washed mugs apart from the large blue one I used daily. It's not like I'd wanted to entertain, right? Didn't say that to the blond guy with the tortured eyes, though.

“You haven’t called Brad or me for a while,” he said. His voice was low, and it didn’t sound like he put his whole heart into the rebuke. Even so, I felt like a major asshole.

“Not a lot of news to share.”

He raised a cynical eyebrow. “Just so we know you’re okay. We don’t need a full news report for that.”

I nodded and shrugged. “Okay. Of course I’m okay. But that’s fair enough.” I flipped on the kettle, knowing we had a couple of minutes before Judith got impatient for us to return, and the noise of the bubbling water would hide our voices. “So let’s have the truth here, Simon. I’ve been out of it for almost three months now. What the hell is this all about? Far as I know, there’s been nothing much going on in the Department since Mission Dove wrapped up.”

“Far as you know?” His eyebrow rose again.

“Right.” I sighed. “So I’m not on the circulation list nowadays. But I can find out what’s going on if I want to, you know?”

“Yes, I imagine you can.” His eyes sparkled briefly with amusement. “You always did find access to all kinds of places. But you’re right. The Project Team hasn’t been called up for any more work on that scale. All we’ve been working on are minor investigations, some local security issues. Housekeeping tasks for the Department, you might say.”

“So....” The kettle shrieked and rattled to a boiling halt. The condensation dripped with familiar glee down my wall cupboard. “So what’s this sudden crisis?”

It was obvious that it took him an effort to appear calm. “I guess it’s important to get you up to speed. We’ve all been unwinding after Dove, and maybe we’ve been too complacent. But most of us were just looking forward to taking a break. We were all exhausted, still pretty tensed up from it. As you know.” He glanced at me, and I knew what he was referring to.

Not now, Simon. Leave it.

Mission Dove had been the last major exercise I’d been involved in, before I... left the Project Team. It had been the most important to

date, not that the Team could take any specific credit, working as it did behind the scenes. “Anonymous” was our group’s directive. We were agents of a confidential cell within the Department, kept under the radar of its governmental bosses. But we all knew that one of the most significant peace talks of the last forty years had been concluded without serious incident, and that our small but highly specialized team had been a contributor to that success. None of us had specific job titles; flexibility was the name of our game. But our brief had included sweeping the conference sites for trouble before and after the events, monitoring communication systems that’d shame the flight deck of a jet, and tracking any potential hostility, whether from or toward the participants. We’d added our covert protection to the delegates in just as significant a way as the official security forces. It had been a damned fine time, the best work we’d ever done. Though I say so myself.

But like Simon said, we’d all suffered from the tension and weariness it brought. And some of us had let it take hold. I knew that better than all of them here today.

“Tanner?” He was staring at me. “Work with me on this, will you? You were with us on that mission. You’ve been with us all the way since the beginning of the Team. Look, I don’t know exactly what happened when you left. But it’s important to talk about that time and fully trust each other.”

“Sure.” My gaze met his, steady as before, and he turned back to the matter at hand.

“Well, like I said, things were calm. Then just a month ago, the attacks started. We were alerted of random sabotage at locations where the Team had been working during Dove, although obviously we’d tried to keep the whole mission under the strictest cover.”

“Any idea why?”

He shook his head. “None at all. No warnings, no formal threat, no obvious connection with any other current political or military event. The strikes have all been amateurish, but dangerous nonetheless.”

“How dangerous?”

“A couple of small explosive devices. A sabotaged vehicle. There’s been damage to telecommunications and computer networks.”

“Weird. Someone with a grievance against the talks?”

He shrugged. “There have been no further political demands since it all ended, no overt protests. But yes, at first we assumed it was part of a fresh reprisal against the event and the official mission.”

I frowned. “But why did they choose those locations?” Simon had said they were where the Project Team had been working. I’d always been impressed at the way our cell was kept in the shadows of the Department. Some people used to say that even the HR section didn’t know we existed, and Judith handled all our remuneration issues herself. One of those urban myths, I reckoned. “How could anyone know for certain where we’d been?”

Simon put his hand on a mug as if he were concentrating on making the tea. Both of us knew he wasn’t. He was suddenly very still.

“You mean there was a leak from the Department?” No further response. “Dammit, Simon, from the Project Team itself?” A traitor sounded way too melodramatic, but wasn’t that what he was implying? After all, who else would have had access to all the information?

“No! I mean... we don’t know that for certain.” He rolled a teaspoon back and forth between his fingers. I reckoned he’d spooned six heaps of sugar into his mug already, and I hadn’t even poured the tea yet. “No one knows enough about it yet to make any assessment. Brad...” His voice faltered, but he went on, the words tumbling out more quickly. “Brad was—*is*—following the trail right now. He’s been monitoring every communication in or out of the Team since Mission Dove was concluded. He’s been checking recent logs and reissuing access protocols. If there’s ever been any breach of security, he’ll find it. But it takes time.” Tendrils of panic flickered in his eyes; anger too. “There must be another explanation, Tanner. We’re such a small team. We all know each other so well.”

Or not, as the case may be. I felt a nasty little chill raising the hairs at the base of my neck. “And so you’re here to check me out? Thinking it might be me?”

“Dammit, no!” He looked genuinely affronted. “Why the hell would you think that?”

I shrugged, hiding my relief. “I guess it’s common knowledge I have issues with the Team. I didn’t exactly get a gold watch when I left.”

“You didn’t give anyone enough time, one way or another.” His tone was terse.

“Whatever. But I know about you all, about the missions.” I wasn’t sure why I was pursuing this. “I know enough about sabotage...”

“In theory, maybe.” Simon was trying not to smile, although his eyes were still worried. “Remember that time you nearly blew your fingers off, helping Joe’s training class?”

“Amateurish, you said. The attempts.” I sounded stubborn.

“To hell with it, Tanner! We’re not here to place blame. We’re here to work out what to do! No one thinks it’s you. I said we came here because we can trust you, didn’t I?”

“Okay, okay.” I’d rarely heard him so upset. “And... thanks.”

He frowned and shook his head, but his expression softened.

“So tell me more. You said ‘at first’ you thought it was to do with Dove. There’s been more since then, hasn’t there?”

“Yes, there has.” Simon tensed up. “Over the last couple of weeks the attacks have... changed direction. There’s no mistaking the focus. They’re targeting the Project operatives themselves.”

“The Team members?”

“And their support staff, yes. Some of our suppliers, too, and our contacts in other governmental departments. More random attacks on property, computer viruses... some aggressive but untraceable telephone threats. All personal, all very specific.”

“Those people and places are only in our files. No one else knows where we work, how we work.”

Simon glared at me, his expression fierce. Like I was the one giving him this grief. “For God’s sake, Tanner, don’t you think we

know that? But there's been barely any time to investigate how this attacker gained such information. We're too busy trying to protect ourselves!"

I held out a hand to calm him. "But that amateurish approach..."

He shook his head again. "The effect is no less devastating. And to be honest, that makes it more difficult to cope with. There's no reason to the attacks—no coherent plan we can anticipate."

"We always knew the job had risks."

"But in the course of the mission!" His expression was half anger, half distress. "This is against us personally. Something very different. And we can't assume they won't get more effective. It's all just... shocking."

Catching us unawares. The chill this time felt ugly. "And Brad?"

Simon paled. I'd obviously struck a nerve. "He's okay... I think. I mean, he's not been attacked personally so far. But he's been working twenty-four seven on the communication trail to and from the Department, and he's out in the field now."

Huh? Simon wasn't telling me everything. It was rare for Brad Richards, our communications expert and resident geek, to work out of the Department at all. "So where is he now?"

"I don't know." The note of desolation in Simon's voice was horrible. "I need to get back and try to track him down. He hasn't called in for over eight hours. He left just before the attack last night on the Westbridge building." He glanced at me. "Judith told you what happened? Why we're here?"

"She told me the basics on the phone," I said. "Niall's apartment building blew up."

Simon flinched, and suddenly I felt the wave of emotion from him as clearly as I might see a sudden jag in a sound wave pattern. "That's an exaggeration, Tanner. The whole building didn't blow up. But it's the most significant offensive so far." His eyes narrowed with anger. "Both Niall and Joe were hurt. It would have been even worse, but luckily they were on their way out. It also seemed that some of the

explosives didn't go off. Even so, Niall's apartment was all but destroyed."

And if he'd been in it....

Simon's spoon clattered noisily back on to the counter. "So now we're all on the danger list, Brad the same as I am. Joe's in the hospital under armed guard, with severe injuries to his leg. They'll only let Judith in there at the moment. And Niall's here...."

"Why?" I didn't know how else to say it, except bluntly. "Why us?"

"I don't know," Simon said. "But we'll find out."

I was shaken, despite my pathetic attempt at not caring. "And so why contact me? I've not been a part of it since Dove. I doubt I need protection or anything. There's been no threat against me."

"Whatever Judith may have said on the phone to persuade you to do this, she meant it, Tanner. About *us* needing *you*. You're the only one in such a unique position. No media exposure, very little public record, and the skill and training to vanish if you want to. Hell, you've proved it already. It took me four days and all the resources of the Department—unofficially—to track you *here*." He saw my startled expression, deteriorating swiftly toward anger. "Take that look off your face. I had my orders. When the attacks first started, Judith wanted every Team member located, including you. Just in case."

It wasn't worth getting upset about, and I guess I was kind of disappointed it hadn't taken longer.

"I respect your need to get away, Tanner, but we need you now. You're the only one who can understand what's at stake, what's required. We just don't have anywhere that we're sure is totally secure any more. This place—your place—has never been anywhere near the Department's records. It just doesn't exist as far as they're concerned. You're the only one at the moment with a genuinely safe house."

"Trailer," I said, being pedantic.

He looked confused, then smiled. "Sure." His eyes ranged over the lemon-painted walls; the slightly bulging window frames. He tensed up. I don't think he'd registered much of my unusual décor

before now. “Trailer. It’s good, I’m sure.” He sighed. “Tanner, look. I know you and Niall have... issues.”

I carefully bit back the growl in my throat.

“You won’t talk about it, either of you. That’s your prerogative, I guess. But I have to force this on you, regardless. Even Judith has been targeted in the last week or so—”

“What the fuck?” I ignored Simon’s wince. “How serious?”

He waved his hand, dismissing it. “It’s okay. Just a suspicious package delivered to the Department. It never got past the front desk, let alone to hers. But it was clearly addressed to her.”

“Shit.”

“She won’t tell you about it, I suspect, and she’s unharmed, you can see that yourself. But we’re suddenly all in danger, with no idea as to why, whether it’s an organized campaign or random acts of revenge of some kind. We have to consolidate what we know and support each other. Find and isolate the threat. Then deal with it.”

There was a moment of silence. I poured water from the kettle onto the tea bags with exaggerated care. “The Department is involved to the highest level, right?”

Simon was still pale. “This situation has been escalated. Of course it has. But there can’t be any official recognition. The Project Team was set up as a separate and secret division and that’s the way we have to stay. We have to clean up our own mess, without knowing what it really is. And we need you with us, don’t you understand? If this is a chance to bring you back on board...” He looked very earnest, very concerned, and I bit back an overwhelming desire to offer him whatever he needed. Simon had that effect on people; I knew why Judith relied on him so much.

“It’s not going to happen,” I said. I cleared my throat, just for extra emphasis.

“Why are you hiding out here, Tanner? You should have stayed. It could all have been sorted out, I’m sure. I never wanted you off the Team, you know that, don’t you?”

“Sure. It’s a given.” I didn’t meet his eyes. It hadn’t been Simon’s choice, whatever the circumstances. I knew exactly who to blame for my exile, self-imposed or not. “Take Judith’s tea in for her, will you?”

He picked up the two mugs, looking at the random spring flowers on one and a leering kitten—mercifully faded—on the other. I could see his mental count. “What about Niall?”

“Didn’t ask for anything.”

“You’ll want to talk to him about all this, of course—”

“I won’t,” I said.

His eyes blinked, rather too quickly. “It’s not much to ask, Tanner. You’ve always been a tolerant person.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I said. My voice sounded hoarse. “That’s where your Team speech fails, Simon. Because just now and then, I’m fucking *not*. I’m doing this for reasons that stick in my throat, although I’ll stand by my word. But I don’t have to be tolerant at all. And don’t you forget it.” I ignored the splash of brown liquid on the counter and the burning mug handle against my thumb. I pushed through the bead curtain and emerged back into the bubble of tension that was hovering in my meager living room.

Which was now uncomfortably full of people I’d thought I’d left behind.

IT WAS like one of those Mexican stand-offs. I stood, leaning against the wall nearest the kitchen, paying about as much attention to my tea as I would to weather reports on the moon. Simon sat awkwardly beside Judith on the couch, which was never the most comfortable of seats at the best of times. The fourth inhabitant of the trailer stood beside them.

Niall. Niall Sutherland, alongside the boxes he’d delivered to my home in a strange, bitter little plea for protection. His hands hung at his sides, and he didn’t meet my gaze. He looked like he was frowning, but I was pretty sure that was just the way his face had settled. His mind would be busy on other things.

Simon stared at the two of us with something ominously close to despair. “We weren’t followed here. We’re pretty sure no one knows about this place except for us. But you must inform us at once of any strangers on the site.”

I snorted. I wasn’t working at the moment, so I saw most people as they came and went, but barely twenty percent of the population stayed on the park more than three months in a row. That was the nature of this place, didn’t he know?

He continued, regardless. “Niall will need communication with us. I’ll leave you with a cell phone for that exclusive use. It’s linked to the emergency numbers for the Team we all know—and *only* we know.”

“The numbers we never expected to use?” It had been a bit of a joke during initial training. We’d thought it was way too James Bond.

Simon ignored my sarcasm. “Niall mustn’t have any other external interaction. He mustn’t be seen, mustn’t leave here until we give clearance.”

“You want me to sit through the briefings on security again?” I thought my voice was steady enough, but Simon frowned.

“No, of course not. Don’t be so damned sensitive. I know you know your job. I just wanted to stress some specific things.” He wriggled on the couch and glanced over at the unnaturally still man standing beside him.

So did I. Tall, a little slimmer than I remembered, dark hair looking pretty unkempt. The shadow of a cut under his chin. My gut shuddered a little. I didn’t think it was because I’d missed a couple of meals this week.

Simon glanced back and caught sight of my scowl. “Cut me some slack here, Tanner. We’re all very disturbed by this. Like I said, we need to support each other.” His voice was just the right side of pleading, just the right side of appealing to my better nature. He negotiated well, but of course he’d met his match in me. My better nature was snoozing in a corner, wrapped in a blanket, hibernating for the season and dreaming of Florida beaches. I think Simon could see that in my eyes. “Perhaps none of us are thinking as clearly as we

should. You'll need to discuss your own arrangements with Niall, work out your own timetable. And you'll need twenty-four seven contact between the pair of you, of course, to monitor this."

That's when Niall's head jerked up, when his eyes met mine at last. His frown was reflected in the depths of his eyes.

My mouth went dry. "Twenty-four seven contact," I echoed. "I rather think that's the last thing I need. And though *I'm* the one you might expect to be kind of prickly, I'm guessing your colleague feels much the same way."

Simon stood, rather abruptly. He looked from me to Niall, and then back at me. His shoulders tensed. Guess he recognized the daggers drawn in two sets of dark pupils. I think I saw Judith's hand stretch out slightly, as if to hold him back. I did notice that he hadn't drunk a whole lot of his tea.

His next words were bitter. "Okay, so maybe I wanted this to work just a little too much. But look at the pair of you! What the hell made me think that it would?"

I turned my head away, losing eye contact with all of them, trying to tune him out. He made me feel ashamed, I admit it. A brat. But I was in no mood today for Simon Wagner, the Project Team's man who "got things done." Couldn't he see that?

But he didn't let up. "Dear God, you're glaring like gladiators at each other. As if there's a danger you'll kill each *other* before any enemy has the time to track you down!"

And then Judith Harrington herself pitched in. The slender, elegantly attractive, dark blonde woman who currently sat on my couch and sipped at a stale tea, more bitter than my shriveled emotions. A woman with a black belt in martial arts, which no one would ever guess from her quiet, controlled attitude unless perhaps they were on the receiving end. The keenest brain that had ever thrashed me at chess, and the woman I'd listened to—been directed by—for a long and very interesting time. The woman I'd been surprised to see here today, in person. Guess that's what made me realize this whole damned farce was real.

Her voice was sharp, and the reproof was aimed at me. “Tanner MacKay, I don’t want to have to pull rank, but I will if I have to. This is for the good of the Team, not individuals, do you hear me? I’ve worked damned hard to get what support I can, and I won’t let something like this close us down. This directive has been unofficially sanctioned by certain sympathetic channels in the Department, and if you want any chance of ever working in the field again—in *any* capacity—you’ll do your very best to cooperate and keep Niall Sutherland safe. Do you understand?”

There was a sudden, awkward pause. You could’ve heard the last drop of condensation drip down in the kitchen on to the linoleum.

“Okay,” I said, slowly. “No problem. I understand all too well. I’m not aware that you—of all people—ever had any problems with plain speaking.” We both knew the insouciance was a ploy of mine, to play for time, to retain my dignity. I was actually quite shaken by her vehemence. Judith’s management of us had always been calm and reasonably voiced. “But you are asking me to put my home on the line, right? To come out of my quiet, anonymous little world—to offer it back to your organization, with all the risk that currently seems to attract.”

“You’re still officially an employee of the Project Team,” she snapped.

“And still on suspension, right?” I fired back. “Still on much-reduced pay and benefits, right?”

Her eyes grew darker and she flushed. “It was your choice, MacKay. We could’ve discussed the financial implications. But as far as I remember, you told me to shove the benefits up my ass and twist them *hard*. Next I knew, your address was ‘gone away’. And yes, you’re still on suspension, though that’s open to final review in a couple of weeks’ time.” She caught my angry gaze and held it fearlessly for a moment. Then gradually, her expression softened. “If you’d given me a chance, Tanner, I would have told you to stay and see it out. You just weren’t listening to me at the time.”

I didn’t want her pity. I had my own, right? But Judith had always been a damned good friend to me.

“Tanner, I know it was tough for you back then, but this is what we have to do, now. And we need you to help. We can look at this as a partial return to active duty, if that’s what you want, and we’ll review the salary issue. If you can work with us here....”

“You’re not the one I’m sharing my personal space with, *here*,” I grunted.

Simon laid a hand on my arm. It was a shock, being touched like that. He’d always enjoyed the friendship in the Team, the banter. The comradeship. Maybe I’d missed that, the past few months. But I didn’t think I was in any mood to debate it either way.

“Tanner, it’s obvious this is difficult for you. But like Judith says, we need your help! We can’t trust any other Departmental locations at the moment. Joe’s in hospital and Brad is isolated, out in the field with no support. Judith has junior staff with very justifiable fear of stepping outside their front doors and the Department watching our every move from the safety of their plush governmental offices, wondering and waiting to see if this brings us down. We must stop this, and fast. All the good work we’ve done in the Project Team so far—we must protect that, as well as ourselves.” I could hear the urgency in his voice. “Niall has nothing left and nowhere to go! He needs you, Tanner.”

He’s going to love that summary of his situation, of his life. The pressure from Simon’s warm hand was very unnerving. Once upon a long time ago, I’d been as committed to the job as he had. You hear that, Niall? Apparently you have nothing left! Except this....

Except me.

And so I turned back to face my new houseguest. Niall Sutherland. Man with the boxes, man with the need for my address.

Niall. The man I’d crossed the state to avoid, whose proximity promised nothing now except contempt, the man I once said I didn’t want to see again until hell proverbially froze over, let alone offer a mug of tea.

And he was staying in my home.

Monday 06:30

THE trailer park was still quiet in the early morning. Well, quiet in that the only background noise was a mixture of barking dog, the occasional raised voice over breakfast coffee, muffled through the walls of adjacent trailers, and the melancholic turning over of a dying car battery. The usual. No one got up around here to rush to work in the city.

The guys from the Team left with the same care and secrecy that they'd used to arrive. Cissy came over quickly, directing them back to the company car—a dull-colored vehicle with its plates artfully obscured. It had been parked around the back of the gravel heap. I'd forgotten to warn her that was where some of the residents drew their scrap, utilizing a random collection of vehicles that were abandoned or just carelessly parked. Anything left unattended for more than a few hours vanished or became unrecognizable by morning. I surreptitiously checked it still had all four wheels.

Greg was beside a nearby trailer and came running over to help shield Judith and Simon, presumably watching out for any sudden threat in this decidedly unregulated area. I laughed aloud when a large Rottweiler poked its head around the trailer after him, snapping aggressively. The kid staggered back in surprise, but it certainly put a spring in his step.

Simon was the last to leave me, but also the most eager. His pale color had deteriorated to something closer to parchment. He was worrying about Brad, I knew it. We all knew it. Brad would feel the same, if the situation were reversed. It had been a bit of a joke when I first joined the Team, the way that the two of them seemed joined at the hip. Not physically, you understand, but in the way that they understood each other without a load of chat, in the way that they cared for each other. They didn't make much of an issue of it, keeping anything they shared outside work pretty discreet. But they weren't

making excuses, either. When I got to know what genuine guys they were, and after I had some experience of my own... well, it wasn't such a joke then, was it? I envied them, to tell you the truth.

And so off went almost all of my visiting delegation, rolling quietly through the back streets, returning to the Department with their *Mission Nursemaid*—or whatever they called it in memos that were probably never officially acknowledged—well and truly accomplished.

When I turned back from seeing them off, I found Niall hadn't moved from the corner of my room. A narrow shaft of morning light sneaked through the broken blind, dissecting the shadow of his body. For a few long, silent moments, we both stared at some disturbed particles of dust that glittered within it. When they settled at last on the cushions of the couch, I cleared my throat. This was my place, after all.

“No one's going to steal any of your stuff. You can leave it there and sit down at least. You make the place look untidier than it already is.” My voice sounded very brittle in the suddenly empty room. My gut was churning. I'd abandoned my tea a long time ago, it seemed, and I couldn't remember if I'd eaten anything since last night's supper. The phone call had come from Judith less than two hours ago. It felt like weeks.

And—dammit!—I was still wondering where she'd found my cell number when I'd changed providers twice in the last three months, and both times under different names.

Niall's sigh sounded like it was dragged out of him. He shifted on one foot, then the other, but he still didn't sit down. “I feel the same way you do, if that's any consolation to you,” he said at last, his voice thick with exhaustion and something more like anger. “I tried to find someone else, tried to convince them I'd be okay somewhere else. You know what Judith's like, though.”

I didn't answer that one. It was unnerving enough, having to listen to him. The voice was just as I remembered. Just the same as my late-night dreams, the nightmare's mockery, snagging at my nerve endings. *Fuck*. For the first time, I wished the others would come back. At least I could be distracted by other, less disturbing sounds. I wondered why basic training had never covered *this* particular scenario.

Niall looked like he was struggling with the conversation. I felt the wave of frustration from him as clearly as I read the clench of his fist. “Tanner, we have to cope with this, right? Just for the bare minimum of time. You have to keep a low profile too. We’ll have to sort out some compromise.”

Obviously “fuck off and leave me alone” wasn’t an option. Then I despised my sudden, childish aggression. My social skills were obviously lapsing. Perhaps I was becoming the loud-mouthed boor that many accused me of being in the past.

Perhaps—just at that moment—I couldn’t care less.

NIALL sat down at last because even his cast-iron will couldn’t keep him up indefinitely. I drew the stool out from under the kitchen counter and dragged it into the living room, sitting down on it somewhat gracelessly, while he settled himself down on to the couch. He moved gingerly.

I felt a familiar buzz inside me as I watched his movements. Partly because my job had been to pay attention to the people around me at all times, and partly for other, more intimate reasons. He was nursing an injury to his left leg, probably the hamstring, and it looked like he had some hearing restriction in his left ear. That was apart from the external cuts and bruises. My appraisal of his condition was swift and instinctive, even as I hated myself for bothering.

“So how bad was it?”

He looked up quizzically, and for a moment my breath caught in my throat. It was the way that his broad chin thrust up, in a familiar, defiant move; the way that his dark brown eyes widened as they met my focus. He didn’t ask me what I was talking about because he knew, of course. Damned smart, as always. “You want to know?”

“Asked, didn’t I?” *Christ, was this how it was going to be?*

His voice dropped to a low monotone. I knew it was his way of controlling his emotions, but it still grated. “It was bad. It happened yesterday, early evening, about 19:25. It was pure luck that we were on

our way to get some takeout and had just left the apartment, taking the stairs. Otherwise we'd have been caught in the full blast..." He paused, swallowing heavily.

We? "You and Joe, that is."

He tensed. "Yes. We'd spent the early evening checking out some toxin reports from the Department."

I nodded. Didn't trust myself to speak, which was lucky because Niall continued, regardless. "The whole rear of the building was damaged, though my kitchen took the worst of it. It blew a hole in the wall, demolished the room and knocked the impact through to all the other rooms. The explosives must have been set in the back yard, probably attached to the fire escape that leads up to my floor. There was no evidence of anyone there, so it was obviously on a timer. I'd guess a series of connected detonators around a central charge, small but heavy-duty explosives, staggered for maximum effect. It's a style that some terrorists and saboteurs use." I wondered if he was cataloguing the materials used; considering the likely suppliers. Weaponry was his specialty, after all.

"Joe got the brunt of it?"

"Yes. The apartment door blew out on to the corridor and hit him. He fell down a couple of flights."

"Anyone else hurt?"

He shook his head. "It was entirely localized. The police are giving out the message it was some kind of gas explosion. They don't want anyone thinking it's terrorism. But it was directed specifically at us, no doubt of that. The charges were camouflaged into the brickwork, so it had been placed over a period of days. There'd obviously been detailed surveillance of the site. Whoever set it had seen enough comings and goings to be able to establish who was at home and who wasn't. I haven't been officially deployed for the last few months, of course, so I was in a more familiar routine." It was as if he were giving his official statement all over again. "My... the apartment is mostly rubble. It'll be months before it's safe to go back, let alone anyone live there."

My pain was startlingly keen; that was the only excuse I had for my puerile response. “I forgot to return your spare key. Guess it won’t be such an issue now.”

“Cheap shot,” he said, in a very tight voice.

“Cheap? That’s me all over.” Comeback was automatic. “As you were so fucking eager to tell me, last time we were together.”

“As far as I remember, that was the only damned thing you wanted to hear, MacKay!”

A-ha! There was spirit left in him after all. I bit my lip, knowing I could take him on, knowing I could escalate an argument beyond belief in short, stunning seconds.

But I looked at the dark weariness in his eyes, and I didn’t do it. I dragged my control back from the brink, teasing nonchalance back into my voice. “Well, you’re out of there now, and more or less in one piece. The Department will get you another place, I expect.”

His eyes narrowed. With anger? Suspicion at my sudden change of mood? “Sure they will.” His voice had calmed, though I could see his fists clench again, as if with the effort. “Judith has put in the request already. They’ve authorized her to evaluate a couple of other potential properties, from the point of view of security. Then I can move on. I mean, the apartment was fairly small, in a quiet area, no striking features. There are plenty of others on the market that are similar. It was only a place to live, right?”

I stared at him. “Right.”

He made a sudden, jerky movement that startled me, and his leg knocked against my small card table. Judith’s abandoned tea mug rattled, the reflections from the overhead strip lighting shivering in the surface of the liquid. Niall righted the mug with exaggerated care, but the scrape of the china on the plastic tabletop was still too sharp for my ears.

It seemed to affect him just as badly. He lifted his hands as if to bury his head in them, but then he paused and let them fall back to his lap. His voice hitched up a couple of notches on the volume control. “But it *wasn’t* just a place to live, Tanner. It was my home. So maybe

I've had to move around in the past few years. I've learned to be ready to mobilize at a moment's notice, never let my roots go very deep. But that place...."

"Don't." I knew he'd know what I meant. I knew he'd ignore me, too.

"Not just where I lived," he persisted. "It was more than that." His voice faded and stopped. Despite his darker coloring, he looked damned pale. I suspected he was still in some kind of shock.

I sighed. This was my living room, right? But it seemed an alien place right then, miles away and perching at the wrong end of a telescope. There wasn't much to distract me except the ratty furniture; I'd never been one to collect trinkets of any kind. Even the pictures had only been sheets of advertising color that had just caught my eye. There was nothing and no one but Niall to draw my attention. It had been a while since I'd heard him raise his voice like that. And for once, I agreed with everything he said.

I gentled my voice. "It was indeed, Niall. Much more than that. I liked it. Good place."

He looked up at me then, the anger fading as quickly as it had come. Maybe he recognized something in my expression. There was too much we could both have said, but not enough to ease the moment.

"What about you? Were you badly hurt?"

He shrugged. His limbs looked sapped of strength. "I doubt you need to ask. You can assess me as well as I can myself."

I grimaced. We'd been through the same training, after all. "Tell me how you think you are."

"Just shock I think. Some bruises."

I nodded, knowing he was in pain, and knowing he knew I knew he was in pain, and that I knew... well, whatever the hell any of that mattered. "So what do you want to do now? You want to sleep?" The moment of truth had come at last. I'd submitted to the Department's demands and was resigned to offering what sparse hospitality I could. Hurrah for me. I braced myself for Niall's scorn, for the inevitable resistance and resumption of hostilities.

None of it came.

“Yes,” he said quietly, and rare though it was, he surprised me. Guess he was definitely in shock. Or maybe I’d never seen him before in such a vulnerable position. “I just want to lie down here and crash out for a few hours. If you’ve got a blanket, fine, but I’m not cold or anything. If you need to work here or something, just say. If I’m in the way, I can sleep somewhere else.”

I was listening to his words, but not hearing. I was just watching his mouth, trying to read his body language. He was fucking unhappy, I could tell. And tired beyond exhaustion.

“Hell of a time, eh, Sutherland?”

His laugh was short and bitter. “You can say that again.”

We stared at each other then, for a few long, painful seconds. His eyes were full of residual shock and horror, plus sadness and anger. Maybe mine looked a bit like that too. In the end, I turned away from his gaze. It was all just a little bit too uncomfortable.

“I’ll get a blanket.” I slid off my stool with a wince of discomfort. “Damned couch is more like the back of a drunken camel, but that’s all there is on offer in a mansion like this. You’re welcome to it.”

Monday 22:45

IN THE end, he slept right through the day and on into the night. Flatbed trucks screeched over the gravel paths as guys came back from a day's work; the dogs barked and howled some more and so did the emerging trailer kids, engrossed in the usual homicidal superhero game. Life at the trailer park made no concessions to Niall. I mean, I was used to it by then. But he must either have been extraordinarily tired or medicated, because he didn't stir.

I got on with my usual stuff, which consisted of clearing up and reading the newspapers and puttering about on some projects I'd been dabbling in. The details weren't important to anyone but me. There hadn't been much else in my life for the last couple of months, not that I was complaining. Well, okay, maybe I was, sometimes. But it wasn't like there was anything I was prepared to do about it. Not at the moment.

I walked around Niall a couple of hundred times. Sometimes I stopped to watch him sleep, his body stretched out as best he could on my couch. Head cushioned on his arm, dark hair caught up against his cheek, legs folded and hips shifting occasionally as he sought a more comfortable position. But after a while, I tried my hardest to resist that entertainment. It didn't exactly give me any peace. I napped for an hour or so myself, though thanks to Judith and Simon's visit, I was a little less relaxed than I might have been. When it grew dark outside the trailer and things were quieter again, I ate a cheese sandwich or two, drank some coffee, and decided to spend my time in working out what the hell was going on.

When Judith set up the Project Team, we all knew it was risky. She'd never kept entirely within the rules of the Department as it was, but she believed there was a need for a small, specialist intelligence team to use on the more sensitive missions—and she pushed for management of it. Amazingly, they agreed. She chose her own guys

and ran it her own way. A very fair boss, with an unusually compassionate care for her staff—for all of them, right down to her devoted assistant Cissy, the drivers, the clerical team, and anyone else who supported her.

A couple of early successes and she was cautiously settled in place. We identified an assassination threat on a Presidential candidate days before his own Secret Service personnel even started to suspect. We exposed the tax frauds of an evangelical TV preacher. And we also helped find the hiding place of a runaway child of one of our own Department's senior management before they came to any harm. We reported it all to the relevant powers that be, quietly and effectively, and without the glare of publicity.

How did we do it? Judith had been right, in that a small group of anonymous agents could infiltrate where official personnel were blocked. We weren't beholden to any other boss, any other timetable. Sometimes, one man could go where a whole department couldn't—or where they had to keep within more regulated lines. Our faces weren't on file, our fingerprints never taken. We could concentrate entirely—and swiftly—on the areas of most risk. And we utilized a unique balance of skills.

I was on infiltration; I had been told to expect everything from surveillance of a suspect to donning the old false beard and trying to sell Bibles on the doorstep to unsuspecting crooks. I'd had a fairly varied life, and it qualified me to blend into all kinds of background. I could convince a target that Tanner MacKay was nothing but a loud, vulgar extrovert, and then I'd merge into their particular crowd for a couple of hours and wait to see if they noticed me. They rarely did. I'd be the nondescript guy who sold them their groceries or the guy who was fixing the elevator on their floor. Or the man who briefly took their wife's elbow at a cocktail party and left her with the memory of an expensive cologne, the sip of an overly dry martini, and a smiling, flirtatious insolence. But hardly anything about his individual features.

I'd been described as a chameleon, and I didn't dislike the comparison. I liked surprising people, whether I was anonymous or acting larger than life. A character that's "in-your-face" can use as much sleight of hand as a mouse of a man, right?

There weren't many of us in the core Team, but the others had similar, unique resumes.

Brad Richards worked all our computer and communication systems. He came from an army background, or so they said. He never spoke about it—well, not specifically to me—and he never pulled rank. Once, Brad and I delivered a report to the Department when it was being visited by senior military personnel. There was a classic moment when the general in charge saw Brad, did a double take, and then looked deeply confused, like he was seeing someone familiar but out of context. Not just that, but I saw him snatch back an instinctive salute, hoping none of us had noticed the faux pas. I never found the right time to ask Brad any more about it.

Simon... well, the earnest, efficient Simon Wagner had used his organizational skills for slightly less legal purposes in his past life. He came to us from a minor correctional facility where he was serving a short-term sentence for a rather sophisticated financial fraud. They'd been sorry to let him go—not because they didn't want him to go “straight,” or because they were worried about issues of national security, but because he was the only one who'd proved up to the task of redeveloping their transport logistics. He'd also motivated the whole damned place into a new workflow pattern that increased efficiency by twenty-five percent, and his revolutionary new training plan to reduce the rate of re-offending had just been passed by the prison board. And now? Now he was a changed man, and Judith's right hand manager.

Joe Lam was the other main player. Of Chinese extraction, he was built as solidly as a brick wall but with considerably better muscle definition and steely self-discipline. No fighting style had been invented that he hadn't heard of, and probably mastered. Judith had poached him from the Department itself, and he still trained their recruits. He was the only guy allowed to straddle the two worlds like that. He'd taught *me* a few new moves, and I'd hated him passionately for every damned second of it. Joe was a walking block of relentlessness, never flinching from criticizing me for all the things I apparently persisted in doing wrong. It astounded me that all his other pupils were devoted to him, willing to follow him over the top like lemmings.

And then there was Niall Sutherland, of course.

He was the original quiet man, appearing from some unremarkable background, yet with knowledge of both hand-to-hand weaponry and tools of semi-mass destruction like I couldn't imagine outside of a sci-fi film. I always assumed he'd been some kind of mercenary, though he described it as nothing more than time spent as a soldier. He rarely talked about the past, except to admit to no family, and few roots. He didn't seem to consider himself as anything out of the ordinary. But sometimes he looked like a walking ball of tension; a coiled spring of predatory violence, just waiting to be let loose. He was always amazingly focused, and when he was in "mission mode," everything he did was tightly controlled and shockingly effective. Did I think he'd killed people in his military or intelligence career? You bet I did. I also assumed it'd been when he had no other choice. Of course, I may have been a little naïve there.

Rumor had it he'd been moved on from more than one department as too much for them to handle. I often wondered who'd had the balls to try. I recalled how, during Mission Dove, there'd been a thirteenth-hour challenge to the peace talks. A non-violent opposition group was hijacked by a more militant faction, and it quickly threatened to develop into a full-scale physical riot. Judith mobilized Niall and a couple of choice acolytes within the hour. They moved swiftly and secretly in amongst the ringleaders. The protestors' weapons were removed and "lost," and their principals persuaded to take their provocation elsewhere. The danger had passed, and several hours before the security services got around to clearing the legalities of investigation. So maybe some of the methods used weren't above board, but they *were* tightly controlled and shockingly effective. Like I said.

Yeah. We were a strangely mismatched bunch of guys, it might seem, but somehow the core Team had worked. All of us together, friends and complements.

Until, of course, I broke it all up.

ELEVEN p.m. came and went with nothing more than some off-tune singing outside my trailer as someone lurched back to his own place, full of tonight's home brew. Lights around the park flickered off, and the view from my window morphed into a small, indigo-black square. I was stretched out rather awkwardly on the floor, lying on top of some cushions and flicking through a catalog of various "might be useful if I ever get back to active duty" goods. God knows what my neighbors thought I was up to when they saw me rummaging in the waste site beside the park, collecting up a wide selection of discarded, dog-eared publications. "Stage Makeup and Costumes for Halloween"; "Be Seen in the Scene—this season's ladies' fashions"; "How to Build Scale Models"; "Amateur Film-Making Techniques"; "Calligraphy for Beginners"; "When Sports Stars Misbehave"—you name it, it was likely to have use for me at some stage.

Niall expelled a breath, shifting awkwardly on the couch. I assumed he'd sleep through until morning now. I wondered what I had to offer for breakfast, but then he never ate much in the morning, I knew. A flare of anger stabbed through me. Damned Department, still hounding me, landing this particular bombshell on my front steps....

I thumped a cushion and settled myself again.

So was this threat to the Team really to do with Mission Dove? There were always a few people who didn't want success, who didn't want peace, for whatever warped reason they personally thought justifiable. I thought we'd weeded most of those out, one way or another. Guess a couple may have escaped our clutches. I'd left the tidying up at the end of the mission to Judith.

Judith Harrington had been the favored daughter of a famous political family; an independently rich family too. She'd been expected to marry a high profile governor, or a disgustingly rich industrialist, or perhaps even a member of a minor royal family. Instead, she'd shown the lot of them the virtual finger and gone out to get a job. Used her family's influence to get accepted into the Department, then cut a swathe through it on her own merits so that she was in a senior position after eighteen months. I wasn't there then, but the stories still rattled around the water cooler of how her innovative budgeting changed the whole approach to a mission's resources; of how her arbitration skills

saved more than a couple of Departmental expeditions from disaster. Oh, and she kicked ass, too, had I mentioned that? People still talked in whispers about the disgraced Director who made a pass at her, and how he still found it difficult, one, to get a job elsewhere, and two, to make a proper fist of his crushed hand. There were probably more than a few establishment figures who were glad to see her move out in favor of her own team, if only to get her off their back. Maybe they were the ones keeping her in resources and support.

So we moved in dangerous waters, as a matter of course. But then why and how had the target suddenly changed to be members of the Project Team? To me, that was way more worrying. We'd never been high-profile—most of the Department's staff wouldn't know us if they passed us in the corridor—and we worked damned hard to maintain that anonymity. Otherwise we'd never have been able to do the things we did, or reach the people and organizations we needed. Okay, so we couldn't all hide away in some Bat Cave somewhere, but we did all we could to distract and mislead, as a matter of course. We all had names, though they weren't always the ones on our birth certificates. We had homes, too, and they were under whatever protective surveillance Judith could beg, borrow, or demand. Usually.

So where had the security been for Niall Sutherland?

Niall's home.

My gut cramped with familiar nausea. He might have been killed. It had been a matter of luck that he wasn't. I hadn't seen him for three months, and when I did, he was stumbling free of the jaws of a crumbling, crushing death.

There was a context to this whole mess, of course. Niall and I had history. Like, we weren't born glaring at each other the way we did today. No, we'd been exemplary colleagues and fellow operatives, mature young men with a commitment to the Department and the Project Team. We'd been bright and appropriately aggressive and everyone had rated us well.

At least, that was in our professional life.

I couldn't stop my thoughts returning to the attack on him. Judith's details had been sparse, but Niall had confirmed that his

apartment was now completely gone. It presumably lay in a mess of brick and exploded plaster, miles away from here. I didn't mind admitting, the thought of that wreckage stung me almost as much as it distressed him. Even leaving aside the injury to Niall and potential harm to others in the building, there'd been things in that apartment that were now destroyed forever—things that I'd known.

No, not just that. Things that had been mine, or at the very least, shared between us. Things that were treasured for memory alone, for a sentiment that nowadays I tried damned hard to despise. Things from a time that I tried even harder to forget.

For many months, I'd spent more time there than at my own apartment. There was a time when we ate together, did laundry together, watched TV, played chess, rehearsed our parts in upcoming missions, and rested after the frenzy of completed ones.

Lived, washed, cooked, breathed, laughed together.

Went to bed together—or the couch, or whatever square meter of carpeted floor we reached first. Yeah. That was the context.

It was a time when we were lovers.

Tuesday 00:15

NIALL slept, and I continued to brood.

I should have been sleeping, too, but I never could when I was disturbed. No excuse, really, for allowing the memories to clutch long, strong fingers around my neck and choke the emotions back out of me. But they did. I teased and tortured myself with recalling everything about him.

The memories were always vivid. But nowadays, I just never let them loose.

I joined the Department over a year ago. Initially, I just sort of drifted there. I was doing contract work for some neighborhood guys I knew, working on a rather creative property deal with a major financial institution. Not that I knew anything about property; I was just there to liaise with the realtors on their behalf. Call me naïve, but I hadn't realized the sketchy legality of the job, at least until I was approached privately by one of the financial firm's paralegals who'd refused any part of the deal. He suggested I should look for a new career—and he introduced me to Judith Harrington. I soon saw the light and I dumped the 'guys'. Smartish.

So I was hired, before I really knew what the job was! It was a pleasant surprise when Judith asked me to consider doing what I already enjoyed so much: becoming someone else for a while, working my way into places I hadn't previously been invited, just taking on challenges and having damned good fun. That's a very facile way to describe our work, I know, but at the time it was how I viewed it all.

And I thrived there, though I say so myself. She was building up the Team at the time, and I soon realized I'd been brought into the hub of the best people. It was small scale; we weren't an army and we weren't some kind of super secret agents. Just a group of people who wanted to make a difference, but were an uneasy fit with formal

authority. It was good company for me. I hooked up with Brad and Simon and Joe as genuine friends, and I had a healthy respect for Judith as a boss. At the very least, there was plenty going on to keep me out of trouble.

In those first few months, I never bumped heads with Niall Sutherland at all. I think I'd seen his name on memos from Judith, but at that time he was a Departmental employee and not part of the Team. Besides, most of my work was in preparation, and I tended to work alone on that. I helped put together the best, most effective team: decided who were the critical people in the mission to influence—either for or against us—and then chose the particular skills we needed from our own team members. So I'd never met Niall, knew nothing of him except for his reputation in the Department and a certain amount of nervous admiration on the part of his workmates. Until Judith introduced us properly.

A Tuesday night, about 21:00. Yeah, I remembered the exact time. Judith was leaving the building, on her way home, but seeing a light still on, she came around to the office I was using. I often kept on working, regardless of office hours, until I got tired of concentrating on my latest project—or fell asleep, because that could run on into the small hours of the morning. I was working that day on planning the infiltration of a high-tech I.T. corporation, and I'd been picking Brad's brains for several hours. This was now my quiet time, when I looked things over on my own, starting to get a more instinctive feel for the job. It was the part I liked the best—and I reckon it was my best talent.

Niall appeared at her shoulder, carrying his jacket over one arm. She introduced us, her eyes flickering between us. "Be nice to Niall," she told me. "He's just joined us. Excellent man, good weapons expert. He'll be on the I.T. job with you, though he's involved in exit strategy, not infiltration. Perhaps you can take him through some of the preliminary plans tomorrow. He'll need to know what operative you're putting in, the organizational structure of the target. Keep it as simple as you can, okay?" She smiled confidently. "It's a strategy that's always worked for us in the past."

I nodded. At the time, I don't think I was giving her my full attention because she coughed deliberately to get me to look up. "Make

sure you put the time aside for a briefing, Tanner. I insist. I know you think we all get in your way. But you'll live with it." She pursed her lips in a half-smile and ran her gaze over what I called my office uniform. I was in faded jeans and a casual short-sleeved bowling shirt, my shoulder-length hair twisted into a short tail at the back of my neck. I think I probably had a chewed pencil in my mouth and my feet up on the desk; it was my usual pose when thinking through a mission plan. Someone in the past had dared to suggest that my dress and attitude weren't particularly good for the Department's image, but Judith had always been willing to show a little more tolerance if the job were done properly. I think she'd had a quiet word with the person who complained. I never heard anything more about it.

That evening, she'd been distracted, passing up on the chance to harass me about it. Instead, she turned back to her companion. "And I suggest you watch Tanner in return, Niall. He lives life on an impatient and unpredictable edge, and tells us all what he thinks we should know. But he's also smart and sometimes sees things the rest of us miss. If he doesn't exhaust you first, you'll find his contribution to the missions invaluable."

"Hey! And I'd always thought you such an excellent judge of character." I was wondering whether I should be flattered or insulted, wondering whether I should let loose the grin her praise provoked. Instead, we smiled good night at each other, and she went on her way out of the building. I nodded to the new guy in a casual, friendly way and settled back to the task in hand.

I wasn't bothered about Niall Sutherland joining the team. To be honest, I didn't really have time to give it more thought. I had a pile of files in front of me with details of half a dozen Departmental employees. Judith had her unofficial eye on this selection, to see if they'd be suitable to join the Team. I was meant to consider them for this mission, but it was looking like a quest for the proverbial silk purse from a sow's ear. There was a guy who looked more like he should be modeling designer briefs than passing himself off as a technician, and a couple who'd struggled with programming in their basic training and I doubt had progressed past basic HTML. Maybe I was being an ass about it, but I reckoned they all needed to prove to me they could blend

into their environment better than an elephant in custard. So while I was considering developing new identities for these people, I knew all along I'd probably use one as a backup cleaner or something similar and go into the Service Department myself. Couldn't trust them to know their byte from their butt, right?

"Nothing good?" asked Niall's voice, startling me.

I cursed, rather colorfully, and the multi-layered files scattered across my desk. Twisting around in my chair, I found him standing in the doorway of the office. I'd assumed he left in Judith's wake, but it gave me a chance to look him over properly for the first time. He was wearing well-cut linen pants and a long-sleeved dark blue shirt. *Very suitable office attire*. I smiled to myself. He had broad shoulders, a slim neck, darker skin than mine. Thick, short dark hair that reflected a purple sheen in the dim fluorescent lights of the office and looked damned attractive against the blue shirt. A straight nose and a generous mouth, with the hint of sharp white teeth behind the lips. A very good-looking man, I concluded, but with a serious expression. *Obviously a man who wouldn't get caught with his feet up on the desk*. Dark eyes; deep, chocolate-brown irises. I got caught looking into those very eyes, and that's where my gaze stayed.

"Can I help?" He smiled, put his jacket on a chair, and walked over to my desk. I scabbled to collect up the files again and he watched me, quietly standing at my side. *Close*. He had a very pleasant smell, must have been his soap or his shampoo. Glancing over my shoulder at some of my notes—a hell of a lot of exclamation marks scrawled across them, as usual—he put a hand down to steady one of the papers. It was a strong hand. It looked well kept and graceful, but definitely strong. I stared at it for what seemed like ages, God knows why, and at how close it was to my own long-fingered hand lying beside it, half-curved around a pencil. I glanced up at his face, and suddenly he smiled, like something had pleased him. It was a striking contrast on his serious face.

It was one of those moments I thought only happened in fiction, but I remember very clearly the feelings his smile provoked, because I'd never known anything like it before. Warmth ran all through my

veins, like some kind of real-time embalming. There was a churning in my gut like nausea, although I knew I'd had a reasonably bland lunch.

At the time, I laughed at myself. I tried to blame my reactions on the air conditioning, on the need for supper, on the weather, dammit. Ridiculous! This guy stood peering over my shoulder and I felt like I melted into sap. It took me a little longer to realize—and admit—what had happened.

In that very instant, I fell heavily, and *hard*, for Niall Sutherland.

“Tanner?”

Did he notice? I reckoned I covered my reactions well, though maybe I was fooling myself.

“I see your problem.” His voice was low and calm, recalling me from my embarrassing thoughts. “It’s a rather mixed bunch, right? You’ve got your work cut out for you. Judith’s only ever asked me to look at people with established technical qualifications. My evaluation’s only good for finding guys who’ll load a weapon and be prepared to use it, according to my orders. Who’ll set a fuse as I tell them, then stand well back.”

“Yeah.” I grinned. I felt light-headed. “Sounds a lot like my job description too.”

He didn’t exactly laugh, but his eyes flickered across to mine, and they looked warmer. They looked *interested*. Shit, I nearly hopped like an Easter bunny.

“Thanks for the input, anyway,” I said. “Guess I just like to do things my own way. You heard Judith. I like to work on my own at this preparatory stage, that’s all.”

“Others can’t keep up?”

“No.” I felt myself flush. His smile was very distracting. “Just too much of a maverick.”

He nodded. And dammit, despite the fact my words were arrogant and facile—which wasn’t unheard of, for me—he looked amused by them. Or maybe he was just looking at my mouth, at my lips. It was a very sensual action, though I didn’t know if he realized it. Whatever the reason, my cock reacted shamelessly to it, right there and then, my

groin feeling a strange, prickly tingle. At that moment, he could've looked at anything of mine if he'd wanted, and I wouldn't have minded. My worn socks, my ancient set of original comic books, my kindergarten report card. Come to think of it, that last one might have given him a good idea of what I was like, it was as accurate in its way as my most recent appraisal.

I shifted my legs carefully, trying to get my comfortable position back. He was still nodding but his eyes followed my movement. "A maverick," he said, softly. "Not always a bad thing." He glanced at his watch and looked surprised at the time. "You want to grab some late supper and talk some more about it?"

Did I? I tried out that insouciant look and probably just looked sour. I'd checked his hand; no ring, though I knew a lot of guys didn't wear one anyway. Checked the way he related to Judith, because she was damned fine, but he'd been nothing but professional. I nodded agreement to the supper. I nodded; and I prayed for more.

WE WALKED to the small Italian restaurant a few doors down the street because they knew the staff from the Department there and because the food was always good. As far as they were concerned, we were just plain office workers who kept odd hours. I nodded to a couple of familiar waiters, but the rest of the time my eyes were glued to my companion. The way he shrugged off his jacket; the way he folded his long legs under his seat. The polite smile he gave to the wine waiter, and the approving nod he gave as he looked around at the cozy décor. The menu arrived under my nose, and I looked right through it like I had Superman's X-ray vision. God knows what I ordered! I like my food, you know? But I could've asked for Table Napkins Carbonara, and I wouldn't have cared.

We both chose a rich red wine and the same thick, creamy pasta. And we started to talk. Even when the food arrived, we continued, the conversation flowing comfortably and easily.

Niall mentioned his involvement in a few higher profile Department missions. Not boasting, you know, I had to give him that.

Mind you, he didn't need to; his reputation was already established, from what I could gather. In fact, one of the missions he mentioned was the very job where Judith had earned her best promotion. Despite myself, I was impressed.

"She thinks a lot of you, right?"

He shook his head dismissively. "I'm just going to be one of the team. But I get on very well with her. She's fair. She's a good boss." He smiled easily, but there was restlessness in him, too, and I didn't think it was anything to do with this evening. I suspected Niall Sutherland was a field man, through and through, and looking forward to getting involved in something more challenging. More risky. I liked that thought a lot. I didn't have much time for routine myself.

"I have a meeting with Simon tomorrow," he said. "To get up to speed." He paused in his eating for a second. "Great guy."

"You like him?" I was being mischievous, of course. Simon was a valuable colleague and he'd become a good friend. Nothing more, though; he was gay, too, but we didn't find that attraction in each other, and neither of us minded. But he did get included in all the high level meetings. Sometimes I thought he must know as much as Judith about the mission plans, and probably *more* when it came to knowing how the hell they were going to be put into practice.

Niall raised an eyebrow. "Yes, I like him," he said. "Judith speaks about him a lot." And then he grinned as if he'd seen right through my clumsy prying. "Apparently he and Brad Richards have got up to speed already, but in a different way. Am I right?"

"Yeah. They're together." We both laughed, but I could tell Niall respected that. And I could also tell... what? That he liked guys too? Seemed like Judith had found a few of us for the Team so far. A happy coincidence, or maybe we'd found a place that accepted us just as we were. In my case, at least, it had colored my upbringing and helped create the kind of man I was today—a man who'd never fit elsewhere in the Department's more rigid establishment. But that was their loss, of course.

And it didn't necessarily mean Niall would like *me*.

“So what are you hoping for from your move to the Project Team?” I hurried on. “It’s been great for me, something really challenging. And the guys are the best to work with.”

“I’m looking forward to that,” Niall said. “Working with you.”

I felt a terrible ache inside, and all I could taste in the salad I was eating was the sharp flavor of need. Hell, had it been that long since I dated? Since I touched anyone? Since I had some rich, wet, sticky satisfaction?

It wasn’t just that, of course. It was all about *him*.

Meanwhile, he talked some more about new weapons he’d been testing, and his hope of working with more cutting-edge equipment. Judith often took advantage of prototypes in the market, offering a professional evaluation in return for exclusive use, at least until it came out to the public. He talked about some high-speed, low-weight models that had been imported from Eastern Europe; some exciting new developments in chemical research. I listened with only half an ear, the other half fascinated by the timbre of his voice, the rhythm of his careful enthusiasm.

He was also intrigued to know more about my role, which, let’s face it, didn’t lend itself to a normal job title. “I work with the people,” I explained. “Ours, and the target’s. I identify the people we need to manipulate, then help discover their motivations, suggest what triggers them. I coach people in developing alternate personalities and how to cope with undercover work. It’s like acting. I help them find the right clothes, the movements, the mannerisms. Then it’s up to them to carry out the rest of their shit.”

His eyes caught mine. That had been happening a lot, all through the meal. “Like a chameleon,” he said, and it didn’t sound sarcastic or like he’d been listening to water cooler gossip about me. “That’s quite a talent.”

Fuck, I didn’t blush, did I? “It’s just part of the process.” I shrugged. “Not as glamorous as blowing up strongboxes, or like guys in sunglasses providing security for international celebrities, or charging into riot situations, guns blazing.”

When I looked back at him, his eyes had clouded over a little. I could've kicked myself. I'd been facetious, just like I always was, but I'd been talking about someone else's work, not my own. I was out of line, and I knew it. He might be really pissed with me, might think I was laughing at his role in the Department.

"Sorry," I blurted out. "That didn't come over like I meant." I reached for my glass, to cover the embarrassment with a drink. He reached for something at the same time. Our hands nudged knuckles.

My body went white hot with excitement.

"It's okay," Niall said, and he sounded like he meant it. He didn't move his hand and, quite frankly, mine might have been soldered to the cloth, hanging on to that small touch like discovered riches. Our fingers lay against each other's for several moments. Niall's gaze flickered to my face and away again. He looked wary but calm.

"Good," I replied. I reckoned I had my answer about his preferences, but my throat was too tight to manage anything more articulate. There seemed to be a lack of blood flowing to my heart. It had all gone south.

The waiter had been hovering for some time at the edge of the room. By then, we were the last ones in the restaurant, and we'd definitely taken longer over a couple of plates of salad and pasta than anyone really had a right to. We were still smiling at each other—mine was so broad it must have looked more like a grimace—when the poor guy snatched his chance and waved the menu between us. "Coffee, sirs?"

Niall looked fully at me. It was a look of such astonishing intensity that I was suddenly breathless. His eyes were so deep that I felt momentarily dizzy; I felt as if the floor shifted under me. I tried to put my napkin down carefully and only succeeded in dropping it off the table altogether.

"Coffee, Tanner?" How could someone put so much communication into two such banal words?

I gazed back. "Not here," I replied. Hoped to God my voice wasn't shaking as much as my heartbeat. "Got some at home. I live just a few blocks away."

“I’ll get my jacket,” he said.

LET’S face it, I’d had more than my fair share of dating; had a couple of other guys’ share, probably. But it had been a while since anything regular, and nothing had ever really lasted. No one had ever kept my attention longer than a shared summer, or finding casual warmth in bed. Just a few weeks’ unencumbered fun. It’d been several months since the lack of such company had even bothered me. And I’d definitely never felt so drawn to someone that I couldn’t hold my hands at my sides, that I couldn’t tear my eyes away from that person, or stop thinking about what it would be like to kiss him....

But that’s how it was with Niall.

He walked beside me as we made our way around the corner of my street, just kind of normal, two guys wandering along. He had his hands in the pockets of his light-colored pants for a while, and he’d slipped his jacket back on, as the evening was cool. His shirt was made of a thin fabric, and I’d seen the line of his muscles underneath it during supper. I do remember thinking—again—how that shade of blue really suited his coloring. I felt shabby with my jeans and my garishly-patterned shirt, but when I’d stumbled into my clothes that morning, I’d not envisaged the day ending like this. I felt all sorts of strange new things, to tell you the truth. Most of all, I felt every inch of him along the shared side of my body; I was conscious of every breath he expelled into the cool night air. It had never been such a long and charged journey back to my apartment.

I’d been living there since I joined the Department, though Judith was looking into something more secure for the Project Team members, so I’d probably be moving again in the near future. I’d always moved fairly regularly. You could have justifiably called me a bit of a gypsy. So I kept a lot of my stuff in boxes and trunks, didn’t have much time for formal furniture. Just needed a reasonable kitchen, a comfortable bedroom, and a top-notch bathroom with power shower. That made me happy enough. I didn’t watch TV, though I listened to music quite a lot. I had my system fixed up to turn itself on the minute I

opened the front door, just to greet me with something good. And yes, you may well think, why was I rambling on about my household habits? Guess it was a measure of how nervous I felt that night. Nervous about what he'd think of my place; nervous of inviting him back there, like I couldn't remember if I'd washed up after breakfast, or left my sneakers in the middle of the hallway, or yesterday's jeans out on the couch....

I discovered that wasn't really an issue, of course.

I fumbled with the key of the building to get in. When the lock first clicked open, even before we'd taken a step through the doorway, that was the first time he touched me properly. Suddenly there was one of his strong, steady hands on my shoulder, turning me to face him, then the other one running slowly around the line of my jaw. I stared into his eyes, and they looked darker than ever. Maybe hungry; still wary. I didn't know his expressions well enough then. My own eyelids felt heavy with seductive delight, and my lips parted very slowly as if to release a silent groan. Swear to God, I nuzzled up against his palm like some needy cat.

He whispered very gently into my ear, and I could feel the brush of his hair against my cheek. "Tell me now, Tanner, if you'd rather I didn't come in. I don't know you well enough. Don't know if this is okay. Shit, I don't know anything, really."

I didn't answer with such mundane things as words. Couldn't even be bothered with a nod. Just let my chin tilt up so that our lips were millimeters away from each other's, and I could breathe in the warmth of his tentative whisper. Then I opened my mouth and took in his darting tongue.

We were going to bump heads that night, for sure.

Tuesday 01.25

I STIRRED on the cushions, uncomfortable and restless on the floor of my trailer, with only memories to entertain me. A cool breeze on the street and a good meal nudging my stomach; that was partly what I remembered from that evening, all those months ago. But clearest of all was the precious memory of how fantastic Niall tasted!

I'd been in some kind of sensual heaven. He kissed like a demon, but a very sweet, very sincere demon. His tongue was hot and fast and fucking *gorgeous*. He tasted of the wine, the pasta sauce, and the mints that came with the check. He pressed fiercely against me, like he'd been holding himself back for the last hour or so but was now released from whatever inhibitions he'd had, and his hands twisted sharply into my hair at the back of my neck. I could feel strands working loose from the tie and his fingertips pressing on the thin skin at my nape. His eyes were open, watching my reactions, and his hands never strayed past my shoulders. He was waiting, I think, to double check I was okay with it all.

I may have been an acting coach at work, but no one had ever accused me of being difficult to read when it came to sex, in all its forms. I slid both my arms around his waist and pulled him in even closer, tight against my body. My lips pressed back hard against his and I gasped my willingness into his mouth. I felt his body tighten and the muscles slide against my own, all the way from torso to knee. The door eased open behind us and we half-fell into the hallway, laughing, groaning, still nipping at each other's lips.

"Which floor?" he gasped.

"Fifth." I'd never cursed the broken elevator as soundly as I did that night. We stumbled up all five flights, bumping our hipbones on the banister, scuffing our shoes against the wall. From the way we clung to each other, we were like a single melded body with two sets of limbs. I nudged him around each landing, taking every chance to run

my hands inside his jacket and down his sides, his warm torso tantalizing me from underneath his shirt. As I groped for the keys to my apartment, he seemed to be the only thing holding me upright, clutching my shoulders and gasping into my neck, his fingertips tracing the pulse in my throat, caressing my skin with the damp heat of his palms.

We tumbled again through a doorway, panting from our exertions and from a barely contained passion. But this time when I kicked the door closed behind us, I knew it was just us now; just the two of us, blessed privacy, and a mounting excitement that had consumed any shred of sense left in my brain.

The music playing in my apartment? It was pure soul... a low, slow beat and a voice rich with sensuous humor in every syllable and tone. I barely registered, except to feel the familiar comfort of it around me. Kind of my favorite music, coincidence or not.

And all those worries I had about the state of my place? Thankfully, we never went anywhere near the kitchen to check up on my housekeeping abilities. We also bypassed the lounge where, in fact, there were several piles of my laundry on the couch, some clean and some embarrassingly crumpled. As we staggered down my narrow hallway, he shrugged off his jacket and I dropped my keys someplace I didn't see and, frankly, didn't care. I toed off my boots and socks in a trail of laughter and hot breathy kisses. When I mumbled something about the coffee I'd promised him, he laughed directly into my face and kissed me again, so soundly that my eyes closed against his forehead and I felt his taste seep into my very veins. I felt him kicking off his own shoes and fumbling at my buttons. I'd wanted to take some time, to savor the suspense of peeling his clothes off of him—to tease him, perhaps, with my own unwrapping. Then his hands came up underneath the cool fabric of my shirt, running fingertips across my exposed nipples, and suddenly instantaneous nakedness would have been *way* too slow for me.

The bedroom wasn't hard to find, mainly because I pushed him bodily through the door, and we fell onto the bed, entwined again as that four-limbed beast. By now, my shirt was hanging from my body by nothing more than a single sleeve, but in return I'd managed to open his

without ripping off any buttons in my impatience, and also tug down the zipper of his pants. He palmed my groin, molding his hand around the swollen excitement under my jeans, but *I* had a hand inside the cloth of his underwear, and I had a hold of flesh—damp, hot, and tangled in amongst curls of hair already sticky with excitement—and I was making him groan aloud in a very satisfying way.

He felt exquisite. *Precious*. I couldn't understand my reverence, but there was no mistaking it. I'd never felt like that before—nor since, for that matter.

I took the advantage then. I rolled myself around and scrambled up to kneel beside him, tugging at the fabric of his pants and pulling them down from his hips. His soft black jersey briefs were a fabulous contrast against his flushed skin, and they peeled off just as easily under my determined touch. I wanted him naked, and I wanted it now!

He lay on his back underneath me, with none of that coyness that some guys have when you strip them. No, he lay there with his shirt wide open and his chest heaving, his long, bare legs stretched out along the length of my bed. He looked both confident and comfortable, like a wet dream come to reality. His eager eyes glittered like flints, and they were locked on me. His arms lay by his side, and his fists clenched gently. When I reached down to pull his shirt off properly, he shifted his upper body to help me out. Then he reached up for my hand and drew it down to his mouth. I watched, fascinated, as his tongue slipped out and licked the valleys between my fingers.

“Tanner.” It was just a breath; just a murmur. No instruction, no demand.

I gazed at him, drinking in the sight of his body laid out on my bed, the sheet creased up under his hip, shadows playing along the white cotton folds as he clenched the muscles of his slim ass. The front of his thighs curved sweetly. Soft hairs on his skin, dark curls around his groin. He sucked softly on my fingers and shifted, getting more comfortable. What can I say? The movement made his cock bob gently against his belly, the flesh thick and swollen. It made the skin of his balls crinkle and the shape of the globes inside roll against the base of his groin.

I'd always thought unadulterated joy an unattainable urban myth, but I felt it then.

I leaned further over and pressed my mouth to his, trying to regain the taste of hot need in him and succeeding. He was saturated with it; his kiss in return was even greedier than mine.

My hands slid down his body, his hips straining up toward me, as I took his cock back into my grasp, and I started to stroke him. Both hands rolling around him, up and down, spreading the warm pre-come around the shaft. He gasped and bit at my lip so that I pulled my kiss away, laughing softly. And still I caressed him. He cursed a few times, like he couldn't find the right words. Once, his hand crawled up to his own hair, gripping it like an anchor to reality. I'd never enjoyed pumping a guy so much in all my life; he was a prize in my hands. I felt his desire flooding up through my fingertips and into my own body.

I was grinning like a fool by this time, and wriggled out of my own loosened jeans until I was naked too. My hands were trying to keep the contact with his arousal, but his seed leaked out onto my palms, glistening and making them slippery. I felt the shiver of disappointment in his body every time I had to loosen my grip. His eyes were fixed on mine, widening with every stroke. His face was very flushed, his chest was covered in a thin sheen of sweat, and he was panting. Seems he was trying to tell me something; ask for something, maybe. I thought I could guess what it was. I was pretty smug by then.

I licked my lips. "Niall," I said, trying out the sound of his voice in the acoustics of my bedroom. No music had ever sounded so good, and I grinned from pure pleasure. "So what now?"

His pupils were hugely dilated, but he smiled back as if he were savoring the anticipation just as deeply. "Whatever you want, Tanner." His groan was husky, very sexy. "It's your place, your room. Your call. I just want *you*."

And with that deeply sensual sound in my ears, I nearly lost it. Any bantering reply I had in my throat turned tail and ran. I leaned down over his hips instead and took him into my mouth. I knew what I wanted; I wanted to taste him, to possess him, to draw him into me wherever and however I could. He cried out loudly, and his hand

snatched fiercely at my hair. I didn't care. I licked and sucked, and his cock nudged at the back of my mouth with barely controlled passion. It was better than any damned meal I could ever have ordered.

I think he was close to climax when he pushed me off. I didn't take it as any kind of a rejection, just that he wanted it to last longer. He still grasped at me; I could still hear his harsh panting and the soft whimpers of need in the back of his throat. His hands ran over my flesh, and he rolled my erect nipples between his fingertips. Then he shifted his body so that he lay beside me, but with his head now at my hips and his groin achingly close to my chin. I had saliva glands at full productivity and a tongue caressed by trails of his pre-come, so I was more than happy to go back down on him. But I also didn't complain when he returned the favor.

His tongue was soft at the tip, with a pleasing roughness along its length; it swiped hungrily along my shaft, and I gasped with delight. It was a shock when he took almost all of me into his mouth. Don't get me wrong, I'm not boasting, but I've been told in the past that I'm not small. But his nose nudged at my groin, and my balls swung helplessly at his bared throat. I started to slide down that slippery slope of ecstasy right about then, and, *fuck*, I was loath to resist it.

I tried to hold back; I tried to keep my mind on pleasing him, and I was thrilled when I felt the familiar throb of his cock against my lips and the strangled sob from his throat that meant, in my experience, that surrender was imminent.

"Tanner!" He pulled his mouth back up to the tip of my cock, gasping for breath, struggling for words. I didn't know why he bothered. I wanted to throw myself off that damned slope and let the tidal wave of orgasm wash over me as well. But what did I know of him and his thoughts, back then?

"Is it...? I'm going to...." *Yes, yes, get on with it....* "Tanner," he groaned. "In your mouth? I mean, if you'll take my word that I'm okay...."

He wanted to know if I'd prefer not to swallow, I realized. If I'd be disgusted or nervous of it. I couldn't remember the last guy who'd bothered to ask at this stage, not that I wouldn't have made my own

preferences clear enough if things were going the wrong way. But I was intrigued, despite myself. Even if I hadn't needed any more evidence that Niall Sutherland was a different kind of guy—which, had I been honest, I didn't—his concern for me, even as he shuddered with a climax approaching in the fast lane of his nervous system, was very revealing.

I shook my head gently and tensed my lips around his cock to emphasize my eagerness. He groaned then, no more words available, and I was filled with the sudden burst of warm, viscous liquid from its tip. An eager burst, then another. Hot, thick flesh, shooting its delicious load, spattering on my tongue. I licked and swallowed gratefully. His thighs thrust up against my chin, his muscles clenched and strained, and I smelled the sweat and passion that suffused his skin.

It was all I needed to take me there too. I lifted my head from his groin and bared my neck, my eyes sliding half-closed. Then I stretched an arm down behind me to grab however much of him I could reach. My palm rested on his thick, damp hair, and I pressed his head further down on my own arousal.

“Me too,” I grunted. “Trust me.” And he obviously did. Two more thrusts of my hips and I groaned aloud with my climax, my cock throbbing with delight at being bedded in the warmest, softest place it had been for a hell of a long time. Niall's mouth tightened around me, like mine had around him, and I swear I felt the vibration of a laugh run the length of my shaft. I don't know for sure; I was rather occupied at the time with keeping my body on the planet and my voice below mega-decibels.

I came like the walls of Jericho must have tumbled.

THAT was never going to be enough.

Believe it or not, I don't fuck on a first “date” as a matter of habit. But that night, as Niall shifted back up on the bed to come face to face with me, my whole body still shook with desire. I was like the string of a guitar, pulled tight and then released, but still thrumming with the

note. I turned unfocused eyes on to his dark, laughing gaze, and my mouth just opened for his tongue, all over again.

“I want you,” he murmured thickly, deep into my mouth. I think he’d said it a few times already, or maybe I heard it echoing in my head, which was far from clear. I was hardening again at the mere sound of his voice. From the harsh nudging against my hip, it seemed he was as eager himself.

We rolled almost instinctively into a position where I was bottom, lying on my back. Guess I didn’t care how, and I could do both, of course, with equal enthusiasm. His hands were very sure, parting my legs, stroking at my belly. He was looking down at me with those sinfully gorgeous eyes, smiling that ridiculously fascinating smile.

God, I had it bad.

“Do you have condoms?” He looked sheepish, as if the whole thing had him bemused, and also very tense, as if he were struggling to hang on to some shred of sense. Hell, I could show some responsibility, too, couldn’t I? If I could just tear my eyes from him for a few seconds....

There was stuff in my bedside drawer, though I knew I’d have to search under a pile of books and receipts and various coins to find it. It’d been a while since I’d found anyone that attracted me enough to bother. I fumbled around for condoms and lube, one arm stretched out to the drawer while I tried with the other one to keep him close. He lay on me, murmuring nonsense into my shoulder, running his tongue along the line of my muscle, deep into the armpit and down along the sinews on the inside of my arm. It all reduced me to a mess of needy, nauseous hunger.

He took pity on me eventually and took charge of the lube, popping the top of the bottle and letting the cool gel drip on to his hand. I bent my legs up and pulled my knees further apart so he could reach more easily. When his finger slipped slowly into me, I groaned aloud. He paused for a second, maybe afraid that he’d hurt me or something.

“Tanner?”

“Don’t stop,” I gasped. “More.” I only just held myself back from a weeping “*Please.*”

He probed me gently but firmly. He certainly knew what he was doing, reaching inside me with care and determination. Three smooth thrusts, and he was hitting the spot. I heard myself yelping with delight like a devoted puppy. He laughed softly, his breath quickening. Giving pleasure seemed to delight him as much the receiving thrilled me. He didn't withdraw his fingers until the last minute, continuing to stretch me, tantalizing me with strokes to my prostate while he slid on the condom with his other hand, slicking himself up. When his cock finally nudged up between my legs, pressing tentatively at an opening that hadn't seen much third-party penetrative action for a while, I was more than ready for him. I arched up, pressing my body against his, and I pulled his head down to nip at his lips. My thighs tightened around him and my ass lifted inches off the bed with my own eagerness.

He sank into me steadily, carefully, deeply.

I know I groaned; I daresay I cursed as well. I'm not the quietest of guys regarding pillow talk. But before he could worry again he'd hurt me or I was reluctant in any way, I slid my hands around his body, under his tight, lean buttocks, and I gripped him to me. He thrust fiercely and greedily, as if the desperation overcame him; I heard his low groan in reply to mine. His cock sank in to the root, his balls slapping softly against my ass. We rocked together, skin slick with sweat, muscles keen and strong and clenching on to each other like we were afraid to let go. We both scrabbled for my cock, crushed as it was between our bodies, rubbed mercilessly against my belly. He pushed away my flailing hand, and I knew it wouldn't take much to tip me over the edge again; and yes, a few strokes from Niall's broad hand and I was moaning his name along with a lot of other stuff that didn't make any coherent sense. My back arched again, and my head swam, and then the flesh between us was damp with my sticky seed, bursting free as we thrust together. I felt its warmth as it pooled in my navel and then trickled down on to the sheets beneath us.

Guess it was my night for embarrassingly quick comings.

I could feel Niall's own climax approaching, the increased thrusting inside me and the tightening of his hand on my hip. I wanted to savor it as much as my own; I wanted to give him that same ecstasy! I hissed encouragement and clutched him close to me. I tried to mold

my body against his as he leaned into me and heaved out every gasping breath. He felt like an extension of me, like we consumed each other. I couldn't have described the feeling aloud, but the satisfaction and the rich pleasure coiled deep in my groin and started to flood thickly through my limbs. It saturated me.

When he came, I shared it with him, like I was suffering the same effort, the same sweet agony, the same ecstasy. His hips slammed sharply against mine and my ears rang with his cry of shocked delight, as if he hadn't enjoyed such a thing for a long, long time. I didn't know if he always sounded like that, or if it were something rare. I didn't care, really; I was just too thrilled for sensible thought.

Like I might have said before... I'd never felt like that before in my life.

WE AMUSED ourselves for some hours after that first time; we couldn't get enough of each other. I can't remember much of anything we talked about, just the thrill of anticipation along my nerves every time he laughed, or moved his limbs in *that way*, or kissed me again... and every time our lustful desires were reawakened. Every touch made me catch my breath; another outrageous, tingling, thrilling climax brought amazement. In the end we were defeated by our own stamina—or lack of it—and we collapsed, still laughing, our muscles aching and exhausted. The mattress dipped under our combined weight as we relaxed, like it welcomed us on board.

We untangled our limbs and wiped off the more obvious mess. I suggested a shower, but neither of us could find the energy to move for a while. I eventually fetched some chilled water and the pair of us drank it slowly. We listened to the music playing throughout the apartment, enjoying it but without really concentrating. There was soul and some jazz and some more obscure European composers. It was all good. Then, when the tracks faded to nothing, we sighed into the silence—companionably—and I turned it all off. I didn't need any other company at that moment.

We washed up and played around under the shower together. When he turned to kiss me, the water running down over his shoulders, his skin flushed with the heat, we both found our bodies stirring with the memory of recent, renewed lust. But then he shook his head and laughed, and I laughed along with him. Enough, already!

We helped dry each other and pottered back to the bedroom. Lay on the bed and drank some more, talked about music. Yawned. Finally, Niall wriggled down on the bed, his arm still over my chest, and his conversation drifted to nothing. He fell asleep soon after.

I stayed awake for a much longer time, just watching him.

Jeez. I wasn't any kind of lovesick teenager. But he looked so good, I felt I had everything I needed, right there. He slept totally unselfconsciously, sheets crumpled around his ankles, his limbs spread-eagled across my mattress like he slept there every night.

It was all so cheesy! At any other time, it would've made my teeth clench. The whole romance thing was anathema to me. I liked occasional dating, I liked company. But it was usually a much more pragmatic approach for me. A couple of beers, a shared sense of humor, a measured glance down a body to see if the other guy felt the same physical interest. Then it was just a matter of seeing if anything developed between us. But this had been something very different, right from the start.

And now he was asleep in my bed, apparently staying the night.

Did I give him the usual get-outs? I searched my usual mental checklist. I always gave guys the chance to leave if they wanted; it didn't often offend me. I'd waited for Niall to smile and say "Thanks," to climb back into his clothes and ask if I had a local cab number. I would have offered him a drink and a sandwich, maybe. Dammit, I'd have clambered back into my own wrinkled jeans and driven him home myself. Anything to have kept that delicious, sated, sensual feeling humming between us. Anything to have stood a chance of seeing him again. And I didn't mean at the office.

But he'd seemed happy enough to stay with me regardless. I continued to watch him, holding my breath as best I could, in case I woke him and he got up to leave after all.

He didn't. And finally I slept myself.

AFTER the passion comes the reckoning. Whatever. That'd always been the way for me, my usual expectation. Maybe not straight away, but payback is always waiting in the wings. Isn't it?

I slept deeply after that first "date" with Niall, after showing him everything I had and a couple more things I thought I'd mislaid someplace along the rocky romantic way. I'd slept *very* deeply, but also very comfortably and right through my insistent alarm. When I finally woke with heavy eyelids and limbs full of lassitude, I stared stupidly at the clock for some time, trying to reorient myself. 08:17. I was going to be late for work.

That morning after—everyone has to face it, right?

The sheet beside me was creased, but the bed was empty. I tried to gather my thoughts, bemused by the remnants of sleep. My legs ached and my ass was unusually sore. Hadn't I...? Hadn't we...? *Fuck.*

The rattle of cups in the kitchen startled me. I sat upright under the crumpled covers and held my breath until Niall appeared in the open doorway of my room, dressed in nothing but his pants and carrying two mugs of steaming liquid. He looked in, saw that I was awake, and paused right there.

I hoped he'd found some fresh milk for his drink. I hoped he wasn't catching a chill on the bare boards of my hallway, what with his bare feet. I hoped a lot of things, actually. I'd forgotten how good and how scary that felt.

"Coffee," he said, a little awkwardly and rather obviously, since we could both smell the hot, rich roast. "I guessed you'd want some. I make it rather strong, but I'm hoping that's okay with you."

I coughed and found a thread of my voice still obeying me. "It's fine."

"I called in. To the Team," he said. I was still staring at him; didn't reply. "To reschedule my meeting with Simon. To tell them we were working from home today." His eyes widened suddenly as he

realized what he'd said. "I mean—I was working from *my* home, and you were working from... damn."

I was still staring. If my eyes had got any wider, they'd have popped out of my head altogether. He stood there in my doorway, and he looked spectacular: ruffled hair, flushed skin, eyes darting around with uncertainty. Nervous, perhaps. But *spectacular*.

"Look, I'm sorry about last night," he started. Perhaps he saw me wince, because he hastened to clarify. "No, dammit, not that! I mean... I fell asleep in your bed, in your apartment, without asking if you'd mind. I was too tired. I was exhausted, actually. It's been a hard week, moving over from the Department, briefing meetings with Judith. And last night, on top of that..." Was that a blush I saw? *Fuck*, it was cute on him. "You should have woken me, Tanner, and bundled me off home. I had no right to assume that was okay—"

"But it was," I interrupted. I looked at the mugs in his hands, but I wasn't focusing on them. I couldn't have told you what color they were or what stupid logo they might have been emblazoned with. I think I had an inane grin on my face again. "It was fine. *Very* fine. I wanted you there."

He stood in the doorway a little too long for comfort, as if he were trying to decide how serious I was. I suspected the hot mugs were starting to burn his thumbs. "Put them down," I said. I shucked off the sheet and rolled around until I was kneeling on the bed facing him. Then I wriggled a couple of feet toward him. I was still totally naked. My skin goose-bumped in the cooler morning air, but it wasn't just from the temperature. A deep, heavy warmth was growing and bobbing between my legs. Most distracting. "Put them down," I repeated. "And lose those pants. Get back over here. I'm not thirsty for coffee. I want to *fuck* again."

His eyes flared some bright message, something vivid and sensual that sparked an answering shiver across my skin. His breath hitched in his bare chest, and his mouth twisted in a slow smile. "That's good," he replied, placing the mugs on the floor by the bedroom door with exaggerated care. "Because I wasn't sure if you would. It was all rather fast, wasn't it?"

“That suits me,” I muttered. I was only half joking. I couldn’t have held myself back from him if my limbs had been strapped to the proverbial wild horses. Yeah, it had been damned fast; I only met the guy three hours before we ended up in bed! I had no regrets at all, but I knew I ought to appreciate any that *he* had. “You’re sorry, Niall? You want to draw breath—take it slower? I understand...”

“No,” he said abruptly. “I don’t want to. But I don’t know if I *should*. Hell, I don’t do this a lot, Tanner. That’s all I can say. It’s just... last night, being with you... it was like I couldn’t help myself.”

“I know.” I grinned back at him. He looked even cuter, struggling with the words. I’d crawled to the edge of the bed by now and reached over for him. I plucked at the half-undone belt of his pants. “It’s the same for me. It happened, it was magnificent. I want some more. End of soul baring for today, okay?”

He gazed at me, and that beautifully understated smile crept over his face again.

I felt the blood rush through me like the tide coming in. My mouth grew dry, and my morning arousal wept shamelessly for his touch. I fell back on the bed, ignoring his laughing protests as his falling pants snagged on his hips, toppling him onto me. He caught himself on shaking arms and leaned over me, releasing a hand to push the bedraggled hair back off my face. He gazed down at me, and laughed with me, and sank down to kiss me.

I knew even then that he was probably the best thing I’d ever seen. The best thing I could ever have imagined. The man who could quite possibly give me the best time of my life.

It was only the first time I’d met him properly, yet it was the first time we came together. There was no doubt it was right; there was never any doubt at all, though I knew very little of him then.

And probably not enough.

Tuesday 02:40

THE best time of my life? Oh yeah, it was!

After that night, we definitely wanted to see each other again. And then again. We wanted each other's company like a drug; we were hungry for each other like nothing else we'd ever known. I don't know when—or if—the other guys learned we were seeing each other, because at first we were fairly circumspect at work. But outside of work hours, we drew together like moths to each other's flame. We drank together, ate together, watched movies, played music. All that stuff. And we fucked as if it were permanently on sale.

Glorious times. Most of the time.

We were very different, of course. From the very beginning. For me, that was the excitement, the whole stimulation. I didn't think it mattered that we communicated in different ways too. Hell, I could manage on very little, I thought. That, and the fantastic sex.

But for us, being in a relationship was never going to be easy. For a start, we had the work situation. We weren't always on the same jobs, and even if we were, the hours weren't exactly nine-to-five routine. And over the course of the next six months or so, the Project Team asked more and more of us.

Judith never said anything directly, but she was obviously under pressure to produce results. She drew in about a dozen other agents, but our group remained the core. And it was a damned small core. There was no official brief, just an amazingly wide collection of skills and enthusiasms and a bunch of people who itched restlessly to use them. But there was also no margin for error. The jobs they kept pitching our way were complex and often messy. I reckoned we got the stuff that other departments had turned down as too tricky. Flattering, but risky too. We were in on anything and everything; celebrity security issues,

assassination threats, industrial sabotage, political sleaze. We'd investigate it, then decide how to deal with it.

And we *did* produce results. Good ones.

Seemed the variety and the risks suited us all just fine. We bounced ideas off each other and developed a way of working well, whatever the combination. I never felt as good as when I was in that Team, when I was with the guys, using the talents we had, working always at top speed, at top awareness. We had an exhilarating banter going between us; we were young and fit and full of confidence. And working like dogs.

In some ways, I thought that was better for me and Niall, in that we worked together; we shared the tension and the excitement and the long days planning and directing. So okay, we had very little leisure time and weren't always on the same schedule, but we'd find places to be together when we needed to. We laughed at ourselves, sneaking around like school kids, but I guess our passion was heightened by the adrenaline rush and the half-secrecy of our early relationship. Yeah, I got a blowjob in the janitor's closet! Jeez, I had trouble looking seriously at the cleaners for weeks afterward. I'd recall the image of my foot stuck in a metal bucket, my pants around my ankles and my hair tangled in with a mop head. The handle jerked alongside me as I climaxed into Niall's mouth, in a weird pseudo-sexual dance of its own. Niall laughed so much that my come dribbled out of his mouth and all down his shirt.

There were more anecdotes than could fit in one of the more lurid men's magazines. We christened the office tables, several cubicles, underneath the fire escape. And there was one particular stall in the executive toilets on the third floor of the main Department's head office that had Niall's fingernail tracks as a permanent feature of the Italian tiling.

We even did it once on the back seat of an official car. Judith had been called into the Department for an update meeting, and they'd sent the official car for her. On her way back, she picked us up, intending to run a late Team briefing. Then someone from the Department rang her cell, asking for clarification on some point or other. She parked the car

and went ahead of us into the office to take the call, leaving us to amuse ourselves for a while.

We certainly did that. We flipped the windows up and down and played with her video telephone like naughty kids, and then Niall pushed me on to my back on the broad leather seat and wriggled his hand down the front of my pants. Two minutes later, my pants were around my ankles, my head was twisted awkwardly against the door panel, and my legs were wrapped tightly around Niall's bare hips as he pushed into me. Mercifully, the windows steamed up quickly, and the expensive suspension proved more than equal to the challenge.

He had to press his hand over my mouth to shut me up when I came. It was fast and funny and poignant, like the way tears squeeze out during a laughing fit. Don't think Judith ever guessed what we'd been up to. We were easily decent by the time she returned to find out why we hadn't followed her, though there was a rather rich aroma inside the car. Anyhow, we never risked it twice! Had to find alternative, less potentially dangerous places to satisfy ourselves.

No one had ever made me enjoy sex so much. It was brilliant. *He* was brilliant. That's how it all seemed to me. We wanted each other, we were both committed to the world we lived and worked in, and life was all there in front of us. But I don't think either of us understood what was happening to us.

I know I didn't.

I SUPPOSE I never gave much time to thinking it through – where we might go with this affair, what we both wanted from it all. Neither of us could think straight, it seemed, except through our dicks. But Niall seemed happy enough with it all, happy enough with me. That's what I thought, anyway. I didn't always have a lot to go on. There'd been confusion between us as often as there was lustful joy.

“Just tell me what you're feeling. How you think it's going.”

“What do you mean?” That was a popular phrase of his. He stood opposite me in the lounge of his apartment on a typical evening, a half-

empty beer bottle in his hand and tiredness in his eyes. “Tanner, I don’t see why I have to talk about everything. You know how I feel.”

I was frowning, and I could feel the nagging onset of a headache. For a second, I couldn’t even remember what I’d been asking him. It’d been a hell of a long day for me, too, though we’d been on different jobs. “Maybe I don’t know, not always. It’s just the way I lead my life. I like to hear things, I like to discuss them.” Dammit, he was so good—we were so good! —I wanted to praise the fact and pimp it and just generally pet it all. I felt that way about everything where Niall was concerned. Every damned feeling, from the fiercest orgasm to the strange ache that I felt inch by inch across my body every time he ran a hand through his hair.

He was puzzled but smiling back at me. He ran a hand through his hair in *just that way*. I stepped forward, and his hand lifted at the same time, reaching for me.

“Tanner, I was stunned from the moment I saw you.” His smile faded, shadowed by something that disturbed him. “I’ve never felt like that about anyone in my life. Even before I spoke to you.”

“Huh?” His hand was stroking slowly along the line of my jaw, and I stretched up into the touch.

“I just looked at you and wanted to know you. In every sense of the word.” He tsked softly. “Is that the kind of thing you want to hear? It’s not easy for me....”

My mouth was over his before he could finish the sentence. Words couldn’t compare to that taste. But yeah, he could be *damned* good with them when he chose to.

I was spending more time at his place than my own, and we were effectively living together. Because personal time was so snatched and precious, we’d decided early on that neither of us wanted to spend our nights in a game of musical beds. Instead, we took joint meals and sleepovers in each other’s apartments whenever we could and duplicated most things we owned so that we never got caught without a toothbrush or spare socks.

Niall had an apartment in the Westbridge building, in a residential area north of town. It was one of the places that Judith had cleared for

security purposes. It was critical that her Team worked secretly and anonymously, and yet comfortably. Somehow she hadn't yet got around to re-housing me as well; I'd been wondering whether to take her neglect personally. However, his place was a damned sight smarter than my downtown apartment, so I enjoyed my time there. We went our separate ways out in the field, but then we came back together—back to washing up, reading the papers at night, yawning our way around grocery stores, playing interminable games of chess, waking up with sheets tangled around us and pillows kicked off on the floor. All that stuff that comes with living together.

We just did it because it felt good. Well, it did to *me*. I had visions of us being as much friends as lovers, supporting each other through the missions.

God knows, we needed it.

Niall came home sometimes dirty and tired, ears obviously ringing from explosions or shots that had been too fucking close. Sometimes there'd been casualties no one had anticipated. He'd sit in the bedroom and he'd strip and clean his personal handguns, quickly and fiercely as if it burned his fingers to hold them any longer than necessary. He'd tell me about some of the missions, but others he wouldn't, even when I asked.

Meanwhile, my reactions were more extroverted. I ranted and raved about the way things had gone, the successes, the setbacks. The damned stupid way the world ran. The arguments I had with Judith, the delays in supply, the caliber of personnel, the fucking rain when I was on outdoor surveillance in the park. I liked to talk. Hell, he knew that well enough. But he so rarely reacted. Sometimes it even looked like he was bored.

That was too painful to consider, of course.

Once, after he'd returned from a three-day solo mission, I heard him cry. Quietly, in the bathroom during his shower. With the door closed so he thought I wouldn't see or hear. Maybe he forgot I was there or something. Though it was hardly that large an apartment.

"Niall?" I stood close to the door. I wanted to respect the privacy he obviously thought he needed, but the sound was shocking. It made

something inside me ache, tightening up in my chest so painfully that my own eyes started to water. “Niall, I missed you. Hey... you okay?”

He never answered. The water stopped and I heard him padding across the floor of the bathroom.

“You want to talk about it?” Of course, that was probably the worst thing I could have said, but I wasn’t thinking straight. I wanted to help him; to hold him. The door opened, and he came out very slowly, as if walking was an effort. He had a towel twisted around his hips. I stepped up close and put my arms around him, pulling him into my embrace. He smelled of shower gel, his hair damp, his bare skin warm.

But he was tense, his body stiff against me like some kind of robot.

“Anything you want,” I said. “Tell me.” I pressed my lips to his ear, breathing into him as if I could somehow melt the tension. Yeah, the other guys could probably update me on what specifically had happened, but this was about me and Niall. I wanted to hear *him* tell me. “I can understand. I can take it. Tell me. Let me help.”

“No,” he said. His voice was hoarse and—shockingly—angry. “Leave it.”

What the fuck?

He turned to me then, his head buried in my neck, his teeth against my skin. I couldn’t see his eyes. He grasped my upper arms and his fingers dug in deeply. “I’m back now.” It was like a growl. “That’s all you need.”

I started to protest, but he pressed against me even harder. His heartbeat was very fast, I could feel it through the thin cotton of my tee shirt.

“Fuck me,” he whispered, raggedly. “Do it, now!”

My breathing sped up, and lust shimmered through my veins as warm as blood. Then he gave an impatient shake of his hips and let his towel fall to the floor, his body bare and flushed, his cock thick and rubbing its wet need along my leg.

I didn’t ask about the crying again.

WE WERE very different. I said that before, I reckon.

Took me a while to realize that was what it was really about.

The sex continued to be as hot as it had ever been. We'd be apart for a while, and then we'd be back in the same apartment like newly married yet sexually familiar partners. At first there'd be a thick cloak of tension, clutching around us like a straitjacket. We'd argue over something—or nothing—like we needed to let off steam before we could touch. And then we'd clamber over each other's bodies to get to the soft, sensitive bits, and we'd fuck like starved bunnies.

After all, it had been his body I wanted, right from the first time I saw him. It was that rush of thick, ecstatic delight that suffused me every time I saw him. That was all I needed to keep me riding the crest of a wave. So maybe I didn't need to nag at things any deeper. Or so I told myself. Dammit, I spent my whole time at work organizing people and trying to analyze their motives and behavior, it was damned stupid to want to do a whole lot of it between the sheets as well. Niall's approach was probably just fine. He suffered the same pressure, after all. We both knew how significant the work was to us, and what it represented in our lives. Anything else was just a diversion, just entertainment. If strong and silent was the way he wanted to be, I could play along.

Liar, liar.

It didn't work that way, of course. By then, I knew how deeply I really felt about him. Not just his body, fit and lean and deliciously demanding as that was. No, I knew how I felt about all of him; how he dressed, how he laughed, how he puzzled, how he wrote, how he smiled... yeah, *all* of him. But he rarely gave me any opportunity—or encouragement—to tell him so.

Guess he didn't want to know.

I don't think either of us had realized the Team work would be its own kind of trial, as well as an unbelievably exciting challenge. Ridiculously long hours, reams of paperwork, and the need to have a

portion of your brain concentrated on the mission and the other Team members at all times. Great successes, but some horrible, terrible failures, too, where decent people suffered. And throughout it all, a constant exposure to people whose motivation would probably remain incomprehensible for the whole of your conscious life and whose lack of humanity was often staggering.

How we coped with this? That's where most of the differences lay. The arguments followed, far too close on the heels of the passion.

"You're going out again tonight?" Niall had watched me gel my hair, pull on my jacket and collect up my keys. From the look on his face, he was pissed.

"Out. The club. Whatever."

"Why not stay in for a change?" The edge to his voice belied the casual query.

I raised an eyebrow. "No way. Not after the week I've had. Two missions back to back, extra hours planning the embassy job. I've had enough." I'd earned a couple of free days, and I was damned well going to make the most of them. "Come with me."

He shook his head; he didn't do clubs, I knew. But it felt like he'd been quietly disapproving all evening. When I turned the music up, he'd gone to the bedroom to read. When I served up some dinner, he ate half of it, then said he wasn't hungry any longer.

"You need to relax," I said. "Seems to me, you don't know how to wind down." I felt particularly provocative that night. "Sometimes it's hell to live with, I know. But we have to find ways of getting through it."

"Hell to live with, eh?"

"The job. The job's hell to live with." I stared at him, challenging him. "Or do you want to make that something else?"

He glared back at me, just as steadily. Anger flickered like a tiny blue flame in his eyes. His quietness annoyed the shit out of me, and when I was tired and frustrated, I'd start to push him to open up. And sometimes, that was exactly what he did. He could give as good as he got, you know. He was no shrinking violet.

“Seems to me, you’ve found your way of winding down, Tanner. Every damned night.”

“Huh?” I was damned tired; all I wanted was a dance and a few drinks and some mindless fun. And now I was on the defense. “Why don’t you stop scowling at me and chill out? There’s nothing wrong with letting loose. It helps.”

“Not for me. I don’t see how clubbing all night and drinking yourself insensible can help.” That sharp tone to his voice really pissed me off. “Can’t you see? You’re surely not that stupid. It’s just running and hiding—”

“Hiding?” *You’re surely not that stupid?* My personal fuse got way shorter. “But you’d know all about hiding, wouldn’t you?”

His eyes darkened. “I don’t want to talk about me—”

“You sure as hell don’t!” I snapped. “But all I’ve got is one guy’s point of view, so that guy’s entertainment rocks my boat, okay?”

I left the apartment soon after. I didn’t come back until the small hours of the next morning.

Expectations were high: from the Project Team, from my own ambitions, from a new and demanding relationship. I wasn’t used to being so screwed up all the time, so tired, so tense. I didn’t have time to look at things any more closely; any more tolerantly. Pity that it took argument to draw Niall out of his shell, but after a while, that became an end in itself. In some warped kind of way, the arguments were exciting. They were fierce and fast, and often finished up with grabbing hands and clothes torn off. And despite the raised voices and harsh words, I reckoned I had control over it all, that there was a foundation underneath us that made the friction nothing more than lively sex play.

It was a new, unfamiliar time for everyone, right? Perhaps it was all too much, too soon. It was what I wanted, though. *He* was what I wanted. And I had him too.

But I guess, being brutally honest, I was never sure for how long.

Tuesday 08:30

THE trailer creaked as I turned on my bed and bumped carelessly against the outside wall. I bit back a groan.

The morning light sneaked in through the blinds of my tiny bedroom, throwing zigzags across my covers. I peeled a grudging eye open and let consciousness creep in. What time was it? My watch lay on the nightstand and it was winking past eight o'clock at me. I groaned again and spent a couple of minutes trying to re-orient myself. I was lying on the top of my bed, fully dressed. My jeans had bunched up awkwardly into the backs of my knees, and my shirt felt as rough as cardboard on my skin. I remembered dozing off on the floor of the lounge in the small hours of the morning before finally dragging myself in here to try to get some proper sleep. I also recalled nightmares about exploding buildings and barking dogs. And sundry other bedtime memories that had blessed me with an aching, not-so-good-morning hard-on. I considered the specific characteristics of a cold shower with vindictive thoroughness until my body calmed down again.

Then I remembered who else was at home.

I reckoned if I got up swiftly, I might avoid my new houseguest for a bit longer. I stumbled in and out of a tepid shower as best I could without making a hell of a racket. I dragged on some soft grey-fabric sweat pants and a tee shirt that had missed this week's ironing duties. But by the time I got to the kettle—my particular Holy Grail—he was there before me. I'd obviously missed him rising from the couch. The blanket was folded neatly on the cushion, and the coffeepot was warmed already. There was the smell of toast in the small, ill-ventilated room, to say nothing of the smell of freshly washed, clean-clothed Niall Sutherland. Despite his whole life having been demolished within the last forty-eight hours, he had clean jeans and tee shirt on, and was managing to look as fresh as a chain of daisies.

“Unhh,” I managed. Thought I ought at least to be civil, though I felt nothing like it. He looked way too good for the time of day. The tee shirt was attractively tight across his muscled torso and slightly caught up at one side; there was a sliver of dusky skin showing above the low waist of his jeans. I tugged at the sweats that hung casually around my hips, feeling less than sparkling in return. I’d lost weight since I moved in here, and nothing seemed to fit quite the way it used to.

He put the mug of coffee into my hand, and I blanched at the suddenly familiar gesture.

“I put two sugars in,” he said. He sounded defensive, like I’d otherwise accuse him of poisoning me. “It’s strong.”

“Fine.” I knew how he made coffee, didn’t I? But I’d had a bad night; I had a lot to think about. I wasn’t at my best. I looked at this man in my kitchen, tall and dark-eyed and too fucking close for any kind of comfort, and I felt nausea that almost scared me. His mouth was pursed, like he gritted his teeth. I wondered at what hour *he’d* woken up in order to avoid *me*. Any other time, I’d have laughed at the situation we found ourselves in.

“I made some breakfast. I was hungry, I’m afraid.” His eyes didn’t exactly reflect the apology, but never mind. “I didn’t realize that was the end of the bread, though.”

I shrugged. “You slept through a couple of meals, I guess. Pity they didn’t deliver you with a packed lunchbox. I can’t exactly pop out to the store.” It sounded abrasive, but I didn’t seem to be able to get the right tone. “You know I don’t have a car at the moment? If you need anything, I’ll have to borrow off someone else on the park, or wait for one of the guys to be traveling into town and grab a ride.”

“Look, Tanner, I don’t like this any better than you do.” His eyes were like flint. “How many times do I need to say it? But I don’t have a choice. Some bastard tried to kill both me and Joe, and I’m not keen on him taking another shot. At least, not until I get a chance to organize some kind of defense. So let’s just get over it, right? The sooner we find the troublemakers and eliminate them, the sooner I’m out of here.”

“Suits me,” I said. I went to leave the kitchen but he’d moved around while he spoke, and his body was halfway across the narrow

opening. I paused before moving forward—only for a fraction of a second—assuming he'd shift out of the way. He didn't. I twisted sharply to avoid him, but our hips grazed. And as he turned his head away from me, his breath brushed across my neck, my skin still damp from the shower.

Every one of my nerves shuddered. *Fuck*. I caught my shoulder on the doorframe, biting back a curse, and then I strode out into my lounge.

I really didn't know how this was going to work out, I really didn't. There was just too much going on. Petty stuff like the lack of bread for breakfast toast, then big stuff like the attacks, the worry about the other guys, the disturbance of my sanctuary, the tension between me and Niall, the soft, earthy smell of his body up close and personal....

I'd missed a hell of a lot more than the Team and its good friendships. And it all concentrated around this man. The memory of my morning erection threatened to become a reality again, and I hoped he hadn't seen my hand hovering protectively over my groin as I passed him.

"So what's on your agenda for today?" I sat down heavily on the couch, nursing the coffee he'd made. It was, as always, just as I liked it. "There's an old TV the previous owner insisted on leaving me. I think a couple of satellite channels work. Not many books, I'm afraid. And the music system is shot to pieces from the move. I never seem to find time to get it fixed."

He frowned at that. "Strange to think of you without your music."

I shrugged. I felt warm, like I was blushing. "Wasn't sure how long I'd be staying here. Might have been moving on. You know."

He stared at me like it was the *last* thing he'd know. "It's up to you, of course."

You said it. I didn't like him staring at me like that. The familiar couch felt awkward underneath me, and I fought the irritable urge to wriggle.

He walked across the lounge, his gaze darting over to his boxes. “Anyway, I’m not after that sort of entertainment. I have to get to work. There are some papers that Judith found for me, some transcripts of the last communications that Brad intercepted just before the attack on the apartment. He apparently had some idea where the threat was coming from.”

“But...?” I prompted. “Simon said he was out in the field.”

“Yes.” Niall looked disturbed. “Ever since the first attack, Brad’s been monitoring some unusual satellite signals, some interference underlying the Department’s routine communications. It alerted him somehow. Then a short time before the explosion at Westbridge...” He was swallowing his distress; I could see the subtle change in him, though maybe other people wouldn’t have noticed. “Apparently he’d discovered something fairly urgent. None of us were around, so he left a brief e-mail for Judith and went out after the source himself.”

“Without backup?”

Niall shook his head with annoyance. “Tanner, the Team has been in a state of barely controlled panic ever since the attacks started. A lot of the standard procedures have moved down the priority list. Yes, Brad shouldn’t have gone without either seeking Judith’s sanction or taking one of us with him. But you weren’t there, of course—”

I grunted.

“And Joe and I were working on the toxin report after the attempt on Judith’s life—”

“What? Simon said it was nothing serious, dammit!”

He continued as if he hadn’t heard me. “And although Simon was coming on duty, everything spiraled out of control within the next hour or so, culminating in the actual blast. Then he was pretty fully occupied, as you can imagine.”

Pulling you out of the wreckage. Right. I felt mean, but I didn’t feel up to admitting it.

“Anyway, I have the message records and Brad’s notes here with me. Judith brought them over for me. I insisted I wanted to look through them as soon as possible. Perhaps I can find some clues there,

find out how they traced us, what their plans are. Who and where the hell they are! Simon's also working on it, but from within the Department with the resources they have there."

"Has he been targeted too?"

Niall grimaced slightly, but I didn't think it was because of me. His mind was scanning other things, I knew that look of distraction. "No, there've been no specific threats against him so far, it seems safe enough for him to remain in place. But any of us who've been hit already—well, we're either under police guard or in hiding, as you've gathered. I preferred the option of remaining accessible, so they had to find me somewhere to go, where I could... you know. Work." He was uncomfortable, that was pretty obvious. "So where's your table, Tanner? I need to spread out the printouts." His eyes flickered over the small card table beside the couch. "Don't tell me that's the only work surface you have available?"

I sighed. This was familiar. His need for control; his impatience with poor standards. Niall did everything with intensity, especially his work. *Mr. Control*. But we'd relied heavily on that in the past, hadn't we? The Team, that is. He'd kept us safe and secure more than a few times. I'd somehow forgotten that. But dammit, I'd also forgotten what it was like to be around him personally when he was in mission mode. Tiring. Consuming. Selfish....

Lonely.

Niall was staring back at me. There was an odd expression on his face, and it'd been there ever since I rushed past him out of the kitchen. I could sympathize with him, to be honest. The last time we'd been together, we'd thrown a lot of flak at each other, and he'd said a few things to me that still left an acid burn in my memory. And now I was his landlord! But to him, of course, there were much worse things. He'd been injured in the line of duty with no fucking idea of whom to blame. That was eating him up, I'd imagine.

His eyes kept flickering over my body. He looked like he'd swallowed a couple of lemons and then bitten into the peel. Like I disgusted him. It's not that I hadn't seen that look before, you know? Just not for a while.

And it still hurt.

“What do you do here all day, Tanner?” His voice was calm, but I knew that deception well. *Why did you run away to a pit like this?* he was really saying, I was sure. *Why are you such a loser? Why am I trapped here with you when I’d rather be anywhere else?*

Hell, it wasn’t like I didn’t agree with him. “That’s none of your business, man. Hasn’t been for a long time. That’s how we both wanted it, that’s how it is. You can spread the papers out on the couch, right? I’ll move off, and we can have a look at it.”

“We?”

I grunted with frustration. “Look, it’s not like all the Secret Spy stuff is your specialized subject, is it? I have more experience than you in the Nancy-Drew-invisible-ink business. It’ll take you a couple of hours to decode Brad’s handwriting, let alone the message underneath.” *And you’ve been hurt.* I nearly bit my tongue off to stop saying it aloud. It’d only irritate him. *Someone tried to blow you up. Your brains are going to be like scrambled eggs for a while.* The mix of emotions that thought raised in me was disturbing.

We both scrambled clumsily to clear a space. Niall flipped open a couple of boxes, sending dust and the waft of damp cardboard across the room, and I swept the cushions back and cleared the coffee mugs back out to the kitchen. He scowled; I scowled. But we got on with it.

When I came back into the room, he had the files he wanted, though he was clutching them to him like precious family heirlooms. I swore and tried to snatch at them—did he expect me to have X-ray vision?—and he growled and started to protest. A file got caught in the middle and its edges tore open with a loud complaint. With a fluttering sigh, a batch of papers tumbled out on to the floor.

Neither of us moved to pick anything up. We stood paralyzed, facing each other, breath stilled, eyes wide with shock. We had both reached for the slipping file together, and both missed it. But our hands had caught at the nearest alternative.

Each other’s palm.

I COULDN'T move for a few seconds. Every sense was elsewhere.

His skin was cool; rough on the pads under his fingers, smooth along the life lines. Skin against skin—it was something I'd not had for a while. And certainly not his. Memories slid cruelly under my defenses. My eyesight blurred and my heart raced.

Then I thought I saw Niall suppress a shudder. I snatched my hand out of his grip, if only to save him his coronary and me my pride. We both stood there, at a loss for what to do next.

“Been a while, eh?” I was baiting him, I knew. I hadn't had any communication with him for months now, let alone seen or touched him like this. The others had tried to keep in contact, to support me, despite my own desire for exile. But Niall and I hadn't spoken since the day I left.

Baiting him and tormenting myself. Ridiculous. How long did I think I could joke about it?

He took a tight breath, and his hand fell back to his side. I liked to think his step back was because of uncertainty. “Don't be facetious, Tanner. You made your choice. We both got the same suspension period. You just chose....” He paused. Bit at his lip. Christ, I knew he hated it when I provoked him to speak without planning it all out first.

“Yeah?”

“You chose to take your suspension away from the Team. You hid yourself here. You abandoned it all.” His eyes caught mine and he glared at me. Of course, he was totally loyal to the Department and the Team. He had no sympathy for my defection. I didn't know why I thought I saw hurt in his eyes as well as fury.

He continued to move back until he was a decent distance away from me, trying to relax the tension in his body. I bent and picked up some of the fallen papers, then laid them on the couch. They may have been in the wrong order or completely upside down; I wasn't focusing too well. “If that's how you see it, that's fine with me.” I sounded hoarse. “I don't have to explain anything to you. You stayed, of course. Hanging around the Team, working out your after-class detention.

Committed to the cause until the bitter end.” *Guess you had other things to stay for, though.* “So you’ve been back at work for a while?”

He didn’t answer directly. He leaned back against the wall, though there weren’t a hell of a lot of other places to rest while still keeping a safe distance from my contagion. “You’re the one acting like a kid, Tanner. I haven’t had any special treatment, if that’s what you mean. I’m still in the last stage of my suspension, same as you. But I’ve been in touch with Judith all along. In your words, I’ve been hanging around the Team, but in case I was needed. When the attacks started, she called me in.” He sighed, obviously annoyed that he had to justify his behavior. “Everyone in the Team has a role to play, Tanner. We’re all needed, especially at this time. That’s more important than any internal disciplinary matters.”

“Yeah.” Maybe his dressing down hadn’t been as humiliating as mine; maybe his session with Judith hadn’t been so heated. Maybe, at that particular time, his mind hadn’t been white with fury the way mine was. “Guess when you told Judith just what a shit I’d been, the sympathy vote was with you, anyway—”

“I never told her anything,” he said sharply.

I raised an eyebrow, and the bitter words dried in my throat.

He was flushed. “She just saw our fight and disciplined us accordingly. I never told her anything about the reasons it started, nothing of what was said between us. It was private, not relevant to the mission. It wasn’t for her to know.”

It was private. His words echoed my own thoughts. Perhaps I’d misjudged him. Mind you, the mood I was in then, I’d have misjudged the Archangel himself. But that didn’t stop me feeling a little ashamed now. “Okay,” I said. *Sorry* kind of stuck in my throat.

“We were... dammit! We behaved appallingly, you must have realized that.” Niall’s expression was very grim. “We were unprofessional. We jeopardized the surveillance. They couldn’t let it go unpunished. But it’s all over now.”

I saw him grimace, even as that superbly pragmatic remark slipped out from his mouth, even as he realized how his words—*all over now*—could be taken on several levels. His eyes flashed with a

depth of fury that I could have drowned in. He was angry with me, but angry with himself too.

“Sure is,” I said, smoothly. “All over. Wipe the slate clean of it all, right?”

“Don’t be such a brat, Tanner. Running off like a scolded child. Did you expect someone to come begging you back?”

“Fuck you.” I knew I deserved his anger but I wasn’t backing down. “I had to get away. You’d know that, if you had any idea about me at all!”

“Which I thought I did!” He was very flushed now. “I could say the same about you too. Imagining how *I* felt. You think I’m not ashamed of the whole thing?”

“Ashamed?” *Of us?*

“Of the fight!” He glared at me, his eyes back to that cold flint color. “We’ve hammered anything else to death, I’d say, and I don’t need any extra helpings of death wish right now.”

“That’s why I left,” I snapped. “Like I don’t need the trouble myself. The abuse, the misery.”

“That’s what it all was, then? Trouble? Misery? You gave up that easily?”

“Yeah. Maybe so.” I was warming up now. My heart was thudding and my flesh felt too hot. My fingers itched to grab hold of something. “Far as I can see, I’m out on my ass and a disappointment all round, and now I can’t even hide in my seedy little sanctuary without being hounded down—”

“For God’s sake, Tanner, I knew where you were all the time!” he growled. “I tracked you down pretty quickly.” He must have seen my wide-eyed outrage. “Tanner, I didn’t mean it like that—”

“Like what?” Like he was a stalker? Like he wanted to prove something? Like he *cared?*

“I mean that it was a security issue. In case... anyone needed to find you.”

“Security issue. Right. So why did Simon and Brad bother tracing me as well? Could’ve just come to you—”

“I didn’t tell anyone,” he said, far too quickly. “I assumed you’d run here to be alone. It was up to you what you did then.”

I was trying to read any underlying feelings in his tone, in his eyes, in his body language. Fuck all to work with at the best of times. Of course, it could just have been indifference. The absence of care.

Niall was shaking his head again, forehead creasing with irritation. “Oh, the hell with it!” He looked disgusted that I’d wrung the emotion out of him. Bemused. Pained. “Tanner, what’s the point of digging over the past?”

I stared at him, my anger leeching away like water through a sieve. He’d been near death. His ordered life had been thrown up in the air like a handful of confetti and he was standing amongst the drifting pieces. He didn’t need my arguments. He was right.

What *was* my point?

Tuesday 08:45

HE'D mentioned the fight, and I guess you need to know what that was all about. Or maybe just that it happened. Niall and I had a falling out, but a rather major one. In the middle of a mission. We fought, physically—and I'll have you know I put up a creditable defense—but Judith took a dim view of it, at work and all. We were both hauled over the coals and suspended for three months.

There you are. My fall from grace in a nutshell. Not only that, but the end of my affair—the end of Niall and me. With not a whimper, but a rather impressive right hook. His.

So what did it matter now whether I'd been humiliated or hurt? It was past history. Neither of us was going back there. What did it matter whether Niall knew where I was all along? Whatever he thought about me and what he knew... well, that was all *his* problem now, wasn't it? Shit, there I was again, going around in that spiraling way that leads to plenty of sleepless nights. That's what it's like at the end of a relationship, after all, no new revelations there. It's the loss of everything, including the right to know anything about your ex; to share anything with them; to have anything but a supporting role in their future life.

Niall obviously had it sorted out well. I was the one struggling.

There was silence between us for a while. Maybe he had as many questions bubbling in the back of his mind as I did, but neither of us spoke them aloud. His eyes were clouded with what looked like shock. Yet again, I'd drawn him out, and so quickly. But he could blame the trauma he'd been through.

I didn't have that excuse.

"Why *did* you get called back in?" I was curious, despite myself. "Couldn't they manage the investigation without your inimitable help?" Maybe if he'd kept withdrawn like me—kept out of the line of fire

while he did his time—well, maybe he'd never have been targeted in the first place. What sort of masochist was he?

He bit at his lip again. I watched the plump flesh ease out from under his even, white teeth. "I don't know why you want to know. You've made it clear you'd rather be kept out of it all." He took a deep breath. "But I guess it's important now that you do know. For a while, we thought I might have a clue as to the motive behind it all. There's so little to go on."

"And...?"

He shook his head, not answering directly. "It should have been given higher priority from the start. The Team should have contained the situation after the first attack. It was a small letter bomb, though it made a hell of a mess of one of the Departmental carports. But there were plenty of personnel available at that time, plenty of opportunity to identify the culprit. Personally, I think they underestimated the threat, thinking it was an isolated event. The work of an amateur."

"And then it escalated?"

He nodded, very slightly, as if reluctant to engage me. "When the next attack came in, and the next after that, all in such quick succession, there was too little time to regroup. Especially when it shifted and threats started on Team personnel."

"And then it *did* become priority."

"Judith suggested she revisit some of the closed mission files to see if there were any connections, any reason for a specific vendetta against us. To see if there was anyone who'd also threatened the Team or its people in the past. I was only called back into active duty because I could identify someone who fit that profile."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not bothered that you were Mr. Popular while I languished out here. Don't bother about trying to massage my ego, because to be honest, I don't have a hell of a lot of time for one nowadays—"

"Dammit, I wasn't! Are you listening to anything I'm saying?"

I swallowed back a retort, and then engaged my brain instead of my tongue. "Wait a sec. The person you could identify—the previous

threat against a Team member—you don't mean it was that kid who stabbed you?"

His eyes narrowed. "Yes."

I cursed myself. That time had been one of the most distressing... for us both, despite whatever arguments we may have had subsequently. *Hi, Tanner. Meet Mr. Foot-in-Mouth.* But if Niall could talk about it so coolly, well, so could I. "So, did that confirm the theory that it's not political at all, but a personal attack? On the Team—all of us? Or just you?"

He shrugged. He was looking weary again, despite that exhaustive sleep. "I don't know, I really don't know. I checked out the kid, and he's still in the specialist detention center. It couldn't have been him."

"Other family members? Associates? The guy who ran the club where we found him?"

"I don't fucking know!" *Whoa*, when Niall let loose, he let loose. He saw the look on my face and growled with frustration, trying to rein the anger back in. "No, there was nothing else on that particular exercise to give us a lead. But Judith has other cases to examine, other people we've brought down or exposed or just generally pissed off—and anyway, that may not be a motive at all. Shit, I don't know where to go from here."

I looked at the papers on the floor and the couch. "Well, we could make some sense of this pulped rain forest and see if it gets us any further. Okay?"

And then the cell phone rang. The one that Judith had left behind for us. For Niall.

His gaze flashed to me, and I stared back. Then he grabbed it from a back pocket and flipped it open. We stood there, paralyzed like some kind of living tableau, as he listened to whatever greeting it was. When I caught sight of his expression, there was a strange kind of wildness in it.

"It's Joe." He might have been presenting the weather forecast for all the outward emotion he showed in his voice. But I read him far

better than that. “From the hospital. They’re going to operate tomorrow.”

I wanted to snap back at him again. What kind of cold fish was he? What hospital? What operation? How serious was it for God’s sake? And then it occurred to me that he might have been holding back on the concern for some other reason... maybe for *my* benefit. Hospitals were a difficult thing with me. Not that I’d spent much time myself in them; I’d rarely had a broken bone or serious illness in my life. But Niall had, and the circumstances had caused me plenty of grief.

You see, six months ago, and because of me, he’d nearly been killed.

OKAY, so I guess I knew it wouldn’t be enough just to skate over the story of our prize fight as some kind of lovers’ quarrel. It was actually at the end of a time of great stress—a culmination of a strange, tightening spiral of misunderstanding and hurt and bitter, bitter disappointment. It had been threatening for months.

Things were still tangled up between us personally. Guess we never cleared the air. The Team missions got more complex, our lives got more committed, our relationship... got more crappy.

And that’s when the Team was marked out for Mission Dove.

Judith was thrilled; we all were, really. It was our first really big break, and we’d be working alongside the Department itself. No formal recognition, of course, but she was excited that they’d see what we could do. We’d make a real contribution. The preliminary work started almost at once: preparing and monitoring the locations as the delegates began gathering for the meetings, checking out their security and the people around them.

That’s where we came up against the first hurdle. We discovered that one of the more prominent politicians was spending his nights in a downtown *gentlemen’s* club. Nothing new, you might say, if you’re as cynical as I am. I mean, that in itself wouldn’t have merited the

attention of the Project Team, except that it turned out the pimp offered access to a special selection of kids—children who were way too young and way too vulnerable for anyone to let it pass. We alerted the Department, but because of the sensitivity of the politician concerned, they nudged the situation Judith’s way.

At first, this early work only involved Niall and Joe, with Simon on support. They didn’t waste time on diplomatic platitudes, just rounded up the politician, sent him discreetly home, and started closing down the club. They’d already alerted the police to mop up the remains of the staff and to take the pimp into custody. But then I got a call from Simon, asking me to come and join them there. They’d discovered at least a dozen kids who lodged there full-time, without any other visible means of support. He was worried that they’d need emotional help to trust the Team and accept what we were trying to do for them. I think he was just a little overwhelmed with it all, to tell you the truth.

That was my skill, you see. People. Connecting with them, understanding them, making things work for them. That’s what the Team needed from me.

And yet, I seriously misread the situation. I had some poor, misguided idea that the kids would be grateful for their release. That they’d be innocent and pliable and ready to follow our lead, that they’d be glad to leave behind the life of an abused innocent in their current home. It was just a matter of reassuring them and offering emotional lollipops, or something like that. I’d had plenty of experience with adults; I had a talent for judging many a sticky situation.

But I was frighteningly unprepared for what was there. I’d not worked with kids before, and never in the sex industry. There were all sorts of shocks in store for me. I hadn’t really anticipated there’d be boys as well as girls; I was startled by the youth of some of them. Naïve, eh? Everyone had been rounded up into the main lounge of the club, where the cops took the principals away, the emergency services did their work on any physical injuries, and Niall and Joe went off doing whatever technical things they did.

And me?

I stood like an island in the middle of a sea of scum. Beside one of the low, overstuffed couches, there was a coffee table, scattered with the tools of their trade: sex toys, bondage gear, needles, and packets of designer drugs collected in a heap. The police had been gathering up the evidence. In amongst this mess I saw a brightly colored blanket with the design of a TV cartoon character; a single slipper lying under the table. There were a couple of boxes on the floor, full of stuffed toys and a jumble of tattered old children's puzzles and books.

My heart went out to the kids, without realizing that they wouldn't know what to do with it. I had no idea how harsh some of them were, how broken some of their minds were, how hostile they were toward intruders. I swallowed the bile in my throat and tried to acclimatize to the distorted little faces around me, but it was an alien experience.

"Fuck off, mister," an undersized, rather smelly teenager hissed in my ear. I caught his arm as he swung out at me, and when I released him, he stumbled back in frustration.

"Do you want to feel better? We can go to your room." A slim boy tugged at my sleeve and smiled at me, the brightness of his voice never reaching his eyes.

A vibrantly red-haired girl ran up to me and spat in my face, shouting that she hoped I got hideous, fatal diseases from it. And then wheeled away, laughing.

"Are we going home?"

"Where's the boss?"

There were babbling voices and crying all the time, confusing me, cluttering my hearing.

A small, silent girl slipped her hand into mine.

"The money." A thin, pale young woman in an ill-fitting, short-skirted dress stood pressed against the wall. "He owes me my money. I have to send it home, you know."

Others just stared at me as I moved slowly around the room. I couldn't read their expressions. There was blankness there, and little sense of reality. I wondered who would be able to peel those children's

souls back out into a worthwhile life, because it sure as hell wouldn't be me.

Well, I did my best. I reassured them and explained we were there to help. I sat with them as they were handed over one by one to social workers and aid helpers, I explained things they said they couldn't understand. A few of them clutched my hand, or hugged me. I felt I was on top of it, though the room was still full of unpleasant body odors and sobbing kids, and I guess I was still a bit shocked. Whatever the reason, I lost my connection with the ones still left for a few critical moments.

And that was long enough for one of them—one of the older boys—to decide we were another version of the common enemy. He started crying, pushing away the helping hands, swearing and yelling. He refused to follow the social workers out of the building, accusing us of threatening him, bullying him. The cops were sick fuckers, he cried, we were taking him to jail, we were kidnapping them all, we were working for another house, another boss, a worse one. All sorts of stuff. Niall was over the far side of the room, signing some legal release forms. I was conscious of him turning around, looking over at us. The boy was thin, blond, and scrawny, and although he was obviously an older teenager, he didn't look like he could lift his own body weight, let alone take me on. But he was very distracting, very loud, and very aggressive.

“Get the fuck out!” He was close to me by now, the other kids had parted the way to let him through. “You don't understand. Leave us here, it's nothing to do with you. It's okay here, we're settled here.”

“What's your name?” I kept my voice calm, my movements non-threatening. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Niall break away from the aid workers and start over toward me, presumably coming to give support. “Everything's fine. I'm here to help you.”

“I don't need your fucking help! All my friends are here. Family too. They care for me. They'll be along soon, I have to stay here.”

“It's going to be okay.”

“You think we're trash, don't you? You want to use us yourself. Or you want us out of the way, all of us in institutions, locked up.”

“No, I don’t. Of course I don’t.” Niall was over on my left, only a foot away. I hoped he knew to keep his distance, so he didn’t spook the kid any further. I needed just a little more time to talk him down. “I’m Tanner. Tell me your name. Let’s talk about all of this. You say you have family and friends. Tell me about them. Who will be along soon for you?”

“We don’t need you.” His eyes narrowed. For a second he was totally still. Then, “Fuck you,” he spat out at me. “All of you!”

Instinctively, I leaned away. Some of the remaining kids had gathered around me, staring between us both with stark, scared faces. I knew I had to protect them, somehow. Protect my colleagues, as well.

That’s what the Team needed from me.

But I never had the chance to calm things down and explain things better to the hysterical boy. Next minute, he pushed past me with an astonishing strength, a knife suddenly appeared in his hand, and he sliced it upward with all his strength into Niall’s side.

Time stopped, just like they say in the movies.

Niall turned to me as he fell. There was a look of pained shock on his face, as if he’d expected me to know it was about to happen. As if I should have anticipated the kids were under the influence of something more pernicious than distress—that they might be armed, as well. As if I should have been watching out for him.

Which I guess I should have been.

Then he sank to his knees, hand clutched to his side. He coughed, and blood seeped out between his fingers. His face went deathly pale.

I thought I’d lost him.

Tuesday 09:00

NIALL stood there in the living room of my trailer, clutching the cell phone like an anchor to reality. I knew he was remembering the same things I was. I *knew* it.

“Tanner.” I hadn’t heard that brittle emotion in his voice for a long time. “Leave it. That was months ago. This is now. And it’s Joe we’re talking about.”

Months ago. Right.

After the stabbing, the kid had been hauled away. Kes, he was called. We were told that he was an orphan, though they were having trouble tracking down his history, but we never found out if he had any other family around, or what the fuck had been going on in his mind. Judging from the drugs in that place, I thought maybe he’d been hallucinating at the time. He was too young for prison, but the authorities considered him too mentally disturbed to face reality alone. He ended up in a secure facility somewhere, just like Niall reminded me earlier, still working the damage through and out of his young, scrambled brain. Far as I knew, he’d had no visits from those friends and family he clung to. Or anyone.

No one said the stabbing had been my fault.

But it was, of course. It was all due to my carelessness. I was complacent, slapdash. I’d done no research on the job before I blundered in, just assumed it was a social issue, that the danger was nothing more than kids’ tears and bruises. I had an affinity with many people, sure, but I’d never come across the naked aggression of a young, addled mind turned to fear and anger. Never thought to check for weapons or for unbalanced psychosis. And that, of course, was no kind of excuse at all.

They rushed Niall into surgery with me following, shocked and furious, but they stopped me at the door of the operating theatre. I

wasn't thinking too straight then. I had to be taken forcibly from the hospital, yelling that I had to be with him, whatever the fuck *Judith* said! Didn't help my case much. Judith did me the courtesy of holding back on actual handcuffs, but two sturdy guys she must have borrowed from the Department Thug Pool stepped either side of me and brought me back to base with a grip that well illustrated the phrase "extreme prejudice." So I never saw Niall when he came out of the long hours in theatre; I never saw him with the tubes and the mask and the bags of blood and plasma slowly dripping into his body.

I was facing an immediate internal inquiry.

The initial interrogation went on for several days, and my ass got well and truly kicked while they unraveled exactly what had happened. What protocols I'd breached. What standards I'd compromised. What—and who—had gone wrong. During that time, I was only allowed calls to the hospital, to see how things were going. Simon kept me posted on how well the operation went, how Niall would be okay soon. All that encouraging stuff that Simon was so good at—and that passed me by completely.

They let me in to see Niall eventually. He was in a private room by then, still weak from the blood loss and shock, still under the hospital care. And when I got there, ready to sit with him, to care for him, to do all those goddamned things that lovers do for each other—someone was already there.

"Hello, Tanner."

"Joe." I nodded to him. I glanced at the bed, met Niall's pale, wide gaze. My heart ached from a strange mix of fear, relief and... well, it just ached, you know?

"Tanner." Niall grinned, but it was a poor imitation of past ones. "I'm glad you're here at last."

"He's doing good." Joe gave one of his own quick, efficient smiles. "I've checked in here each night and the steady progress is unmistakable."

Every night?

I sat on the spare chair by the window and stared at Joe's obviously familiar seat on the other chair. The one at the bedside. He continued talking to Niall in a low, restful voice. Things about the progress of Mission Dove, about the guys in the Team, about the successful prosecution of the club owner. Of his martial arts training; of the latest weapons intelligence.

I sat silently, just watching.

Well, there we have it. I mentioned Joe Lam before, didn't I? As far as work went, he'd always been the one to spend the most time with Niall, which was kind of obvious. They both dealt with the militaristic side of things. Not really my forte. They'd both been in the armed services at some stage; they actually knew a couple of mutual acquaintances, even before they'd joined the Team. It was obvious they'd be thrown together.

"I'll call in again later," I said. Joe nodded easily. Niall's eyes narrowed, but he didn't say anything. He looked kind of tired, really.

Hell, we all admired Joe; he was a great guy to have on your team, and had always impressed *me*. He was kind of fierce, though, and he liked to play on that, I'm sure. He wasn't a guy you warmed to until you knew him better.

I guess, over the months we'd been in the Team, Niall had managed to get to know him a hell of a sight better than me.

THE inquiry reported its conclusion a few weeks later. I was cleared of direct blame for Niall's injury. Yeah, I'd been under-prepared, and I should have allowed Simon to brief me more thoroughly, and I should have remembered that every situation has to be treated with the utmost caution, but I wasn't held responsible for the unprovoked attack. I stared at my copy of the report as Judith ran through it with me, most of the words blurring to incomprehensibility in the face of my anger and misery. I was scheduled for some juvenile training and some outreach work with local youth groups, and then Judith assured me the matter was concluded.

“I know where I went wrong.”

She'd frowned at me. “You're the one beating yourself up worst of all, Tanner.”

“You mean I wasn't responsible for Niall getting a blade in his gut?”

She winced but recovered well. “No, not officially.”

Sure didn't feel that way.

And that was also when things started to collapse personally for us. Seemed like every time I found time to be with Niall, so did Joe. He arranged for Niall to be taken home, he arranged the proper post-operative care. I discovered that everyone thought this was an excellent idea. Judith praised him, Simon admired his reliability, Brad was impressed with his knowledge of medical matters.

Seemed churlish to complain.

They must all have looked at me and thought, “What the fuck?” I'm sure they did. I know how they'd all seen me up until then: an easy-going guy with plenty of improvisation skills, but nothing more robust than that. And now, wait a second—hadn't it been *my* fuck-up that put Niall in the hospital in the first place? Okay, so no one ever said it. But no one denied it, either. And when Niall turned those deep, dark, weary eyes on to Lam and “thanked” him for his help....

It all stuck in my throat like I'd swallowed a fucking grenade.

I knew things were on the downward slope without knowing what the hell to do about it. I felt like I'd lost Niall's attention and his care. His respect. He never said anything that specific, of course. He never argued with me about it. And hey, I never caught him and Joe doing anything other than hugging, and let's face it, we were all fond of that, as support and comfort and a gesture of solidarity. But it seemed to me that he withdrew his respect from me and bestowed it elsewhere. That can be a betrayal, even without fucking.

Can't it?

I WAS still living full-time with Niall. When the heavy nursing stuff faded into general daily care, it was entrusted to me. Obviously they thought I could cope with the occasional change of dressing and some physiotherapy exercises. Hurrah for me. But whatever the reason, it was a relief to push aside the spotlight that had been glaring on us. Niall told me how pleased he was that the inquiry had concluded in my favor; he told me he wanted to put it all behind him. He rarely spoke of it again.

In fact, he was as damned quiet as always. And maybe more so.

Mission Dove was at full strength, but obviously he couldn't be as involved as he wanted. I was still deployed, and I didn't find any evidence that they held back on my tasks because I'd fucked up once. In fact, it was often a relief to immerse myself in the day job, because life at home was... well, tense doesn't begin to describe it.

We still ate and drank and slept together. In fact, we still fucked, though pretty gingerly at first. We were as drawn to each other as always, but wary. He'd lost a lot of blood in the incident, and there was now an impressive scar along his torso, colored an angry red and shining with fresh new skin as it started to heal. One night, lying naked and lightly sweating in bed, I followed the impulse to kiss along it. He winced, and it felt like he flinched away from me. In my heart, I knew it wasn't from any kind of pain.

Despite the illusion of returning to normal, life felt *bad*. It was as if we couldn't be closer, physically—but we couldn't be further apart. He was withdrawn and moved around the apartment as if he were the only one there. I had no idea what to do about it except get angry. I'd thought I'd be okay once the inquiry found me innocent, thinking I had my lover and my friends behind me. But it seemed I was a little more shaken than I thought; I felt more vulnerable than I'd ever been before.

The guys were sympathetic, I'll give them that. But I needed Niall. *Badly*. I needed him to forgive me, to understand, to help me—us!—move on. To reaffirm the fact that I was living with him and he was damned happy about it all. Okay, so it wasn't a conversation I expected to have without some serious prompting. And I had no taste for that.

I lay beside him at night as he slept and felt like we were in separate rooms. His naked body was only inches away from me, and if I touched it, he'd roll over to me with an exhalation of hot breath on my skin that sent goose bumps down to my toes. But even the sex was shadowed with a hint of desperation, as if neither of us were sure what it was all about any more. As if this was only a lull before the storm. As if it was only a matter of time....

Before it turned sour.

That physical break, while he was in the hospital and I was facing a panel of suited and booted Departmental executives—it sundered far more than our domestic routine. Niall bore the scar, and I bore the guilt. It was like he knew it, like he found it a struggle to be with me. He swung between being frustrated by me and being angry with me. We couldn't get over it. Judith refused to put us on a mission together, even if and when Niall were fully recuperated.

And didn't it seem like every time I arrived home, Joe was there already? Calling in with plans and briefings for future missions, bringing Niall interesting articles on military development. Could have been swapping GI Joe outfits for all I knew. He even answered the phone a couple of times when it rang, and neither of us could reach it immediately. What sort of familiarity was that in a guy's own home? I knew I was behaving irrationally. I knew it was stupid, to feel resentful just because someone wanted to help us out.

But that was the point; it no longer felt like my home. It felt like Niall's, like it *was*, of course. He could invite whoever he liked, and I was just a guest who happened to have a key. He never told me any different.

So I was restless; I went out a lot. My choice of drug, maybe. Couple of times Judith couldn't get hold of me when she wanted to, and there were mutterings about me being unreliable. Whereas Joe Lam gave the job the kind of single-minded commitment that I just didn't have the time for—and damn me if I didn't hear that comparison more than once.

Though not from Niall. He never harked back to the attack; he never called me unprofessional or useless or careless. I heard it only in

his silence, in his lack of defense on my behalf. And his preference for someone else's company over mine.

He just wasn't there for me any more. His eyes were hot over me in the day, and at night his hands were as amazing and possessive as always. But he didn't smile as much; he scowled at me a hell of a lot more. My attitude was irritating to him and my lack of adequate paperwork suddenly seemed a crime against the state. So I went out a lot more, and sometimes I didn't come home. I went to my own shabby little apartment and slept alone and angry. Well, tried to sleep, anyway.

It sounds pathetic now, just cataloguing those months after the attack like that. Was it fair? Was *I* fair? To me everything felt like a betrayal: that Niall privately did believe I'd put him in danger. That I'd been proved a failure, compared to his standards. Everyone had been angry with me—and suddenly he was angry too. And that felt a fuck of a sight worse than any inquiry.

But however much he blamed me, or hated me, or despised me—and as always, I didn't really know *what* he was thinking—that was no reason for him to turn to someone else, was it? Not while I was still around.

He'd nearly been killed. I reminded myself of that many times a day and tried to bite my tongue. The important thing was to get him fit again and back on active service. Mission Dove was our priority, and despite the personal tribulations of the Project Team, we all had to be ready for whatever was required. Perhaps I thought that when he was physically okay again, things would settle back down. Perhaps I was a fool.

Basically, we were a time bomb, fuse set and ready to blow.

Niall would have empathized with my analogy.

BACK in my rocky, mean little trailer, I heard the snap of the cell phone closing. I waited for a minute or so, but Niall didn't speak again. I focused back on him. He looked pale, really ill. He stood still as a rock, his eyes staring at me but his mind obviously elsewhere. I

wondered if he had delayed shock, and I was startled by the thud of distress in my own body. Then he stirred and seemed to become aware of me again. “Joe’s still critical. It’s an emergency operation. It’s his leg... they’re not sure about his leg. When the door hit him, it fractured the bone in several places. The knee is badly damaged.”

“Shit.” I felt sick. Guy didn’t deserve that. “And a bit of a bummer, being stuck here, eh? You can’t go visit him. Take grapes and flowers, hold his hand.”

Even though I’d dropped my eyes like I had plenty of better places to look, I still caught Niall’s scowl. “Don’t be pathetic, Tanner. I know what road you’re driving down, and I can tell you, it’s no more fun now than it was before. I’ll say it just once more—we’re not together. Joe and I are not seeing each other.”

I suppose I could have said I was sorry they’d broken up. But then, I wasn’t. And Niall would’ve known the lie for what it was. He couldn’t have spent all that time with me without learning just a couple of my little ways, could he? “So what was the trouble then? Too many long nights out in the field while he sat at home collating your notes? My partner doesn’t understand me?”

“Don’t you ever fucking listen, you idiot?” His voice was raised now. Guess I’d got the response I wanted. “We’re not together. We never *were!*”

“So how come he was at the apartment with you when it was blown up? Kind of late to be working on Department business, eh?”

“I told you. We were investigating the attack on Judith. The day before, someone had sent her a package impregnated with some kind of poison. A fairly unsophisticated device, but that was partly why no one thought to check it out thoroughly. It nearly blew up in Cissy’s face when she came to check it out.” He dismissed the shock on my face with an impatient wave of his hand. “And everyone knew what we were working on. Judith did, Simon did. It was an official directive. I had security clearance, and we were in constant contact with the Team, through Joe. Hell, Simon even lent one of his guys to help us with the research, liaising with the office, that kid Greg who dropped me off yesterday. What category of hot date does *that* fit into?”

My anger was still simmering. “Far as I remember, you’ve never needed hearts and flowers to enjoy a good fuck.”

“Tanner!” He was yelling now. Only a foot away from me, fists clenched at his side. Just like the old days. “That’s way out of line. You are so damned childish!”

“And you’re so damned smug!”

“Leave it, Tanner. *Now!*” His eyes glinted with warning. “You never could hold your tongue.”

“And maybe *you* couldn’t resist holding something a whole lot more intimate, right?”

For just one, shocking second, I thought he might hit me. The fists flexed—but his arms stayed by his side.

“So maybe I’d have been tempted.” His face was very flushed now. “Maybe I found it more rewarding, being with someone who wasn’t out partying all the time, someone who was there more often than not—”

“So maybe the welcome was a little less frosty for him.” I was incensed now, almost beside myself. “Maybe you opened up a hell of a lot more to him. After all, there’s so much more to share between the pair of you. How *was* the pillow talk? Full of boyish dreams of guns and bombs? Gives a whole new meaning to Wham, bam, thank you ma’am! And so much more rewarding than my sorry little disaster stories.”

Had I forgotten what a match Niall was for me when he chose? “And maybe, yes, it was more rewarding than your pointless jealousy and your ridiculous melodrama and....” His voice caught in his throat; it was convulsing with fury. “You stupid bastard! You stupid, *stupid....*”

We were struck dumb almost at the same moment, as the same thought obviously crossed our minds. Our stupid, selfish minds, obsessing over old ground, old wounds—self, self, self. And I was the worst culprit of all; me and my vicious, unruly, destructive temper. My fucking, *fucking* temper!

I looked at Niall, stricken. Joe had been my friend. A friend to all of us. Still *was*, dammit! And he was lying in a hospital bed, maybe losing the use of a limb, maybe never coming back to us as anything like his strong, active, high-principled, unpretentious self. And both he—and the man in front of me—had barely escaped with their lives.

“Tanner—”

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out, speaking at the same time as his strangled groan.

And I was. For so much, I couldn’t have listed it in a day.

Tuesday 09:30

GOD knows what we might have said and done then, but events overtook us. In the frozen silence following our outburst, Niall tilted his head away from me and his eyes hardened.

“Did you hear that?” he murmured.

I bit back my usual “Hear what?” quip, because a comment like that from him merited my full attention. He had the background and training, after all. I listened carefully. Nothing specific, but what I did notice was the *absence* of noise; the trailer park seemed unusually quiet for an emerging morning, even if most of the inhabitants were normally out and about by now, on whatever legitimate or nefarious occupation they chose. And now I came to think about it, I’d not heard a single dog’s bark since I woke.

I caught Niall’s calculating gaze and I nodded. Our arguments were forgotten, kicked to the side like a used candy wrapper. He started to move slowly around the room, working toward the outside door of the trailer, dodging around the window as he passed. “Where’s your weapon?” he whispered.

“I’m on suspension.”

“To hell with that,” he muttered. “You always had a private license anyway.”

Guess he knew me better than to think I’d live out here without adequate protection. My hand dropped to a pile of magazines beside the couch and peeled out a rather useful handgun from underneath “Heavy Metal Monthly—February.” He grimaced at my less-than-sophisticated security precautions, but I saw an equivalent weapon in his own palm. I wondered which file *that* had been hidden in.

He stood to the hinged side of the door and put his hand flat on the thin metal sheeting.

“Um...” I thought I ought to try one last whispered attempt to save him from himself. “We should call the Team, Niall. Simon said no external interaction, remember.”

And then the smallest, weariest smile teased at the corner of his mouth. My heart lurched at the memory of it in different circumstances. “I’m with you, Tanner MacKay. Since when were *you* external interaction?”

So what was I to make of that?

I braced myself on the other side of the door, ready to move out when it opened. The stale smell of cheap fried breakfast crept across the trailer park and in through the gaps under the sill, teasing at my nostrils; the roar of the traffic on the distant highway growled in my ears, travelers driving to and from the airport on the other side of town, blissfully unaware of what was going on in this part of the neighborhood. Nothing else sounded amiss. And yet every hair on the back of my neck stood to attention, my mind more alert than it had been for months. I had a sudden, very vivid memory of how we’d often been, Niall and I, facing things together, high on adrenaline and arrogance and the pure enjoyment of each other’s company. How it once had been, and not as the reluctant companions of today.

Niall hissed rather loudly, trying to get my attention. He scowled at me from his stance on the other side of the doorway. “No dog, right?” His eyebrow raised in question.

I nodded. Smart guy had registered the change outside as well as I had. “There’s usually some sound from Dylan in the mornings. He’s always on watch.”

“Dylan?”

“Junk’s dog. The big Rottweiler. He’s our early warning system, our protection.”

Niall raised an eyebrow again, maybe at my familiarity with life here. “Who’s Junk?”

“This site is his patch. It’s like he’s in charge.” I shrugged. No time right now to run through the supporting cast.

“Any other doors?”

I shook my head.

“Okay. I’ll take the high shot, you cover the low. On five, on my count. You good for that?”

I winced. “You think now’s the time to doubt it?”

For a second, it looked like he smiled. “Right. Guess I should know you better than that.”

I looked straight at him then, and God knows what emotion showed in my eyes. *But you don’t, anymore. You don’t know me at all.* I startled even myself with the depth of bitterness in my heart. I wondered just how long I’d been carrying it so deep—and for how much longer it might stay embedded there.

THE slamming of my door against the side of the trailer as Niall thrust it open wrenched me back from my thoughts. It was a shock, but I was quick enough on his heels. I dropped to a crouch, gun held with both hands, forced out in a full stretch like I’d been trained. My eyes peered into the sharp morning light, a little hazy over the rooftops of the other trailers. I took in most of the scene within seconds. Opposite my trailer was Zac’s, which he shared with a wide range of pets, always adding to them every time he went into town. I’d seen everything from raucous, green-plumed parakeets to somnolent snakes that I suspected had never had an official visa out of their own country. Next to that was a smaller, neater trailer owned by Ruthie, a grandmother of twelve, with kids who were equally divided between loving and loathing the menagerie next door. On the other side of Ruthie’s was a smaller, currently unoccupied trailer, one of a couple she owned and occasionally rented out. The trailer the other side of Zac was owned by Phil. The hood was braced open on the vehicle in front of it. Phil ran his “rare parts” business from there.

Beside mine was Junk’s trailer, big and black and aggressively pimped-up. There was an empty dog bowl, lying on its rim on the ground outside the door. The space underneath that trailer was dark and

hidden; there were the old tracks of dusty footprints all over the place. Junk didn't work at anything regular—or not as I'd seen—but he was usually off the park during the day. Even so, he didn't always take Dylan with him, but there was no sign of the dog.

It seemed like business as usual—but with no caretakers.

On the other side of the doorway, Niall was also evaluating the scene. “Nothing. It's gone, whatever or whoever it was.” He tilted his head slightly, as if he were trying to tune in to potential danger.

My eyes smarted as I stared around the park. Felt a bit damned stupid with the gun out in the open, so I let my hand drop down to my side. But I didn't put the gun away. “Maybe it's nothing, like you say. I'll go check.”

I started carefully down the shaky steps. I'd never taken time to fix them properly to the trailer itself, but then, I usually jumped them in one stride. Niall looked at me, startled. “We'll go together.”

“No we won't! You're not even here, remember? You're invisible. You're in hiding.”

He snorted. “What the hell does that matter?”

“No,” I said again, firmly. Something in my tone made him stop his descent down the steps after me. “This is my place. I'll do it.”

He stared for a while longer and then he nodded acceptance. He turned to go back into the trailer, annoyed maybe, and his foot slipped on the cracked rim at the top. He fell awkwardly to one side, just for a second, and he leaned back against me. Hell, it was far from deliberate! But as his body bumped mine, his hand reached out instinctively to right himself against my shoulder, and he held onto me.

First time for three months.

I should have fixed those steps....

I heard my gasp as if it came from someone else. A someone else who lifted his hand and pressed it quickly over Niall's, holding it tight to stop it being snatched away. A someone else who felt his eyelids droop with desire and his fingers tingle with the need to slide their way

down the smooth skin of Niall's upper arm and slide a possessive hold around the taut, muscular waist.

It was so much more shocking than the earlier touch of hands. The desperate reaction of my body was astonishing. It must have been like reliving your hidden traumas under therapy—not that I'd ever had the time or inclination to try that out for myself. Doorways opening, memories flooding back, the sensory overload of things that had once been familiar and fascinating. Except that these memories hit low and hard and *cruel*, and the flame of remembrance seared through every nerve end that connected with him.

Memories. They suck, don't they? And they don't let you go easy.

WE'D held it all together right until the end of Mission Dove.

Damned thing had taken nearly three months more, while Niall was working his way gradually out of his convalescence. Judith let him back on duty when most of the main peace talks were being drawn to a close and many of the delegates had already returned to their political day jobs. He complained that he didn't have a lot to do, but he knew he wasn't as fit as before, though he'd healed a damned sight faster than anyone had expected.

Maybe he was more pissed off at missing out than I'd realized.

I caught him doing push-ups late on a Sunday night. I'd been out for the weekend and came back to his apartment to freshen up for my own shift on duty. He must have heard me come in, but he didn't acknowledge me. I stood in the shadows of the bedroom doorway and watched him work, stretched out on the wooden floor. The muscles tensed across his bare torso, again and again, as he carefully lifted his body. The scar was much paler than before, though still obvious against his dark skin. He was dressed only in his shorts, the light of the bedside lamp glinting in the trail of sweat down between his shoulder blades. He gave the slightest grunt as he moved, maybe with the effort, maybe counting the presses.

I found I was holding my breath. I hadn't called him for the last three days. Hadn't been in touch in any way. As he straightened his body and climbed back to his feet, I looked at the graceful way he moved, and I ached all over for him. Not only for the easy, vibrant sexuality of him. Not only for the lust that had always been our constant companion. The maelstrom of emotions was deep and uncomfortable and confusing to me. I couldn't remember what I'd been doing all weekend, and wondered what the hell I was trying to prove to myself.

He stood in front of me, regaining his breath. He pushed sweaty locks of hair off his forehead, and his dark eyes challenged me. "Tanner. Are you staying?"

Hell of a question. Maybe he wanted to know if I'd make a late supper, or if I wanted the bathroom before him. Something mildly domestic like that. Or maybe it was something far more significant. Scared of the latter option, I took the first. "Sure," I said. I couldn't stop my eyes from raking his body; my nostrils flared gently from the smell of his sweat. "Need an early night. I've got a five a.m. start tomorrow. A surveillance job on the warehouse near the conference center where they're clearing out the final equipment—"

"Me too," he interrupted. "We're covering it together. Judith's instructions."

I was startled. I admit it. We'd not worked directly together since the knife attack. I saw a shiver of shock in his eyes that must have mirrored my own expression. "Good," I said, amazed how steady my voice sounded. I took a step toward him. I think I moistened my lips.

"Early night, you said." His voice was very brusque. "Must have been a hard weekend for you." His gaze never wavered, though I couldn't mistake the shadow of arousal under his loose shorts. "I've set the alarm for four a.m." Then he walked past me as calmly as if I were nothing but part of the furniture. When my hand reached out to him, he bent away from me, so slightly that I might have thought I imagined it. But I didn't. He had never refused me before, never turned so deliberately away from what we both wanted. Never denied it.

When he came out of the shower fifteen minutes later, he walked straight into the bedroom and turned out the light. I was still standing in the hallway, shocked. He never said another word to me.

FUCK it. Memories—glances backwards, whatever—almost always suck.

The surveillance job that following morning was a minor task, but we were both there on time. It had been a long night, and I'd been damned uncomfortable on the couch. We grunted at each other over coffee, and sat as far apart in the hired transport as possible. No one else was on the job—the other guys were on duty elsewhere on the site—but neither of us needed our hand held.

We'd always worked well together in the past. Hell, we'd enjoyed it. A job like this might have been a bit of fun, too. No real danger any longer, therefore no prospect of distraction for a few hours. I often wondered later on whether things would've been different if we'd chosen to spend some of the time making out instead of messing up. In the early days of our relationship, we wouldn't even have needed to think about making a choice.

I think we initially tried to be civil, but the long hours of boredom took their toll. The agents we relieved were yawning after their night shift, and after a while on our own, we weren't much better. The whole exercise was a final check by the Team, helping out the Department, and just in case some of the external contractors turned out to be less discreet than we hoped. We had bugs in all the relevant places, including their own warehouses and offices, picking up their conversations. That morning, though, it seemed that most of the heavy work had already been done, and any activity at the warehouse was nothing more than the shouts and crude jokes of workmen. Occasionally we heard the creaking of temporary office furniture being dismantled. We sat in a seedy upstairs room in an abandoned unit across the industrial estate with nothing to entertain us but a portable radio link, and we nursed our resentment. Well, that's what *I* did.

The tension wasn't going to die down any time soon. It'd been a miserable night, and now we sat for hours in the early morning, waiting for something or nothing to happen. The place was cold and damp, and the filth around us implied that it had been empty for months. We were both tired, and I soon got a cramp in my left calf. The flask of coffee was drunk far too soon—Niall took the last cup—and there was no food left for a guy like me who'd skipped breakfast. The final straw was when my numbed fingers dropped the radio for the third time. After that, the reception was so bad it sounded like Brad was talking through crispy corn flakes.

Up until then, Niall's only conversation had been to do with the damp and the dust around us, but now he suddenly seemed to snap. "You need to keep your mind on the job in hand."

"Not professional enough for you?" I fired back. "See me as some kind of an amateur compared to you?"

He stared at me angrily. "What the hell do you care what I see?"

In all honesty, I think the aggression between us was mainly due to the miserable situation we were in but to me, at that precise moment, he was dredging up the horror of the attack all over again—and my less than glorious part in it all.

"That's crap. I'm not getting drawn into this, just so you can go another round against me, you and all the Team and their fucking dog!"

"Feeling a touch of paranoia, Tanner? No one's picking on you. That's nonsense, and you know it."

"Nonsense?" I bristled. "Sums me up, eh? Careless. Unreliable." *Worthless.*

He shook his head, impatient. "Yes, I think you let yourself down sometimes, but you won't listen to what I think. It's easier for you to go for the cheap shot. You're always speaking *for* me, as if you reckon you know what I really think."

"Got to do that," I ground out. We were both half out of our uncomfortable seats by now, the surveillance and the radio all but forgotten. "Because you eke out so fucking little for me to go on."

“I’m not like you, Tanner. I don’t feel the need to validate everything with endless words. And anyway, why the hell should I need to? I tell you what needs to be told.”

“So now *you’re* speaking for *me*, eh?” I was perilously close to a yell by this time. “Keep MacKay on a need-to-know basis, right? He’s only another colleague, and not one you think you can rely on.”

“Yeah?” He’d raised his voice as well. “Nowadays, you’re not around long enough for me to know one way or the other. Look at how you just slid back in last night, not a word for days, no sign of you at all. If you don’t see any need to keep me in the loop, that’s fine. Life seems to be one long party to you.”

“Now who’s the paranoid one?” I protested. “I’m not around because I don’t enjoy seeing the look on your face when I am.”

“You’re not around long enough to see *anything!*” He was really incensed, but I couldn’t see past my own fury and distress and had no intention of backing down. “Don’t accuse me of the very thing you’re doing yourself! You pride yourself on your honesty and openness, but it’s pretty damned convenient that excludes your own behavior.”

We glared at each other for one poised, poignant second as if we’d suddenly reached the exact same level of anger and hurt and confusion. And then—even as I watched it happen, with horror and some amazement that I could lose control quite so spectacularly—I laid right into him.

I wasn’t thinking straight by then. I had a huge pile of umbrage smoldering in my heaving breast, and it was itching to get out and be heard. I’d always thought I could rein myself in, if need be. Perhaps I didn’t see the necessity anymore, or perhaps I’d just had enough. Perhaps I was—just for that brief moment—completely insane. I told him it was wearing me down, his lack of empathy and tolerance, and his inability to communicate in ways that were familiar to the rest of the human race—hell, I think I suggested he’d been some kind of alien changeling since birth. I said it was a pity he’d had to lose a chunk of skin before he realized it, but it was obvious I was nothing but a raw edge in his smooth life, and if he couldn’t get over that and accept me as I was, there was no fucking point in going on together. Basically, I

said, we had nothing more to say to each other, no reason to keep pretending, no duty of care anymore.

I halted my rush of words, drawing a sudden, painful breath.

“This is the one time I welcome you speaking for me,” he growled. “That’s exactly how I feel too.”

It still hit me hard, to hear it aloud. From him.

“Okay, fine,” I replied quickly, fiercely, if only to keep the words flowing over the lump in my throat. “But if you want other company, at least be honest about it, if honesty’s so fucking important to you.”

He stared at me then, eyes wide and accusing, and—though I didn’t want to see it right then—hurt.

And then I *really* lost it and accused him of fucking Joe on the side.

Tuesday 09:45

THE argument began with words; it escalated swiftly to fists. Shit, the guy could land a punch! Niall's first crack to my jaw sent me sprawling. Every tooth rattled in my head, and my eyes couldn't focus. But I was so fucking angry that he'd hit me, I got straight back up and pitched in my defending blow. I caught him kind of unawares, too, and I was ridiculously pleased to see his head snap back from my own fist connecting.

We wrestled each other, eyes blazing, breath rasping in our chest as we struggled to speak, most words coming out as incoherent grunts. And I kept bouncing back, kept plowing in with my own efforts, despite the increasingly fierce knocks and the pain in my jaw. I was *not* going to go down again, of that I was sure—and I think I was yelling it, too, most of the time.

Like anyone was going to let the situation continue like that.

It all ended with Joe hammering hard on the door, then kicking it open and racing in to break us up. He'd been called over from the conference center itself, and someone told me later he ran all the way, outstripping the other personnel who followed him. In the background we had Brad screaming at us through the radio to break contact because every word was being broadcast—albeit through crackly cereal—both to the Department and to the warehouse we were meant to be watching. But still we fought. It took a couple of Joe's ninja-type minions to hold me back while he personally pinned Niall to the opposite wall, shouting into Niall's face to pull himself together. Someone smashed the malfunctioning radio, and all the voices in the room were silenced. Then all we could do was pant painfully and glare and spit at each other like a couple of frustrated alley cats.

I don't remember much else of that time. Other agents appeared in and out of the room. Pale, shocked, and inquisitive faces stared through the doorway at us. I heard sharp, muffled words from another

radio. Eventually Judith appeared like the Wrath of God herself, bearing the twin divine gifts of her anger and disgust—and immediate suspension of us both from the Project Team.

IT FELT like I left the Team as much a stranger to Niall Sutherland as I'd been his companion. Damned odd, how things go. Close together like Siamese twins—then as distant as prince and pauper. But I was still mad and still hurting. And after the fight, I had a whole pile of bureaucratic shit to plough through as well.

The last thing I wanted was to face more shit from—or because of—him.

We both went through the disciplinary procedure; we were treated just the same. Partners in crime, you might have thought. But instead it acted as the final dissolution of our partnership. We never spoke to each other during the proceedings. We were never left alone together, saw nothing of each other at formal interviews except at a glaring distance. Outside of work, we were under the guard of a Department agent, but we each stayed in our own apartment, anyway. And so we never spoke again at all.

Even when I left the city.

Facing that disciplinary procedure had been one of the grimmest times of my life—dammit, my work was one of the few things in my life that I'd been truly proud of—because they made me feel like a troublesome school kid who'd disappointed his parents and put his friends in the direst danger. Took several days, too, to grind salt into that wound. *Fuck 'em!* I'd thought. *Do I really need this?* Of course, I never answered myself. Nor did I wonder if Niall had been subjected to the same trial. Nor care.

When the internal investigation was over, all I did was peel back to the apartment and pick up the minimum that I needed to exist. We'd been given several months' suspension, and I decided to run for cover. It was what I'd done in the past, though not since I'd joined the Team. Sure, Niall had a key to my place, but I didn't care about that. He was

welcome to it. I had other places I could go, I always did. Places that no one else knew. Not even Niall.

It was my second Departmental investigation in six months, of course. Odds were looking bad for me all round. I expected the call from Judith at any time, firing me completely. I reckoned it was the best thing I could do, to make an escape while I still could.

It still took me a long, lonely hour to pluck up the courage to leave.

I stood there in my cold hallway for a long time, staring at a jacket Niall had left at my apartment weeks ago, hanging on the back of the front door. But I couldn't feel anything else of him there; no ambience, no vibrations at all. Despite a smattering of his stuff in every one of my rooms, it was as if that final fight had erased the whole of our relationship. I was too tired and too dispirited to remember anything other than misery and anger between us. I spent the last half hour heaping as many of his belongings as I could find into a couple of bags, and I left them in the hallway for collection. Or not. To be honest, I didn't care what he did with it all, or if he threw the equivalent of my belongings at his apartment right out of the window. Perhaps he was already planning to move on—had duplicated his toothbrush and flannel elsewhere, at some other guy's place. *Some kind of masochist I was.*

There were several messages blinking on my phone, probably from the other guys. Whether they wanted to help or to scold, I didn't care at that time. I decided that I'd contact them when I was good and ready—and at *my* choice.

So I escaped to my anonymous trailer—courtesy of an old family friend who'd passed on and left his property to another mutual friend I'd once known well. Who was now overseas. Not that anyone needed to know my convoluted social history, of course, except to explain why no one would directly connect the place with me—and why it was available for my use at such short notice. And I stayed there. Comforted only by my own self-pity and the false warmth of my arrogance. In hiding. Licking wounds. Grieving. Whatever. It fucking hurt, whatever it was.

Thinking back on the fight, I realized that it was destined to happen at some time or another. It'd been brewing since the attack on Niall, and maybe from a way before that. It was difficult to remember when we hadn't been at each other's throats. And whose fault had it all been?

I hated to admit it but I had to, deep in my dreams, late at night in my solitude. Whatever Niall might or might not have done, however much he'd betrayed me, or dismissed me, or hurt me—hey, despite all that, *I'd royally fucked up.*

And lost the whole damned lot. Everything ruined. Everything finished.

He never denied it, you know? Never told me to go to hell, that of course he hadn't fucked Lam, I was talking out of my ass. He never said anything like that. But he could have done, couldn't he? It's what *I* would have said. So what was a guy to think?

Fuck it.

SOMETHING was calling my thoughts back to the present. Something insistent.

Niall's fist on my jaw. Niall's angry voice in my head.

Niall Sutherland in my bed. Curled against my body. The rhythm of his breathing in my head.

Niall's dick inside me, his hands holding me to him, his hips rocking against me, his voice in my ear, urging me on.

Niall, on the steps of my trailer, muttering something under his breath, something that sounded angry yet awed. His hand on my shoulder, my hand covering his, and my head leaning slowly in toward him....

I felt sweat spring up on my forehead, and I wrenched myself away from him. He was startled, and his body swayed as he regained his step. He also pulled back. I thanked God my senses had returned

quickly to the present time before he'd seen the look in my eyes, or guessed the thoughts in my head.

“Get back inside.” My anger was way too fierce for the situation, but I wasn't going to be justifying that to him. “Get back!”

He paused in the doorway, his head tilted just slightly to the side, his eyes temporarily distracted from glaring at me. He looked flushed again. “There was a movement, Tanner. Behind the black trailer.”

“I know,” I said curtly. Junk's trailer was a big beast of a thing with exotic graffiti scrawled across the sides and bars across the smoked windows. A huge thing that looked like it'd never travel even if he'd wanted it to; a home usually filled with various relatives of all ages, from babes in arms to impossibly grizzled old ladies, and all protected by Dylan. There were other dogs on the site, of course, but Dylan was the biggest and the meanest. Or looked it, to intruders who didn't know how well Junk had trained him. Dylan—who seemed to have gone astray this morning.

I'd seen the shimmer of movement behind the trailer too. I'd also heard the faintest echo in the morning air of a human footstep.

“I know Junk. That's his trailer. Leave it to me, for God's sake.” *This time, I was thinking. This time, trust me to do it properly.*

Niall moved back into the trailer, obviously still reluctant to be left out of the action scenes, and the door closed softly behind him. I recalled the metal that was warped at the bottom of the sill and the hinges that groaned in the wet weather—but Niall managed to close it both efficiently and softly.

Right. I sighed to myself.

I slowly turned back around, mentally shaking myself back to full attention. The impact of that stupid, *stupid* touch had been so vivid that I still felt the trail of memory like goose bumps on my goose bumps. But now he was out of sight, if not out of mind. Now I could concentrate on the matter in hand.

Couldn't I?

One of Zac's parakeets called mournfully from a tree on the outskirts of the trailer park. A discarded page from a newspaper rustled

around the wheels of one of the silent homes. I stepped carefully across the trailer park ground, my boots brushing up the grit and dried oil. There were people moving in the distance, where the perimeter of the park ran into the surrounding neighborhood and where more regular folks drove their cars to work and bussed their kids to school. But everywhere around my own trailer was deserted. No shouts from the kitchens, no shrieking of children's battles. No cigarette smoke, no revving of bikes' engines.

The black trailer loomed large in front of me, and I stopped a few feet away so that I could see the track around both sides. There was no further movement, but awareness still thrummed on the fringes of my mind. My gun felt strangely sticky in my palm. I knew that something was wrong, of course I did. This was the first time I'd called on my training in months. But you didn't forget that sort of thing.

I just wished I could get the memories of "old" Niall out of my mind. It was all too damned distracting. We'd parted in the most final of ways, and there wasn't much that could be salvaged from that. I thought I was still angry with him. I knew it still hurt to have him around. But he was only here for a day or so, surely. Would soon be on his way again; would soon take his scowling face out of my home and leave me to get on with my exile in peace.

I wished that were true. The peace part. With all of my heart.

The wind around the trailer park hissed in my ears and teased the loose hairs at my neck. I peered carefully at the dark chasm under Junk's trailer, which was the only hiding place I could imagine, though you'd have to be pretty small and have a damned strong stomach to crawl about under there....

When the noise finally came, I admit that I was unprepared for it. I was prowling around like some kind of macho hero, but in all honesty, my mind was far away in both time and place, seduced by the memory of so many things. Aromas of cooking food in Niall's kitchen; the rustle of clean sheets in the bathroom cupboard; the muted sound of the evening traffic outside the Westbridge block. The pictures he once had on his wall, black and white sketches of a place he used to live, long before his time with the Team. Laughter at our favorite TV

comedy show. The feel of his thick, soft hair snagging between my fingers as I ran a hand through it to pull his head toward me....

I remembered so much more of that apartment than just the bricks and mortar. The same bricks and mortar that had been blown up and left as a devastated mess. I let my attention drift for a few vital seconds just as a dog finally started barking somewhere beyond Junk's trailer. Was it Dylan? I saw a sudden burst of movement from behind the trailer, and I turned to cover it, but maybe I was just a little too slow. Maybe I was just a little too blinded by the angle of the early sun reflected on the metal plates of the roof.

Whatever the reason, I never saw any sniper or any gun. I heard a low whistle and that strange whine you sometimes get from a gun that hasn't been oiled for a while. There was a breath of new wind by my left ear and a distracting flash of brightness.

Then the shot hit me, and I went down on my knees.

I remember thinking what a fucking moron I was, not to have sensed the danger. I remember wondering whether Junk was okay, and—even more stupidly—whether the *dog* was. I remember thinking that people made a hell of a fuss about gunshots, because surely it didn't really hurt much at all, just a scrape across my flesh and a tearing of my shirt....

Then the pain flared through me like a hot brand, and the thinking faded swiftly to black, leaving me with an overwhelming feeling of disgust.

Stupid, fucking stupid idiot.

Tuesday 10:56

“TANNER?” The voice was sharp and it hurt my head to listen to it. “Dammit, Tanner, open your eyes and answer me.”

“Fuck off,” I said, but all that came out of my mouth was a fuzzy mumble. Pissed me off, because I really wanted to get that message through to the person who’d dragged me from my comfortable rest. Because consciousness was far from comfortable. My head hammered and my eyes burned inside the closed lids. It felt like someone was trickling the contents of a boiling kettle down the left side of my body, and judging from the anguished complaints of my nerve endings, this was while someone performed what felt like open-heart surgery on me, fairly clumsily and equipped only with fire tongs. Oh—and without anesthetic.

I knew the real meaning of “feeling like shit.”

The voice faded out of my consciousness for a while. I thanked God for that, not that I’ve ever had all that much credit with him. I think some tears rolled down my cheeks, what with the pain and all. *Fuck*. How embarrassing.

Then I seemed to be waking again. The pain was duller, though no less uncomfortable. There were a couple of voices in the background this time, and gradually the words became clearer.

“He’s conscious but he needs to open his eyes, we need to know how badly he’s hurt.”

Niall’s voice. Nice and strident, of course. God forbid he should make allowances, even as my whole body felt like it had been spiked open to the elements.

“Fuck off,” replied someone else who wasn’t me. But I admired the sentiment—and the courage. “Who the hell are you to tell him what to do? Fuckin’ suspicious that this all happened just after *you* turned up.”

“What the hell do you mean?”

I peeled an eye half open because, despite my pain, this sounded damned interesting. I could see two blurry figures above me. Guess I must have been lying down; I seemed to be indoors, too. Where was I? My trailer? Someone else’s trailer? On the banks of the Nile? I thought I recognized the unintentionally retro decor of my own living room, but gave up trying to work it out, and concentrated instead on my companions. One of them I already knew was Niall. Turned out the other one was Junk himself. He’d lived on this park since he was a kid; in fact, his mom still lived a few trailers away, and they were surrounded by plenty of other relatives of assorted shapes and sizes, like I might have mentioned before. Junk was the patriarch of the site; his word was wisdom and law and punishment all rolled into one. I liked him a hell of a lot. Think he tolerated me in return.

Not as tall as Niall, but a damned sight broader, and not one for bothering with first warnings. I knew they’d be a match for each other.

Junk’s voice was very aggressive. *Very*. He didn’t take well to strangers.

“You think we didn’t see you movin’ into Mac’s trailer yesterday, tough guy? A bunch o’ well-armed weirdos sneakin’ in at the crack o’ dawn like there’s good reason to keep out of everyone’s way. And now my dog’s shit-full o’ drugs and Mac is shot and all we got is a snivelin’ little turd who swears he had fuck all to do with it.” Even though I couldn’t focus very well, I could hear the venom in Junk’s gravelly voice and see the threatening way he leaned over towards Niall.

I waited for Niall to respond. Knew he wasn’t backward in coming forward.

“And so where were you in all this? If that dog’s so excellent at protection, don’t you think that’s suspicious, too, that he’s conveniently out of the way at the first sight of danger? Something or *someone* must have led the gunman here. He knew his way around well enough that Tanner never saw him coming.”

“Hey!” I gasped. They were talking like I wasn’t there. Like I’d needed saving, like some kind of newbie who’d failed his entrance exam for the Department...

“Tanner!” There was a shaky tone to Niall’s voice that may have been because he was trying to get closer to me, but Junk’s large bulk blocked the way. “Don’t try to get up. You’ve been shot.”

“I know.” I enunciated each word very carefully. “I guessed. The gunshot was a real giveaway.”

“Fuck you, too,” he muttered, but he didn’t seem to put much heart into it.

“Junk?”

“Here, buddy,” the other man said, and now he swam further into focus. Broad, square face, with deeply creased, tanned skin and topped with a buzz cut of iron-grey hair. Bright, fierce eyes and some interesting scars on his neck and shoulders that I’d never really had the nerve to ask about. “You lost a mess o’ blood, and all over my fuckin’ shirt too. Now this other guy’s got some kind of death wish, sayin’ I had somethin’ to do with it. You’re in crap here up to your knees, Mac.”

Niall wriggled finally in front of Junk, and now I could see him far more clearly as well. His eyes were steely. “Mac?” said his decidedly cool voice.

I stared at his scowl and grimaced. “That’s me.” That’s what they called me here on the park. I mean, I didn’t deliberately create some new persona for myself, but that was what Junk had called me after I told him my name, and that’s what I became.

I shifted painfully. Something creaked ominously underneath me, like a spring snapped. Yeah, that definitely sounded like my couch. I had a few questions I knew I needed the answers to, but I wasn’t sure what I should say in front of Junk. Amazing how the training is instinctive even in the face of agony, eh?

But Niall seemed to pick up on my caution. He leaned a little closer to me and his voice was low and clear, cutting right across Junk’s complaints. “You’re in your own trailer, Tanner. I wouldn’t leave you outside, but we didn’t move you further than the couch. The bullet passed through the flesh of your upper left arm. There’s been some bleeding, but no major arteries were cut, nor is there any serious muscle damage. It needs a few stitches, but it’ll heal well with rest and

the proper care. You must have twisted at the last minute to avoid the bullet, or else he was a poor shot.”

Junk gave a loud, dry laugh behind him. “Dylan had his teeth in the guy’s ass. That’s kind of distractin’ for anyone’s aim!”

I could see Niall’s face screwed up with irritation, and if I hadn’t been so racked with pain, I’d have laughed at the sight. Nice to see it in the context of some other poor bastard’s behavior, not mine.

“Dylan’s the best, eh, Junk?”

“Yeah.” Junk growled. Put him beside the large Rottweiler and sometimes you’d be hard pressed to see the difference. Same sharp, black eyes; same frown of suspicion towards strangers; same grim set to the mouth. But I’d never seen Junk’s teeth in anyone’s ass. Yet.

“Is he okay?”

Junk nodded. “Been drugged, I reckon. He’s still groggy. It’d take a fuck of a lot to keep him down. When I found him, he was comin’ around and fuckin’ angry. Rarin’ for revenge on *someone*.”

“Found him? Where’s he been?”

Now it was Junk’s turn to scowl. “Taken from the park, Mac. Fuckin’ dognapped. I’ve been lookin’ for him since early mornin’, so it must’ve happened damned early. The bastards who did it would’ve needed a van or somethin’. They’d’ve needed to know about dogs, too, because my Dylan don’t go with just anyone.”

“Maybe with drugged food...” Niall caught the full blast of Junk’s look of utter contempt. He frowned, but he wisely shut his mouth again.

“He takes nothin’ from anyone’s hand, ’cept mine.”

“Or one of your family,” I said quietly, and they both turned to stare at me. “Or from me. Dylan responds to those he knows the smell of. I fed him last month, remember? When you had an... appointment... in town.”

Junk’s mouth twisted grimly. Only he and I knew he’d been to meet a court date, and I wasn’t breaking his confidence. It had nothing to do with today’s little drama. “Okay. So maybe he was tricked. It’s

possible. But he's sharp, y'know? Not like humans. He don't usually make a mistake about trustin' folks."

"Where was he?" I was struggling to sit upright until Junk grabbed hold of my good arm and helped me up. He and Niall were standing either side of the couch, like guardian lions at the gates of my personal nightmare. *Fuck*, but every movement hurt! The pain zigzagged across my chest like a cheese wire through cheddar, and where my knees had taken the brunt of my fall, it felt like they'd been rubbed raw, right down to the bone.

"In one o' the warehouses the other side o' the junkyard. I'd have found him earlier if he hadn't been muzzled too. He ain't hurt, but he'll be cranky for a while, I can fuckin' tell you." Junk looked both distressed and furious. Dylan was as cherished as one of his kids, even when he had about twenty of the human variety too. Thank God no one had killed the dog. I wouldn't have wanted to be this side of the state line when Junk's fury was unleashed.

Niall coughed. I didn't remember him ever being that pale. Made me wonder if my eyes were still focusing properly. "The dog will be fine, you say. But Tanner needs stitches." His words were fiercely bitten out, like he accused Junk of something. "And pain relief."

Junk looked from me to Niall. Then back at me. "Reckon that's a 'no' to a hospital, right?"

"No," we both said, in unison.

Junk grinned. "I'll call Hans. He'll deal with it. He's a fuckin' good doctor, but just one stupid mistake and they threw him out, no respect for all that skill. Dammit, everyone reckoned the old lady had outlived her time anyway... well, whatever, he's out with the others, been lookin' for Dylan with me. The call's gone out that we found him. The other guys'll be back soon."

"That's where everyone is?" Niall sounded amazed. "Why the park was so empty? They're looking for the dog?"

Junk looked at him like he'd come from some other planet and not bothered to invest in a guide book. I can't say I didn't enjoy watching it. Guess Niall never had pets, himself; I never heard him mention any. "Yeah. We're a community here, tough guy. We

would've called on Mac, too, but I ain't sure about *you*. Whether you can be fuckin' trusted."

That looked like the final straw for Niall. "Back off!" He took a menacing step toward Junk. "If you've got any problem with me, you can bring it outside."

"Yeah?" Junk growled back and took his own step forward.

"Shut the fuck up, both of you," I said wearily. It'd been enlightening, seeing Niall play the territorial game with Junk, but it was exhausting too. "Niall, I trust Junk completely, as a friend. I don't see how he could have been involved in anything that disrupted the park. Junk, Niall's a... colleague of mine, so lay off. Besides, you don't want to know about his right hook." I winced, the sudden burst of emotion tugging too painfully at a weakened body. "Can someone fill me in on the bit about the sniveling little turd? Does that mean you caught someone out there?"

"The dog—" Niall began.

"Yeah, Dylan got him," Junk interrupted proudly. "Teeth like 'n industrial clamp."

"Once he bit that ass, he never let go?"

Junk grinned back at me. Niall rolled his eyes.

"The sniveler?" I prompted.

They looked at each other, then looked over to the archway to my kitchen. I turned my aching head and stared at a man I'd not realized was there at all. Possibly because he was trussed to the kitchen stool and gagged like a turkey for Thanksgiving and would've had extreme difficulty making any kind of original sound, let alone coherent words. The lower half of his face was bound by a large, tightly knotted scarf. It was one of Junk's; he always wore an amazing array of brightly colored neck scarves, an unexpected sunburst of personal expression in amongst the habitual denim and leather. I stared at our captive, and frightened eyes met mine.

It was Greg, Simon's young assistant.

I WAS momentarily speechless with the shock.

Greg seemed to have stopped sniveling by now, as Junk had called his frightened whimpering. Or maybe it was the sore effect of Dylan's bite marks in his butt.

"Take off the gag," I said hoarsely, in Niall's direction.

"In a moment." Niall pulled up the card table beside the couch, and sat on it, facing Greg. He rolled his gun around in his hand, making it pretty damned obvious that he slept, ate, drank and possibly starred in wet dreams with it, until Greg's fascinated eyes started to glaze over. Then, having made whatever point he wanted, Niall leaned forward and unfastened the scarf.

"It wasn't me!" were the young man's first words. Sounded like one of the kids on the park after a baseball and cracked window incident. He looked a bit like a kid, too, his blond hair sweaty and tangled, his eyes wide and scared. He spat out some threads of cloth and the words tumbled out swiftly. "For God's sake, Niall, it wasn't me who shot him!"

Niall's lips were closed tight. I'd seen this "silent torture" strategy before. It was damned effective.

"Look!" Greg cried, wriggling in his chair. "You've taken my gun already and checked it. It's not been fired, has it? And did you find any other weapon on me?" I glanced over at Junk and he shook his head slightly. Obviously Greg's Department-issued gun had been clean, and there'd been nothing else found on him. "Tanner!" Greg was casting that pleading look over to me, now.

"Not a whole lot of other suspects," I said softly. "And it's not as if you were just passing."

Greg grimaced. "I know, I know. You were never meant to know I was here. Simon sent me, as extra security, you know? Jeez, I was just scoping out the place, wondering why the hell it was so quiet, when I saw something around the back of that trailer. But when I went to look, suddenly that dog leaped at me, attacking me!"

“Something around the back of the trailer,” I repeated. I instinctively knew a firm approach would be the best way to unnerve a young type like Greg. I stared back at him, my gaze kept as steady as the throbbing in my arm allowed. Beside me, Niall slid his fingers up and down the gun barrel. Junk stared at the pair of us, obviously intrigued by the bizarre double-act.

Greg started to stutter. “I tried to catch it—him—tried to see who it was. But just as I got close, I heard the shot, and saw someone run off. And then, like I told you, the fucking dog—”

Junk growled, rather like the dog himself, and Greg flushed bright red.

“What did you see, Greg?” That was Niall—a low but sharp tone. Like a fingernail dragging slowly down a stone wall.

Greg looked panicky. “Not enough. God, if only I’d run faster... I think it was a guy. The figure was short and slim, but he ran like a man. There was just the one shot, then I turned to come back toward Tanner’s, then there was snarling out of nowhere and....” He swallowed, hard, his eyes going wide and flickering uncertainly towards Junk. He looked frighteningly young. I could see him tugging helplessly at the ropes around his wrists. They’d been tied by Junk, so there was no weakness there.

“You were sent to watch Niall? To watch *me*?”

Greg flushed. For the very first time, there was a flash of slyness in his expression. “I know, I thought it was odd too. Simon... well, he’s not always himself nowadays.” He suddenly seemed to think he’d been indiscreet, because the panic returned and he gabbed quickly, “No, forget that, of course, I wouldn’t say anything out of turn. He said Judith agreed to it. I was to come and add support around the trailer park, check out any strangers, you know.” He shrugged, and there was the return of his usual clear, naïve look. “You know what he’s like. How he worries. That’s Simon.”

“Right,” I said, carefully keeping the pain and emotion out of my tone. “So he dumps Niall on me with threats of eternal damnation if he’s not kept safe, but despite that, sends his own guys to spy on me.”

“Shut up,” Niall said. “Seems like a good thing he did. Maybe saved you from a visit to that eternal damnation.”

I glared at him, the throbbing in my wound all mixed up with the pounding of the blood around my head. *No, I'm there already. Started the minute you stumbled in with your boxes and your familiar scowl.*

Junk stirred behind me, and I shot him a look. He looked over at Niall, and they shared a nod. Seemed like they understood each other just fine about this.

“You can untie him,” Niall said. “He’s okay with us.”

Tuesday 11:30

HANS the disbarred doctor had arrived, worked on me, and left. He'd been a small, quiet man, but his stitching was exemplary. Guess it had to be, because Niall stood over him like he was pretending to help, though he was really waiting for the first mistake, probably for an excuse to castrate the guy. We could all see his suspicion; it was palpable, like a blue cloud around him, but I didn't have the energy to tell him to back off. I just grit my teeth and thanked some God or other that I only needed four stitches. Any more and I'd have been biting my lip to stop my eyes watering like before. Hans cleaned up, pumped me full of something that had the incriminating label soaked off the bottle, and left me a handful of unmarked pills for good measure. I started to relax a little. Whatever the stuff was, it did its job swiftly and well.

I'd already been blessed with visits from Ruthie's grandkids, but only until Junk lost patience and threw them out bodily. Now some of his own family had drifted back to the park and came over to my trailer for curiosity's sake. I knew them all and liked them too. The door was half open, and I could hear the sounds of usual life returning to the site. I'd have looked out as well, but the light was blocked by Junk's heavy frame where he'd taken up residence in the doorway as some kind of unofficial bouncer. So I lay in just my sweatpants and socks, smiling stupidly at my visitors. A couple of the girls seemed upset at the sight of my bandaged arm. Or maybe it was the dried blood still spattered here and there on my chest. Anyway, I doubted they were moved by the state of my manly torso. Not that I wanted them to be; I'd held off their romantic advances pretty well so far.

One of them kneeled down beside the couch and took my hand. My smile was genuine this time. She looked up at me through a younger replica of Junk's fierce eyes, albeit they were set in a damned sight prettier face. His eldest daughter, Sheri. She had full lips and bright, inquisitive eyes, and her dark red hair was twisted into a braid at

the nape of her head. Leaving aside the low-cut shirt and the skirt that wasn't much deeper than one of her father's scarves, I thought she was gorgeous. Not so gorgeous with the scowling, of course.

"What's happened to you, Mac? What bastard did this?" She couldn't seem to decide between anguish and personal affront.

That's Sheri all over. Says what she likes, bold and brave. "I don't know." I tried the innocent smiling again but she looked fiercely at me, as if I were deliberately keeping a secret from her. As if I'd dare.

Sheri was Junk's most reliable companion, always there with him, even as his lovers and other family members came and went. Or so he used to tell me when he was drunk and maudlin and determined to tell me his life story for the umpteenth time. I'd seen their neighbor Phil watching her with some kind of lovestruck helplessness whenever he was around at Junk's. A lot of the guys were like that with Sheri, like moths to her flame. She took lovers occasionally, though I wasn't one to check up on her or anything, but she didn't take anyone for a more stable relationship. Too busy with her family, maybe. She looked after the whole damned lot of them, it seemed.

By now, the other girls had lost interest in me and turned their attentions to Niall instead. Guess he looked a better specimen than I did at that moment. I watched him try to ignore them and still be civil, but it made my head hurt again, despite the drugs. And when one of them stepped up on her toes and kissed him goodbye full on the mouth, I didn't like the feelings it inspired in me at all. Nausea, I expect. Having been shot, and all.

Within half an hour, everyone had moved out of the trailer, the morning's excitement over. There was just me and Niall left, and Junk, who was still reluctant to leave.

And in the background to all this drama, acting under our orders, perched uncomfortably on the stool in the kitchen and effectively keeping out of the way of all the attention, was Greg.

NIALL stood beside the couch, looking down at me. I was settled rather awkwardly, though Junk had gone to find me some more cushions from someone else's trailer to make it easier on my back and arm. I glanced over toward the kitchen.

"What do you think?" I said quietly.

Greg had waited until my visitors had all gone, and then had appeared in the kitchen doorway. He hadn't moved farther into the living room, and I didn't think he could hear us properly. He was also a little distracted. Junk had left the door ajar when he left to get the soft furnishings, and Dylan had loped up my steps and into the trailer like he owned the place. He now sat a foot away from Greg, his tongue hanging carelessly from the corner of his mouth, his breath panting, and his eyes fixed constantly on the guy whose buttock he'd tasted once today already. When Greg had cast a pleading look in my direction, I'd told him Dylan had a very healthy appetite.

Now Greg just stood there, worried gaze flickering between us and the dog.

Niall drew breath and waited a few seconds before he answered me. He turned his body slightly so that Greg couldn't see his mouth move. "I think he's scared, but it seems he's telling the truth. It sounds like something Simon would do. Greg was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. A pity he got in the way, though. The real culprit might have been caught."

"Why would Simon think we needed extra support? And only one young guy? Seems very odd."

Niall frowned. "Yes. But it's not good for us to discuss this now in front of others."

I glanced back at Greg. "He's hiding *something*," I said, softly.

Niall tutted, but I think it was just an expression of his own frustration. "Do you think he recognized the attacker? Maybe he was a deliberate distraction. Maybe his orders are something more than just protection. Or he's been used without realizing it."

I didn't have the energy to ask him what he meant. That was Niall's way, to analyze everything from a pragmatic viewpoint, to weigh up all the possibilities, not just the probabilities.

"It's just Simon being a mother hen," I said, wearily. "You wait until I next see him."

"Meanwhile, we have his protégé here, apparently the only witness to another attack on the Project Team."

I was startled at his frankness. "You think that's what it was? They've tracked us down to here?"

"Tracked *me*."

I didn't know what to say. Things were moving rather like a movie—much too fast for real life. "I often wondered what potential Simon saw in Greg," I murmured. "He's way too tolerant with his guys. Kid was never the brightest bulb on the Christmas tree."

"Also a poor shot."

I glanced at Niall in surprise. There was a wry smile on his lips, though I couldn't see if it reached his eyes.

"I can't think it was him shooting at you, Tanner. No one could rely on him hitting you, not judging from my experience. He had me watching him last month on the range, begging tips on better stance, holding the barrel far too high, time and again. I passed him back to the training board in the end. He needed another few months to be anywhere near Departmental standard."

My eyes stung at the inside of my lids. "And that, after all, is the most important thing to you, isn't it? To meet Departmental standard."

Niall's breath hissed a little. "Not now, Tanner. You're hurt, I know, but don't you think this situation is more critical than our own issues?"

"We have issues then, do we?"

He leant his head down to me, obviously worried that Greg would hear our bickering. "Fuck you, MacKay. You chose to run, didn't you? You chose to close that particular door. So don't tell *me* I don't face the issues, okay?" The expression on my face must have been pure

amazement. “That’s some kind of victory for you, isn’t it, making me argue? But I don’t intend to let you under my skin again, I tell you, it’s been hard enough....” He bit at his lip. It was a gesture he kept returning to. His eyes darted away from mine again. “This is not important, Tanner. You’ve been attacked, which means someone else apart from the Team knew where you were. We need to work out who—and why—and what we do next.”

But my attention wasn’t on side just yet. Truth to tell, I was still furious with myself for letting my guard down in the first place. I’d missed the threat until the damned bullet hit me. It was a horrible reminder of the other times in life I’d fucked up—including the other time that had affected Niall himself. I looked up at him, my mind full of pity and annoyance with myself, and our gazes met. He glanced quickly up and down my bandaged body and frowned.

“I’m good,” I said, quickly. I was still sharp enough to know what he was going to ask. “Just groggy from the drugs.” *And obviously tetchy.* “Dammit, just because I’ve bled all over the park doesn’t mean my brains bled out alongside it. You don’t need to worry about me putting you at risk. I’ll be able to think about it more clearly soon, I’m sure. When I’m up and about again—”

“You won’t be,” he said, sharply. “Fuck, Tanner, you’ve been shot. You’ve lost blood, had some stitches. You need to rest. Just let it drop, will you?”

“Drop what?”

He shook his head impatiently. “Do you think I don’t know what you’re harking back to? But we don’t have time. Anyway, I don’t want to listen to it anymore, the damned post-mortem of that incident at the brothel. My injuries, your misery, whatever.”

I gaped at him. “Whoa, resist the urge to kick a guy when he’s down, will you?” He was right, though, wasn’t he? Maybe this was the time to let it go. “If I’d taken this bullet just a little lower and a little deeper, there’d be no need, anyway.”

He paled even more, and it seemed to me his eyes sank into deep black pits of disgust. “Right on, MacKay. Like I’ve said before, you seem to think you have the God-given right to put words in my mouth

as well as spouting out plenty of your own. Far be it from me to deny you that glory.”

I felt nauseous. Everything was off kilter. *Grow up, Mackay*. The last thing I wanted was more argument with Niall. “What about the papers?” I was suddenly worried. Last time we’d been in the trailer, we had reams of paper all over the couch and floor, just about to go searching for clues like some kind of treasure hunt. And since then, we’d had a trail of civilians through the place.

“I put them away,” he said shortly.

“Maybe we should leave the park now. Go and join the rest of the Team. Right?”

He shook his head vehemently. “Not until you can move more easily. If we believe Greg, there’s still someone out there trying to harm us. Better we stay put until we can assess the real threat.”

“Call Simon,” I urged. “Call Judith.”

He stared at me, his brow wrinkling. Perhaps I had been just a little too fierce with my tone. “There’s something still wrong, isn’t there, Tanner?”

I couldn’t answer; I couldn’t admit to... what? Being scared?

The door creaked slightly, and he spun around at the waist, the gun already against his palm, but it was just Junk coming back in with pillows. He ambled over toward the couch, clutching them under his waistcoat as best he could. One looked suspiciously pink; I reckoned it had come from one of his daughters.

Niall let out a long breath. He spoke quickly, his murmur for my ears only. “Who else knows where we are, Tanner? Who knew within hours of my arrival that I was here? Or was it just chance?”

“What are you saying? You think that’s proof there *is* a spy somewhere in the Team? Perhaps someone followed Greg. They might even have followed you all when you arrived here.”

He looked down at me, and the dark pupils were fathomless. “Maybe. I don’t know. We need to talk it through, and without company. Which is another reason for not leaving here at the moment. We’d waste time.”

“Maybe Junk scared them off, like he scared Greg, the boy agent.” My words were rather more frivolous than my tone. “For good.” I was still struggling with the thought of someone out to get me.

He didn’t answer me. “Okay. I’ll call Judith,” he said. As Junk cleared his throat rather obviously and moved in with his armful of frilled fabric, Niall flipped open his cell and moved away to behind the door. It gained him a modicum of privacy from all of us. I saw Dylan’s eyes follow him, then the dog relaxed, and his gaze returned to its watch of the young man half-hiding behind my kitchen curtain.

JUNK punched halfheartedly at a few cushions as if he suspected that was what he was meant to do to make me comfy, then abandoned them for me to wriggle into. Instead, he crouched by the side of the couch, and flipped open a can of beer. A drop of the spray settled on my cheek. I itched to taste it, and Junk grinned at the familiar flicker in my eyes. “Later, Mac. You owe me more beers ’n I can count, and definitely more ’n you ever keep in that fridge o’ yours. But for now, Hans says you gotta stay off the stuff.”

“Yes, doctor.” Across the room, Niall turned slightly toward me, the phone hidden under his hair, against his ear. I could feel his gaze on me.

Maybe Junk could too. He coughed, and turned his head so that his face was hidden from Niall’s sight. He dropped his voice lower. “So what the fuck’s this guy to you, Mac? This Niall guy? I ain’t seein’ any family resemblance, so he’s no brother. And judgin’ from that look on your face, he ain’t your favorite person right now.”

“Just a colleague. Well, an ex-colleague.” I trotted out the cover story with lukewarm sincerity.

Junk raised an eyebrow like he wasn’t even listening. “You know it was fuckin’ bedlam out there when you got shot. I was just arrivin’ back, there was this sudden crack o’ noise and a yell that I reckon was from you. Then I saw the blond kid grovelin’ in the dust trying to hide under my trailer, and Dylan was racin’ across the park toward him. You

were lyin' on the ground like someone'd snapped your knees underneath you, and this *Niall* guy had thrown himself down the steps, coverin' your body with his."

"Huh?"

He nodded, watching my bemusement. "He was coverin' you, Mac. If there'd been any other shots, they'd have got him for sure. I don't know who the fuck all these other guys are that you're talkin' about, or why someone's tryin' to shoot you. But that's one kinda devoted ex-colleague, if you ask me."

"Junk." Guess the drugs were making me a bit dopey. Junk had obviously been mistaken about Niall's behavior, but he wouldn't want to know the gory details about the pair of us, I was sure. His family was wild and uninhibited in many ways, but it followed a traditional boy-girl-baby pattern. He'd never shown any prejudice towards anyone, unless they'd directly threatened him or his family, but I was reluctant to give him the opportunity to start a new trend. "Look..."

His short laugh surprised me. "Sure. And what's that look in your eyes? You think I'm some redneck retard who can't see past his own kind—that I don't know there're other folks with other ways. Don't patronize me, okay? Believe me, I don't wanna know what you do with your long, lonely nights in among the sheets, but I *do* know that no one's ever refused my Sheri without a fuckin' good reason, let alone remained a friend." Sheri was everything to him. No potential date had ever said "no" to her and kept all limbs in working order, or so went the urban myth. I was very fond of Sheri, and she was cute, sure—but not my type. I'd dared to refuse her once, and I still seemed to be in one piece.

Junk stared at me with a rueful grin. "You're somethin', Mac, I'll say that for you. Can't say I agree with your habits, or I understand what the fuck's going on, you know? But if you and him have something goin', it's none o' my fuckin' business anyway."

"We don't." *Sharp.*

Junk shrugged and drained the can. "Whatever. But I'd be pretty fuckin' glad to have an ex-colleague who felt that way about *me*, let me tell you."

“You’re pretty fond of telling me all sorts of stuff,” I growled back. “Doesn’t make it true.”

He grinned. When he liked you, he was slow to take offence. Fucking annoying, of course, when you were trying to give it.

“Yeah. So I’m wonderin’ what you and he do down at the store.” I just stared. “The grocery store,” he repeated slowly, as if he were explaining things to his youngest boy. “Where you told me you got your ass fired from.” When he saw from my expression that the penny had dropped, he laughed softly. “Reckon I never thought you really did work in a store.”

I mustered up some spirit in my reply. “Yes, you did.”

His laugh was louder this time. “Okay, you’re right, I did. You’re fuckin’ good at that—lettin’ people think things without ever really confirmin’ or denyin’ ’em. Good thing people *like* you, kid, or we’d be thinkin’ you were some kind o’ government agent or somethin’.” He lifted himself back up to his feet and prepared to leave at last. He seemed to fill the room, and the rickety floor rocked under him. “We’re here for you, Mac, you remember that. I’m leavin’ you here with *Niall* because you’re okay with that, although you’re pretty damned tense about it all. But if he gives you any grief, call me. Dylan’ll be outside day ’n night. Damned dog can’t stop sniffin’ around the trailers recently.” He darted another glare toward the kitchen and Greg, though there was more calculation in his look this time. “And I ain’t happy with leavin’ that kid in here with you, either.”

“He’s okay, he’s not a problem now. Someone will send instructions for him, I expect. But there’s still someone out there, the one who was to blame for the shooting.”

Junk raised an eyebrow. “Maybe. Reckon I’m better off relyin’ on Dylan’s instincts, myself.”

I smiled. “The dog? I’m not sure he can track someone who’s long gone.”

I didn’t understand Junk’s grimace, but he stretched and yawned and the moment passed. “So you got this *someone* on their way? You gonna be leavin’ with ’em?”

It had been a mild enough comment, but I looked up at him quickly. “That’s not on my ‘to do’ list. You after my trailer? Because it’ll cost you.”

He laughed even more loudly, and Dylan twisted his head around to gaze at him. “This piece o’ shit? I wouldn’t let Dylan sleep in here, let alone any fuckin’ human. You only got it ’cause no one else would touch the repairs. And I get the hint, no discussion about your strangely official-looking friends.” He turned towards the door. “You sure you’ll be okay with Mr. Charm? You can trust him?”

The description of Niall made me smile, albeit wearily. “Whatever I think about Niall, there’s no one I’d trust more than him if I were in danger. No one I’d rather have on my side.”

Junk raised an eyebrow. “Can’t make you out, Mac. You’re full o’ mixed messages. Despite you sayin’ that, it seems you’re not sure. If he’s on your side, that is.”

Before I could even think up a reply, he moved away, clicking his fingers for Dylan to follow. He nodded very slightly to Niall as he passed, and the door squeaked shut behind him.

Tuesday 20.35

THE rest of the day was a bit of a blur. The painkillers seemed to have been mixed for a patient the size of a small bush elephant, thus knocking me out of action for most of the afternoon. I was conscious of Niall moving around the trailer, and at one point there was the smell of food. But it only made me nauseous again, and I let myself drift back to sleep. Voices were only murmurs in the back of my semi-conscious mind. Then, finally, I wakened properly.

The light in the room was dim. I peered over at my watch on the table. Someone had obviously taken it off my wrist when they sewed and bandaged me up. I was startled to see it was already late.

Niall sat across from the couch, cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by his precious papers. He'd shucked off his shoes and socks and had changed into a thin white undershirt over his jeans. For a second or twelve, I watched how the muscles tightened across his shoulders, how the ends of his dark hair teased at the exposed nape of his neck.

"Hey?" My throat was dry but my voice sounded stronger than before. He looked up at the sound of it, and his expression was completely unguarded. Maybe that was the same for both of us. I sank swiftly—surprisingly!—into the concern I saw in his eyes. Then he got up, slowly straightening as if he'd kept that position for some hours, and came over to the couch. His hand brushed quickly but efficiently across my brow.

"Your temperature has gone down a little. You've been pretty feverish. The wound seems better too."

"You dressed it again?" I looked down at my arm, a little groggily. The bandages were clean and unstained, and rather better wrapped than Hans' earlier efforts. I was also wearing an old blue tee shirt I'd forgotten I had. Niall had presumably grabbed the first thing in

a drawer, just to cover me up with some extra warmth. Maybe it was the effect of the drugs, or the shock, or God knows what, but it felt good to think of his hands on me again, on my skin, working on me. Albeit for medical reasons.

Get a life, MacKay. Get a new life.

I heard Niall say “I’ll get you some water,” and I nodded dumbly.

“SO WHAT have you found?” I was propped a little more comfortably now on the couch—Niall was far more efficient with the cushions than Junk had ever been—and was toying with the idea of getting up and moving around some more. Didn’t know how Doctor Sutherland would feel about that. He’d already helped me hobble to the toilet, and I’d been impressed with the way I showed off my recovery, like I managed not to fall down more than once, and I tried hard not to wince at the stiffness in my limbs. But I needed to change my sweats, and I needed something filled with more caffeine than water, and I needed—

Anyway. At least my brain felt back on the right track.

Niall was sitting back on the floor, although he’d shifted around to face me. The papers were in neat piles, and he had a transcript opened up on his lap. “Brad seems to have found a hacker in our e-mail system. Some confidential memos had been diverted to another e-mail address. It bypasses the normal security prompts, though fairly clumsily. Depending on how long this tag was in place, they would have had access to everything we planned.” He twisted the paper as if it might make more sense the other way up. The gesture made me smile. It was so very unlike the precise Niall I worked with.

Had worked with.

“But it’s unintelligible.” He frowned. “A numeric address, with no obvious key.” It obviously frustrated the hell out of him, not being able to find a solution on his own. “This isn’t my area, computer investigation. Maybe the address is purely random, but I hoped it might have a clue as to the perpetrator.”

“Human nature doesn’t like random,” I said, matter-of-factly. “People can’t resist setting up addresses that reflect something about them personally, even if it’s a code. In reality, the most secure passwords are those based on whatever happens to be on your desk that day. Think up anything more easily memorable than that, and you start to let yourself slip. But that’s what people do.”

“They fear not remembering at all?”

I nodded. He was watching my face, and the leap of pleasure in my chest at sharing things with him again was disturbing. “Pass it over here,” I said. “We can try it out on my warped mind, right? It’s the sort of puzzle that’ll help to while away my injured hours.”

He looked unconvinced, or maybe he was too possessive of this whole thing.

“Niall.” I very carefully kept the emotion from my voice. “Neither of us wanted this to happen, did we? Neither of us feels comfortable, thrown together like this. Fuck it, neither of us wanted to see the other again this side of Armageddon. But you’re here now, and we’re in danger, and if there’s one thing I know, it’s that we can work well together if we put all the personal crap aside.” I saw him shift uncomfortably, but I hurried on before I lost my nerve. “Don’t have any other choice, do we, until we can get in touch with someone to bail us out. Look, I know I’ve been the worse culprit, always prodding, always angry with you.” *Call me childish, I deserve it.* “But like you said before, this is too important to be hampered by my resentful shit.”

He took a very deep breath. Then he nodded. “Like a truce,” he said, softly. I couldn’t really gauge the tone of his comment, but I didn’t hear any overt sarcasm. His eyes looked full of confusion. I didn’t think I saw hostility, but then let’s face it, I’d been wrong before. We just had to be pragmatic about this. We had to swallow our personal antipathy and knuckle down to solving this situation.

“A truce,” I agreed. “We need to face the crisis together. I can be sensible about it.”

Why did I think that was the biggest crock of shit I’d served up since this all began?

“SO WHAT did Judith say?” I hadn’t been able to ask while Junk was still around, and then I’d been out of action for all those hours. I wasn’t sure I liked the answering frown on Niall’s face.

“I couldn’t reach her. Cissy said she didn’t know where she was.”

“Crap,” I said, with some enthusiasm.

“Tanner, I know. It’s likely that Cissy does know. But she’s not saying.”

“She’s very protective of Judith. Always has been.” Cissy was Judith’s friend as well as her assistant. And Judith inspired the best in people.

Niall hesitated, then spoke again. “There’s been another attack. A letter bomb, sent yesterday to Judith.”

“Shit! Anyone hurt?”

“Judith’s okay, apparently. But this time it got all the way to her office. Cissy wasn’t on post duties, apparently, and the new junior didn’t know enough to guess what it was. It blew up in his hands. He’s in the hospital now, though they think he’ll be okay. But Cissy was very shaken. She says they’re evacuating the main building and bringing in Government security forces.”

“Where has Judith gone, then? Has she gone into hiding?” I realized for maybe the first time that I knew very little about Judith’s personal life. Where she lived, who she cared about. Who cared for her in return. Who she dated, if she dated. “How do we really know she’s okay? And who the fuck is doing all this?” I was totally perplexed. “Just one thing after another, all aimed at the Project Team. What the hell is this all about, Niall?”

His voice was tired. “I don’t know. Cissy also asked where Greg was. As if she didn’t know he’d been here. As if—”

“As if *Judith* didn’t know he was here.” I knew our thoughts were in accord. “So it obviously wasn’t an official visit.”

And it was then that I realized we were all alone in the trailer.

YEAH, I don't know why it took me so long to notice we no longer had our visitor with us. Blame the drugs, blame my distraction with someone else. But there was no Greg hovering in the corner of my living room, no frightened protests, no wide young eyes pleading with me to believe him. No Dylan, guarding him for me.

"He's gone, then?"

Niall nodded. "While I was talking to Cissy, she got an e-mail message from Simon saying to send Greg back as soon as possible. It was very urgent, so she said. I protested we hadn't really finished questioning him—but Cissy insisted."

When Cissy insisted, it was the equivalent of Judith's own orders.

"The dog—Dylan—was nosing around outside, under your trailer. Greg was so damned nervous about him that I had to ask one of Junk's girls to see him safely off the site. He said he had a car parked just outside the perimeter. He'll be okay to get himself back." He saw my frown. "He had no more information for us, Tanner. He didn't see the attacker in detail. I saw no reason to hold him any longer."

"So did you talk to Simon?" I was a little alarmed at all the things that had been going on while I'd been out of it.

"I tried, but no luck. Seems Simon is in hiding now, too, the same as we are. Or else he's looking for Brad." His voice shook, surprising me. "The whole damned Team seems to have gone AWOL! No one's answering the security cell numbers, no one's left any messages as to where they are or what their orders are."

Running scared. Not something Niall Sutherland would have much tolerance for. We may have handled dangerous situations in the Project Team, but these direct—and potentially murderous—attacks on us were something else. But I was surprised that Judith wasn't pulling things together. "How was Cissy?"

"Still disturbed. Evasive." He looked carefully at me but said no more. He stretched the muscles of his shoulders, and the shirt tightened across his torso. His hair looked less than neat. I felt a shiver run through my body.

“Something’s really odd here, Niall. Judith hiding away, Simon on the run too. Still no word from Brad.”

“Joe in the hospital.”

“Yeah. Everyone’s been affected, yet there doesn’t seem to be any common factor. We’re just being isolated, one by one. It’s sort of clumsy, but whoever’s organized this, they’ve known just how to strike at us. They’ve infiltrated Judith’s own office—her inner sanctum. Threatened her staff. That’s exactly what would really distress and disturb her. Then they’ve split Simon and Brad apart, breaking down any communication between them. Again, the worst thing for those two to cope with. They tried to hit you at home, as if they knew what a familiar base would mean to you, and the misery of losing it. And it’s been a blow to Joe’s confidence too. One of his greatest frustrations must be immobility.”

“And you?”

I shrugged. “Guess I’m pissed they found me in the first place. I was rather hoping to savor my own space just a little longer.”

Niall made the smallest of noises, like he’d stubbed a toe or something.

“I don’t think we should try to contact the Team again,” I said, quite firmly, despite the sick churn of nausea that was resurrecting in my gut. “I want to wait for some of them to contact *us*, you know?” What was I trying to say? Basically, I was worried about who to trust.

“So you also think the threat is coming from an inside source,” Niall said. “Someone who knows us well.”

For a moment, all we did was stare at each other.

AN HOUR later, we’d finished several more glasses of water and eaten some soup and thick slices of ham and buttered toast—Junk’s family had restocked my paltry larder with rather embarrassing riches—but the words and numbers on the reports were now swimming before my eyes.

“You should sleep again,” Niall said. He’d have made a useless nurse, really. His bedside manner sounded like military command, not concern. But I didn’t react, didn’t have the energy. It had been a long day.

“Not yet. Sleep when I die,” I said, not caring how that might sound or how close I might actually have been to that. I could feel the edges of something tingling in my mind as I searched the mystery e-mails and the scribbled notes from Brad. “This threat. It’d have to be someone senior, someone with access to everything.” When I registered a fresh silence in the room, I looked up. “What are you thinking, Niall?”

“You know whose name keeps cropping up here? In all this mess. In all these unusual events.”

“No.” Wasn’t sure if I were being entirely truthful. That shiver was back, plucking icy fingers down my spine.

“Simon is pivotal to this,” he said. He’d dropped his eyes to some papers on his lap, but I knew he didn’t want to meet my gaze.

What the fuck?

“He knows everything about the Team.” Niall’s words plowed on, even though he looked like they left a foul taste in his mouth. “How it works, what the missions are. He’s the closest to Judith, sharing most of the strategy with her. He always knows where we all are. He *brought* me here, for God’s sake.”

“Sure, but that’s not sinister. He’s at risk, too, he’s just as upset as we are.” *Wasn’t he?* “He has Brad in the field, in danger.” I could feel an indigestible mixture of fear and anger rising up in me. *We came here because we can trust you*, Simon had told me, his tone genuine, his expression honest. “How can you even think that one of us would do this?”

“I don’t want to.” Niall sounded wretched now, but dogged too. “Don’t you believe that? But then we see one of his guys creeping around the site and acting suspiciously when we try to probe him for identification of your attacker. Not sent officially, it seems. Then he’s called back, out of our hands, before we can find out any more. By an e-mail from Simon, with no further explanation.”

“So...?”

“Simon’s the only one who hasn’t been targeted so far.” Niall was shaking his head, as if he were arguing with himself. “Brad’s notes are full of discussions he had with Simon about where the original attacks may have been planned, none of which seem to have been reported officially. Simon could organize anything he wished. He has access to all the Department’s resources—”

“No!” Why did my head ache so much at the thought? Why was I even listening to such crap?

“He could do all of this,” Niall said. “He has the ability, the intelligence. His previous... career... was dubious. He’d still have that knowledge.”

“Shut the fuck up! Why the hell would he behave like this? Threaten us? Attack us?”

“I have no idea,” was Niall’s reply. He ran a hand through his thick, dark hair. “Just thinking aloud, I guess.” Some of the papers slid off his lap, but he didn’t bother to pick them back up. His whole body looked rigid with tension. I knew the look too well to mistake it. Anger and distress. For once, I wasn’t the cause.

“I can’t accept that, Niall. I trust him.”

“So do I.” He looked back up at me then, and his eyes were full of misery and frustration. “But how do we know what’s really going on in people’s minds?”

I stared back, almost challenging him not to take that thought any further. “Don’t talk about it again.”

“Okay,” he said.

The room fell silent again, but now the air was charged with shock and confusion.

And more damned *fear*.

I needed to rest. But I had ideas and worries in my head, and quite a few other disturbing gremlins. Time had been passing in a very disjointed way, and I wanted time to marshal my thoughts before the evening passed altogether.

Niall came over to take the glass from my hand. I hadn't realized it was slipping in the first place, but I'd sunk further down on the couch. He stood above me for a moment, looking down on my tired body. "I'm okay," I muttered. I was annoyed. Shattered. Defensive. Fuck knows what else.

"I know," he said, surprising me with his calm tone. "He did a good job. Hans, the mysterious doctor. You're okay indeed."

I smiled slightly. First time he'd really acknowledged the community around me. "They're good people here. A little far from convention, of course, but they've all welcomed me. Junk's a friend. A helpful guy—"

"He may well be," Niall broke in dryly. "But I'm talking about the guy that *you* are."

"Huh?"

Niall shook his head, and smiled in return. "How do you *do* it, Tanner?"

"Do what?"

"It never ceases to amaze me." His voice was quiet; perhaps he thought he should be lowering it in the presence of invalids. "The way you get on with people, the way you blend in wherever you are. I've seen you with politicians and diplomats, and they accept you easily and discuss the relevant mission points with you. Then you're *here*, and just as much a part of this community as with the Team."

I shifted awkwardly. Didn't sound like the usual abuse. Didn't sound like the Niall I'd invited into my home less than forty-eight hours ago. Didn't sound like the guy whose jaw I once punched. "People are more tolerant than they're given credit for, you know."

"You have a gift," he continued, as if I hadn't spoken. He swallowed hard. "I always envied it."

I just stared. His eyes were fastened on my mouth, as if he waited to see what might spill out of it. I remembered that as a habit of his—especially when he wanted me. It had been too long since I'd seen that look of desire without it being mixed up and corrupted by a hell of a lot of other, less comfortable feelings. But it seemed he wasn't exactly

putting out the welcome mat. In fact he looked confused... uncertain. A little shocked. Like he had when he'd arrived with the other guys, his home just having crumbled around his ears. But this time, I didn't think he was thinking about his fixtures and fittings.

It was the first time for a long time that I'd stopped to consider how Niall Sutherland might be feeling about *me*.

Then he seemed to realize that he'd spoken rather uncharacteristically; a flush appeared high on his cheeks, and his scowl returned. "Whatever. I think I must be overtired too. I meant to tell you, the girl called here earlier. Is it Sheri?" I nodded confirmation. "She called several times, actually. Brought more food in for us both, for supper. I'm afraid your share is congealing in the kitchen."

"She's a friend," I said, just for something to fill the quietness. There were strange reactions rippling in my chest cavity like butterflies trapped in a jar.

He smiled again, a little wistfully. "She likes you, Tanner. A little more than a friend, I think." His gaze darted uncertainly over me. I was suddenly very conscious of a trickle of sweat just below my throat; I noticed I had a smattering of golden toast crumbs in the creases of my sweats. What were the flickers of emotion I could see in his eyes? What the hell was wrong with me, thinking Niall Sutherland and *wistfully* in the same mental sentence?

He cleared his throat. "Anyway, she went to help Greg off the park, so she's not been around here since. I'll go get your bed ready. I hope your friends will leave you in peace for a while. We need to get you through this night as calmly as possible."

He turned away, rather abruptly.

I wondered whether this 'truce' business was really going to be one of my brighter ideas.

Tuesday 23:07

I STIRRED in bed, biting back a groan as I accidentally nudged my bruised arm against the wall. The room was semi-dark, strangely shadowed. The moonlight was diffused by clouds, but there was additional illumination from the lights of other, nearby trailers, reflecting through my bedroom window. I'd made it to my own bed in the end, laying myself carefully on top of the sheets, keeping my undershirt and sweats on. Niall was taking the couch. Or at least, that's where I left him. I lay on the thin mattress, wide awake from the many thoughts and feelings that had fuck all to do with the knitting wound on my arm, and then his silhouette appeared at the doorway.

"I'm still okay," I said a little tersely, in case he thought I needed some more of his special brand of reluctant nursing. Hell, I could get myself to the toilet now, couldn't I? The painkillers were doing their work again, and even if my mind were working overtime, most of my body felt a pleasant lassitude.

I couldn't sleep, though.

"I had to consider that, you know," he said. His face was in full shadow but his teeth glinted quickly in the dimness. "About Simon."

"I know." I didn't say anything else. After all, we were in 'truce' mode, weren't we? That was a good enough reason to bite back any sharp reply I might have discovered inside my restless brain. But I was also recognizing something else seeping its way into the dealings we had with each other. This current crisis was like a mission in itself—and both of us had emphasized the importance of finding our way through it. The mission was taking precedence over any hostile feelings we had for each other. And wasn't that how it should be?

"You were right. We'd better stay put." I could hear a muffled laugh and a friendly shout, somewhere far over the other side of the park; I thought I could hear the jangle of a dog tag and a sleepy snuffle

outside. Probably Dylan still keeping watch. “We’ll wait for a call from Judith. We’re probably as safe here as anywhere, with people watching out for us. Maybe the attacker will think we’ve run out. Maybe it’ll be a bluff.”

“A double bluff, in case we actually do,” he said. Another glint of teeth in a small smile.

“Yeah. Something like that.” I shifted again on the bed and wondered why I felt vulnerable. I was fully clothed, I was in my own place, and no one had tried to kill me for several hours. “There must be a motive to be found, Niall. We need to talk to the other guys. We need to do some more thinking.”

“Tomorrow,” came his murmur. He didn’t move away from the doorway, though.

I rolled away to face the wall, protecting my bad arm this time. Wished I had some more of those elephant tablets. I could feel his eyes on me; I could smell the soft cleanliness of soap on his skin. I knew how his thin shirt would feel against my fingers if I moved to peel it off over his head. I knew how his dark hair would spring back on his head and then fall forward on to his brow again. I knew how his deep-hued eyes would flash at me as I pushed his torso back against the pale cotton sheet.

I remembered too, too many words in the darkness.

“Get some sleep,” I said, a little hoarsely.

Let me be.

I ROLLED over on to my back and sighed. It beat holding my breath. The trying to sleep was still a big fail, even after another hour or so. And Niall was at my doorway again. He’d been there for the last few minutes. I turned my head to acknowledge him. “Hey, you. Can’t you sleep?”

“No.” This time, he stepped into the room. His breath seemed loud in the silence. “But then, neither can you.”

I smiled to myself. He was damned right. “The wound’s nagging me, I guess.”

“It might be leaking. I’ll dress it again.”

He sat carefully on the edge of my bed, so I had to roll over further to give him space. He already held the bandages, and his movements were smooth and efficient. I watched his hands work, long fingers wrapping the cloth around me, palms brushing against my bare skin. “Very little leakage,” he said. “It’s healing well.”

It didn’t hurt very much at all now, but I didn’t reply. My tongue felt thick in my mouth. That, or someone had cauterized my vocal chords in the last two minutes.

“When you were hit,” he said, and then paused. “Shit.”

I grimaced in the dim light, trying to see his expression.

“It was shock, obviously,” he said, as if he talked to himself. “I don’t know why else I felt so bad.”

Huh?

“Three months, Tanner. I’ve not seen you for three months. Now I see you for a couple of days, under protest, for God’s sake, both of us uncomfortable with it all, both of us really pissed....”

“Yeah,” I said, my tongue having returned to life. “Ditto.”

“But I didn’t expect to feel this way.” He was looking away from me now, the unused roll of white bandage forgotten on his lap. His head tilted back, and I saw the silhouette of his throat as he swallowed. “I never thought being here with you would be this hard.”

“Niall,” I said. Rather ironically for me, I was beginning to realize just how hard it *wasn’t*. “Did you do that? When I went down. Did you cover me with your body?”

He was silent for a moment. He pressed his hands on his thighs and the mattress shifted under him. “There could have been more than one shot. I didn’t know how badly you’d been hit. You were an open target there on the ground.”

Explanations. But not excuses.

“It was a fucking stupid thing to do,” I said. I don’t think I meant to say it aloud.

Astonishingly, he laughed. “Yes, it was. It was the shock, like I said. I couldn’t believe how I felt when I saw you go down—when I saw your body fold against the bullet.” He looked at me then, and even in the dark I could see his expression. His eyes spoke for him. *I thought you were dead.*

I pulled myself up to sitting. The clean, fresh binding felt good, and strength was returning to my limbs. He stayed where he was, so we were almost face to face, less than a foot apart. “Guess we’re quits then.”

He looked bemused.

“That’s how I felt when you got stabbed.” *I’ll never forgive myself for it.* “And I’d have sat up in the night, dressing your wounds, like you’ve done for me. Whatever you needed. I’d have done it, Niall.” *Whatever the fuck it took.* “Just so happened you wanted some other nurse’s attention.”

“But I didn’t.”

I shrugged as if to say “why are we dragging this up again”?

He shuddered slightly. “Then again, I don’t know if I did. It was a terrible time. I didn’t know *what* I wanted. It was like everything changed then. Everything was distorted.”

“I thought you said you didn’t want the mission post-mortem again,” I said weakly.

He wasn’t listening. “I wasn’t much support to you, was I? I lost sight of it all. You suffered because of me, as well as suffering yourself.” His eyes shone in the darkness with a vivid fierceness. “I never meant you to.”

I stared at him, seeing the faint glow of reflected light around the shape of his rigid body. What the fuck was he going on about? “You were the one who was injured, Niall.”

He shook his head, a quick, dismissive movement. “My body was. But you were in shock. I didn’t understand your distress. I couldn’t see it.”

I leaned slightly toward him, fascinated. “You’ve never talked like this before.”

“I should have done. Joe told me a few home truths, only recently.”

I bristled; my whole body tensed. He must have felt it, but he continued on regardless. There was a strange wildness to his tone, like he was running toward a cliff, and he knew damned well he was heading for the edge, but he didn’t slow down. “He told me there were other things I should have accounted for, not just the physical effects of the stabbing. He told me you would have been in shock, too, from the attack, from the investigation. I just saw your behavior and took you at face value. I never credited anything beyond that.”

I didn’t know anything about that. I’d been in shock? Well of course I had, but that was *my* problem. Daresay it was some syndrome that the head shrinkers had in their textbooks, but right then, I didn’t have time for it, did I? *Don’t make me think about it.* I didn’t want to now, I didn’t want to then; I’d been a little mad. Maybe more than a little.

Am I the last to be honest with myself? I gazed at Niall like he was the only thread holding me to the planet. *My carelessness nearly got you killed. Who’s missing the point, me or you?*

He was oblivious. “There was a hell of a lot I didn’t understand, Tanner. I know that’s no excuse, but I don’t know how I was meant to keep up. You were always so difficult to capture, like quicksilver. Quick in your responses, in your reactions. I was always several steps behind. I felt like dross beside you.”

“Crap!” The cry was dragged from me. “It wasn’t you, it was *me*. I felt a fool set against you. Lightweight. You said as much yourself.”

“But I never meant it.” He sounded very weary.

“Maybe not. I provoked you.”

He nodded so slightly I only just caught it. “We brought out the worst in each other.”

I nodded, more to myself than him. “Sometimes.” He’d laid his hand on the sheet now, a few inches from my own. I looked down at it, at the splayed fingers, at the tendons tight with tension across the back of his hand.

“Yes,” he agreed. “Sometimes.”

And the best....

“And the best.” It was an uncanny echo of my thoughts. Astonishing that it should be Niall—Mr. Silence-is-Golden—who now spoke so openly. “I just... wanted you, Tanner. Desperately. *Always*. In any way possible. Never stopped to think things through sensibly. Never spent enough time getting to know you properly.”

I tried to breathe normally, but my chest felt as if it were in a vice. He was speaking my own thoughts; he was laying open my own regrets.

He turned toward me again, a strong muscular shape in the half dark room. His voice had softened. “You look better. There’s color in your face.”

“Soon back to normal,” I said too brightly. *If some sniper doesn’t get me first.*

“The fight,” he said. “I regret it. Bitterly.”

“Yeah.” *So do I*, my heart screamed at me, but the words were still in the mire of self-pity at the back of my throat. “But that’s all over now, isn’t it? We’re both agreed on that.” I stared again at the dapples of shadow running over the skin of his hand. I knew my own hand ached to reach out and touch him. What was happening here to me? To *us*? My head remembered the hurtful shit, yet my body ached from the sensual memory of him.

“It was just so painful, Tanner. Such confusion.” His voice had an unfamiliar break in it. “To see you withdrawing from me—to see your awkwardness with me.”

“Better we parted,” I said very quietly. I didn’t want to discuss this; I didn’t want to hear this. “Guess we could have chosen a slightly less public way to do it, though.”

“Yes,” he said. “Definitely would have been better without the audience.” He laughed, but with no real humor. Sighing, he shifted on the bed and the bandages fell to the floor with a soft thump, rolling over against the wall. His hand opened on top of the sheet beside me, then fisted up again.

“How did it get so bad, Niall?” I was surprised again to hear my words aloud.

“I can’t tell you.”

“No of course you damned well can’t—”

“No,” he interrupted. “Because you won’t let me. I can’t find the words like you can. Never could. I may have been too quick to judge you, but then you never gave me time to find out to the contrary. You’re so abrasive sometimes.”

I pursed my mouth. “You’re not exactly sweetness and light yourself.”

And then he laughed again, genuinely, startling me afresh. “I don’t think I ever was, was I? You’re right. God knows how we ever got together in the first place.”

But we did.

His eyes met mine and held my gaze, demanding, perhaps, that I didn’t chicken out. There was a triangle of light in the center of each of his dark pupils, like someone had drawn him as a wide-eyed cartoon in the night. “It’s still not easy, is it? There’s too much—or not enough—between us. I’m sorry that all this is happening to you because of me. That I’m the target, not you. That you can’t continue on your search for your own space without my hindrance.”

The pained edge in his voice hurt me. And yet his eyes were still hungry. They drank me in, as if he’d been heavily dehydrated but now found relief. Things were shifting in my mind like a kaleidoscope. My memory of our relationship was taking on a new tone.

“Don’t be,” I said. “Don’t be sorry, that is. Whatever happens with this, I know I can trust you.”

“But you didn’t always before.”

“No,” I replied. Couldn’t trust *myself* at the moment, to know what was right.

“I... didn’t see that I had to justify myself to you, Tanner. About Joe, about anything. You should have known me better.”

Yeah. Maybe I should. Self-disgust crushed me, regret twisted its knife. “I was stupid. End of story.”

He shook his head very gently, and I felt the vibration in the air as we leaned in toward each other. I don’t know what happened next—or rather, I don’t know why we let it. It was as if something tugged at me against my will, as if both of us were lassoed and drawn in for capture, like hapless, dumb animals. The mattress creaked beneath us, and I felt a gentle crick in my neck as it stretched itself. Just a foot or so between us, didn’t I say? Our breath bridged it, combining in the cool night air. Our words were just whispered sound, our protests melted into raw emotion.

His hands never touched me, nor did I reach out those last few inches to hold him. The only things that touched were our mouths. Hesitantly, like bashful new lovers. Lips dry with caution, yet damp with need. Lips that knew each other’s intimately, yet had forgotten the pure pleasure of the touch. It was like the taste of darkness and fear and ecstasy, all combining together with the wash of heartache and lust. The skin of his cheek smoothed mine; the slight bristles of my neglected chin scraped across his jaw. I felt his eyelashes brush at my eyes as my lids closed beneath him.

His tongue nudged at my lips, and they parted. He slid the tip in alongside mine, his breath expelling into my mouth with a sigh of desire. We melded even closer, mouths together like a single caress, our shoulders now pressing against each other with perfect choreography, allowing the familiar twist of our bodies to draw the other in.

It was like coming home.

THE flame of desire consumed me. I swear I could feel its heat like a real fire. I'd been fairly lukewarm about this part of my life since my flight from the Team. Not that there hadn't been the occasional opportunities at the park for sexual adventure. There'd been guys passing through without demands or emotional baggage to overload me, and sometimes a healthy interest in me in return. But I'd never taken anything further, never wanted anyone that much. Never got over the memories, perhaps, or had been fighting shy of the hassle. Something like that. Whatever. Now I heard the thread of a moan, and at first I couldn't have told whether it were from me or Niall.

It was him; it was only a gasp. "Tanner."

No. Don't say anything. Some shock that I should be the one to think that, huh? My hand slipped behind his neck and my tongue plunged back into his mouth, effectively silencing him. There was urgency and desperation now in our caress. I could taste the slightly sharp tang of his saliva, could feel his strong fingers gripping my good arm. When he leaned even further into me, I fell back on the bed quite willingly, pulling his body down on to mine.

He felt so good! He'd lost weight I think, same as I had; at least, I felt the definition of his muscles much more sharply under the thin fabric of his shirt. He wriggled to avoid my bandaged arm, but I grabbed him back against me. His mouth snatched at my lower lip, his teeth grazing the skin, and his tongue pulled out of my mouth to run down my jaw and neck. I bared my throat, pushing my head back on the thin pillow. My nipples were hard, sensitive nubs, spiking through the fabric of my own shirt, brushing painfully against his chest.

Hold me.... Touch me....

It was the return of that hungry, unadulterated lust I'd known and loved so well. There'd never been any doubt that Niall was the only one who did that to me, the one who made my head swim and my body leap with both greed and need. But it felt different this time, as if there were some other demand inside me that I'd never heeded before. His

hands ran down and under my body, tracing the tight lines of my straining thighs, kneading the flesh of my ass as if to memorize the knots and valleys of the muscles. My back arched up to meld myself against him. The sweats were tight across my groin; it had been a very long time since I'd had such a fierce erection. Every nerve I possessed screamed out to be touched by him; every whorl of my fingertips remembered the sensual feel of his dusky, hot skin.

But then my hands braced themselves against his shoulders and I brought it all to a halt.

He responded immediately. His hands stilled on me, and his tongue lifted its damp trail from my throat. A small groan slipped from his mouth. I was just panting loudly, unable to restrain it.

"No," I gasped.

"No?" His murmur was a question, but his eyes met mine in the darkness, and I hoped my expression spoke eloquently enough for me. I was aiming a fairly shameful plea for his understanding. This couldn't be. This was what always got me into trouble, what had always obscured everything, distorted everything, *enchanted* everything. If I opened this rich, ecstatic treasure chest again, I'd never be able to get him out of my system.

Never be able to hate him again.

He reared above me for what seemed like long moments, his chest heaving with deep breaths, his plumped lips glistening with moisture. There were emotions flickering in his eyes that I couldn't make out, thoughts and questions alike. I thought he might ignore my protest—that he might just lean back down and strip away my pathetic opposition with his mouth and hands. Let's face it. I'd not have put up much of a fight. My resistance was all intellectual. My true reactions sprang from the pure, delicious instinct of desire.

But he didn't ignore me. The mattress complained again as he clumsily climbed off my legs and stood up beside the bed.

"Do you want me to apologize?" he said hoarsely.

I shook my head, dumbly. *Of course the fuck not.* I wanted to protest that I'd been a willing partner in it—I really was! —but my mouth seemed too dry to work properly.

“Good,” he said. “Though I realize that was an appalling loss of control. It won't happen again, I promise you.” He pulled his shirt back down over a tantalizing glimpse of his tight belly, and he ran a hand back through his messed hair. “I never felt any differently about you, Tanner, even when our behavior was so disgraceful, so destructive. I don't expect you to believe that, but I want to say it. I think I should have said a lot of things, actually, and a hell of a lot earlier than now. But that's another regret I'll live with.”

He turned and walked to the door, and he didn't turn around again. He took his magnificent body and his rare, astonishing new openness, and—*fuck*—I let him go. His silhouette filled the door, blocking the fractured light from the next room's windows for another brief second, and then he passed out of sight.

I calmed my breathing; I adjusted my sweats. I cursed to myself in every language I'd ever picked up.

And then the cell phone rang again, a shrill buzz in the distant corner of the trailer.

Wednesday 00:05

I STUMBLED up from my bed, but Niall had already switched on the lamp in the living room and had the cell to his ear. “Brad,” he mouthed to me, his eyes bright and wary. I nudged my way up against him, all previous touches forgotten as I struggled to hear the call for myself. Niall flipped on the loudspeaker on the handset so we could both listen.

“Where are you? Brad? Are you safe?”

Brad’s mumble stuttered through a fair amount of static interference and was at uneven volume, like he was out of breath. “Niall? Where are *you*?”

Niall’s eyes flashed to my face, far too close to his for anyone’s comfort. “I’m with Tanner.”

“With...” *crackle* “...ackay?”

“Yes.”

“Thank God.” That bit was as clear as if he stood beside us. “Have you spoken to... dith?”

“No, we—”

But Brad’s voice hurried on. “...tell her I’m on... way back now. I found the address, I found where our communica... have been... diverted to... week or so, maybe. But it was... danger... apped...”

“What?” I grabbed at the phone, trying to wrest it from Niall’s steel grip. “What’s happened?”

“... booby-trapped,” came Brad’s familiar voice, still mangled through the poor reception. “The place was booby-trapped.”

I glanced at Niall. His narrowed eyes looked back at me.

“For God’s sake, Brad,” he snapped. “My home’s been blown up and Tanner’s been shot. Tell us how you are, and where you are!”

There was an exclamation from the other end of the line, though it may just have been the coughing of a chronic connection. Then a pause. Next time Brad spoke, his words were much clearer. He'd obviously stopped in his mad flight and found a place of better reception. With the loudspeaker on, we could both hear him well. "Sorry guys. That's better." He gave a short laugh. "Never thought we'd need to use these numbers, did we?"

Niall didn't sound like he was in the mood for Brad's dry humor. "You said booby-trapped. Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine." Brad sounded dismissive. "Fairly amateur stuff, some loosened floorboards on the stairs. An electrical cable run across them, to catch me if I hadn't watched my step. Definitely a deliberate action, so it looks like I found the right place." I could see Niall itching for more details, but the specifics of a trap wouldn't have been of interest to Brad. It would've just been a hurdle to overcome, not a source of professional fascination. His voice became more excited as he described the trail he'd been following. "I guess no one had the time to follow my notes, which is a little surprising, but anyway, I knew it'd be quicker if I went myself. I tracked the address down through the ISP and it looked like someone hid out there quite recently. The computer equipment had been smashed, but it had probably been used to divert all our e-mail, as well as hacking in. But I'm afraid there were no other clues. I'd caught the communications breach fairly quickly, of course, but it also looked like they cleared out pretty fast."

"Where was the address?"

"It was out by the airport. It's an empty house we'd considered ourselves for surveillance during the early stages of Mission Dove. I remember Simon asking me to look into the local communications network. It's near that club where Niall was hurt, where that politician got his kicks until we outted the sick bastard." Brad had a refreshing lack of respect for public figures who misused their position.

"So the details would have been on file?" Niall asked. "On Simon's files?" I glared at him, but I was hanging on Brad's reply, just like he was.

“Yes,” came the answer. Brad sounded cautious. “Hey, are you guys on to something? Because if you are—”

“No,” I said swiftly, leaning further towards the mouthpiece so he could hear me more clearly. “Nothing specific. We’ll talk it through with you when we’re all together. What’s important now is that we’re all safe.” I felt Niall shift awkwardly beside me, but he didn’t add anything.

“There was a smashed laptop there too.” Brad sounded puzzled. “Like the ones we issued for the Team. Guess it’s a popular enough model.” We were quiet, and he continued. “Anyway, I rescued some e-mail records, some of them showing that encrypted e-mail address I picked up on earlier transmissions.”

“Tanner’s working on that too,” Niall said. “So now we have a place that the attackers have been using, plus a link to their e-mail. Do you have any ideas as to an identity?”

“I want to talk to Judith...” Brad’s voice was fading again, losing both volume and clarity. “Hell, I heard about the bomb at the Westbridge block, but Tanner shot? What’s been happening?”

“I wish I could tell you,” Niall said tersely. “We’re sheltering here for the moment. Tanner’s fine now, anyway. Who told you about the bomb at my place?” I frowned at him—who the hell was he to say I was fine?—but it took a few more seconds for the penny to drop as to why he was questioning Brad like that. When Simon visited the trailer, he’d told me that Brad left the Department shortly *before* the explosion, and implied they’d lost contact with him soon after that.

Brad was already replying. “I spoke to Simon just after the attack. I thought I’d better check in, and I caught him just after it happened. He told me Joe was injured, and he was planning to take Niall to a safe place. I haven’t been able to reach him since—his normal cell’s been cut off for some reason—and then I lost touch with Judith as well. I’m on my way back to base to discuss it with her. Is Simon still there with you two?”

I looked across at Niall. He seemed reluctant to answer that one, and I took the cell off of him. “No,” I said clearly. “Simon’s not here. He left after dropping Niall off. We haven’t heard from him since,

either. The last communication we had was with Cissy. There's been trouble at Judith's office, and both Judith and Simon..." I paused briefly. "...weren't around."

The words were still coming through, but from the shaking of his voice, we could tell Brad was on the move again. "I didn't realize... must find her, then. Look, Tanner, follow my notes, okay? Have a look at... which files were hacked into, which... e-mails. There was a... altern... no time to... ollow up befor... had to leave..."

"Tell me more," I urged. "Brad?"

"Got to go... can't say... kind of... ifficult to explain right... now, not sure... don't want anyone... wrong idea..."

"What?" Niall nudged at me, trying to get the cell back off me. "Are we losing him?"

"We'll call the Department if we have to, Brad." Simon had always laughingly called the Team office the "melting pot" where all information started and finished, all plans were cooked up, and all resource ingredients combined. But if he and Judith had had to leave, I'd escalate it up the line. Someone there must know what was going on. "We'll get another number for Simon, find out where he is—"

There was no mistaking Brad's response to that. His voice burst from the cell with a kind of explosive ferocity. "*No!* Don't call Simon!"

Huh?

"Don't call him!" came the cry again. "Mustn't alert..."

"What? Alert who?"

"Not sure ye... watch who... talk to..."

We stared at each other with astonishment. Niall spoke urgently into the phone. "Brad, it's someone who knows us, isn't it? Maybe these attacks aren't in their area of expertise, but they know enough to be dangerous."

There was nothing but crackle on the line. Then suddenly it ceased, and Brad's voice trickled through. "Underpass... losing connec... where's Joe?"

Startled, I replied, "In the hospital."

Brad gave a bark of a laugh, clear as day. “Then that’s where Judith will be, won’t it? Watch... rselves....” Then the contact broke completely.

That’s where Judith will be?

I clipped the cell shut. Niall swore softly.

I stood there beside him. The lamp flickered, as it sometimes did, and clicked itself off. We were back in the semi-darkness and silence. It was some godforsaken hour of the early morning, our friends and colleagues were scattered God knows where, and we were plunging ever deeper into this mess and confusion.

And, depressingly, I was still half-hard from the mere *thought* of Niall’s body next to mine.

NIALL turned back to me. His eyes were shadowed, and not just from the loss of light. “There’s nothing we can do until we can contact Judith.”

“Right,” I said. “We’ll try again in the morning.”

“Yes, that’s best.”

I stepped away from him as casually as I could, but the loss of body warmth left me feeling bereft. I realized we were having one of those coded conversations where the sentences appear to make sense but no one says exactly what they mean.

“What did Brad mean about Simon?” I blurted out the words without thinking. It was a while since I’d had someone to talk things through with, and it was worrying the hell out of me. “I still can’t believe Simon has anything to do with it. Surely *Brad* wouldn’t believe it. He must be beside himself with worry about the guy.”

“No one bothered following up on Brad’s notes,” Niall said. “He said himself that was surprising. If he hadn’t gone out after the hideout himself, it would’ve stayed hidden for who knows how long.”

“And Simon holds all the information,” I said. A miserable thought, but how could I ignore the facts? “Brad knows that, too, of

course. He didn't want to tell us anything before he speaks to Judith. There's *something* on his mind."

"Watch yourselves, he said. Watch who we talk to." Niall was looking at the cell nestled in his palm, but his gaze wasn't truly focused. "We'd better get some sleep now."

Neither of us moved.

"Niall. About earlier...."

"Yes?" He pursed his lips.

I remembered their taste and groaned inside. "Look, there are things *I* should have said, you know."

"Really?"

It jolted me a bit, to see him smiling, but the nagging inside me insisted I continue. "So, okay, I mean that there were *better* things I should have said. I know I talk a lot, but often it's shit. Most of it's hiding the real stuff. And the fight... well, it wasn't the first time we fought, was it? I always pushed at you, way too much. Then never gave us a proper chance to see it through."

He looked at me warily, as if I might suddenly turn aggressive like Dylan and bite him. As if he didn't entirely believe I could carry on a properly controlled personal conversation. I didn't like to admit he might be right.

"Tanner." He sighed. "You just never seemed to believe anything I had to say. When I finally gathered my thoughts into words, it was as if you listened with only half an ear. And then you'd be gone before I could elaborate. You never told me what the hell things were really about—what you wanted from me. Never gave me enough to go on." He didn't sound as accusing as he might have done. Just a bit bemused. *Sad.*

"Yeah. And of course, that's exactly what I accused *you* of." I guess I'd known I was doing it, even at the time. We'd argue, and then if he didn't come back immediately with what I wanted to hear... well, I went out to nurse my own conclusions. I'd thought him the withdrawn one, but then I rode roughshod over whatever he came up with anyway.

Fucking mess it all was.

“Didn’t give us a proper chance,” I repeated dully. “I just wanted you, too, Niall—at any cost. Didn’t think we needed more than that.”

We were silent for a moment. I yawned, wondering if I’d be able to get back to sleep, wondering if I could persuade my newly awakened libido to take a virtual cold shower.

“We worked well enough together.” His voice broke into my thoughts, slow and careful. “We respected each other, admired each other. Enjoyed each other’s company. It was always a hell of a lot more than the sex.”

Startled, I stared at him.

“As far as I was concerned, anyway. I didn’t think it needed saying.” He looked defensive. “Of course, that was the problem. I know I’m too introspective for your liking. I was never a match for you.”

“What?”

He shifted his feet. I wasn’t used to seeing Niall Sutherland uncomfortable. “I’m not going to admit I bored you, Tanner, but it felt like it sometimes. I just dealt with things a different way, handled the pressure differently. It was increasingly obvious that you hated that.”

“Stop right there,” I said. “That’s crap. *I* was the boring one. I was the bleeding sore on the skin of your self-contained world. I was the one demanding all the attention.” *I was the burden.* I drew a deep breath. “I was the one who got careless and saw you nearly killed.”

He shook his head impatiently. “You’re still going on about that.”

“It’s been a long three months, you know? Given me time to think things through. Beat myself up some more.”

“Don’t.” He moved a step toward me. He looked pretty angry. “Now *that’s* crap! I couldn’t stand that self-pity, that blinkered view you had of it all. The business at the club was never your fault. We were working together, it could have happened at any time, to any of us there. But despite all the words you spewed out, all the fights, all the jokes—you never talked properly to me about it. We never got anything clear. And I didn’t know how to start that conversation with you, Tanner. It seemed every time I thought about trying, you were on your way out partying and the opportunity was lost.”

Another brief silence.

“They were shit,” I said. “The parties.”

“I know they were.” For a moment we wore matching, rueful smiles. “Tanner, I could tell when you were enjoying things and when you weren’t. But if you preferred to be elsewhere, I wasn’t going to beg for your time.”

“I was in the way,” I said weakly.

“Never,” he replied. “But I let you think that, I know.”

My mouth closed on the words I’d been forming. I couldn’t find anything else.

Niall lifted his face to the ceiling and sighed. “I might not have understood how you were affected by the whole attack, but I did know you were pissed at the investigation, and the stream of people coming in and out of the apartment, and the fact that things had gone so wrong.” He breathed deeply. “I let it slide, regardless. You see, I was distracted. By my own problems.”

“Shit, Niall.”

“No, let me talk. I was furious at being injured, angry that I couldn’t contribute to Mission Dove. It was important to me... to be useful. To make a difference. And now I was out of it all.” He paused a moment. “Mixed up with that, I was pissed at *you*. Pissed that I couldn’t understand you, that I couldn’t seem to be the right person for you. But I shouldn’t have left it like that. I knew you particularly resented Joe being there—and I confess I let that continue.” He looked back at me, and his hand lifted slightly from his side, like he wanted to appeal to me. “Both Joe and I were thoughtless, but it was *my* fault.”

Shit. I ran a hand around the back of my neck. “Never heard so much from you before, Niall. Hell of a dangerous time to be baring our souls.”

“I know. But that’s how it is.” He turned away. “I think we agree we’re dangerous to each other.”

I thought vividly of his fingers on my skin and his thighs pressing against mine. “There’s more than one kind of danger,” I whispered. I don’t think he heard.

WE SWITCHED the light on again, and I held the cell phone while Niall settled himself back on the couch to sleep. “Okay? Need another blanket?”

“No, this is fine. I’m fine.”

“Good. Me too.” That coded conversation again. I leaned over to flip off the lamp again. My eyes blinked, trying to accustom to the sudden darkening.

“You need your sleep, Tanner.” Niall wriggled his shoulders into the lumpy cushions, trying to get comfy. “I’m sorry I kept you awake before. This has all been... very unsettling.”

Too fucking right. I was ashamed of myself, really. Niall had shown a side of himself I’d never seen. He’d shared thoughts I never knew tumbled around inside that coolly controlled brain of his, yet I was still nursing resentment and pain that was doing me no earthly good at all. How come I was meant to have all those people-skills, but I missed so much about the man I was living with?

“I was a prick, Niall.”

He sighed. He’d turned slightly away from me so that I could only see his profile now. “So was I. It was a damned difficult time.”

“No,” I said, firmly. “I was a prick before the attack. Before I met you, really. I’ve never really bothered about looking into myself, about growing up. I just liked a good time, a joke, a thrill.” But I wasn’t as great as I thought I was, was I? “When I met you, I thought it’d all slot into place without any help. Couldn’t understand why you didn’t react the same way as I did.”

He laughed softly. “You’re a rollercoaster, MacKay. A thrill of a ride, and I don’t just mean that in a sexual sense. But you require strong nerves. I don’t always respond as quickly as you do. Or, in fact, as you’d like.”

I still thought he was being too damned kind. “That’s what I mean. Yeah, I handled it fucking badly, but I was right in thinking you

and Joe were so much better suited. Much more your type, a much better companion for you. Not as much trouble, right? Easier to get on with.”

“Tanner,” Niall muttered. “God.” He didn’t turn his head to look at me. Was he falling asleep? “I didn’t choose easy when I fell for you. But it’s what I chose, regardless.”

I was a couple of feet away, my body half turned to go back to my room, but suddenly I was frozen to the spot. I stared at him and he rolled back over until he faced me. It was like that first time, you know? When I’d first met him—when my body had shaken with reaction, when my gut had churned with the feelings he ignited in me.

“Niall.” I was hesitant, a little scared, but I knew what I wanted to say. “Come to bed with me. Now. Please.”

We stared at each other some more.

And then he pulled the blanket over him and rolled away from me again. “No.” His voice was very gentle. “You were right to stop me earlier. It’s not fair to use each other when we don’t know what we want. Neither of us would benefit from it... well, apart from the obvious. Damn.” He made a sound of frustration, struggling for those words again.

Personally, I thought his mastery of language so far had been unsurpassed.

“Okay,” I heard myself saying. “Uh... sleep well.” And I made it back to my room without either stumbling or weeping.

Fuck it, I felt like both.

Wednesday 05:27

...buzz...

THIS time it was I who scrabbled for the cell phone when it rang. It was on the floor of my bedroom, and I snatched it up, my tired eyes wincing against the onslaught of the morning sun. For a second, I forgot where I was; I just cupped the cell tightly against my ear in the hopes of not waking Niall beside me.

Then realized he wasn't. Of course.

"Niall?" someone barked.

"No," I grunted. "Tanner. And good morning to you, too, Joe Lam."

He made a growling noise on the other end of the line. "No time for your sarcasm, MacKay. Are you both safe?"

"Yeah." I was still trying to wake up properly and remember what the hell was going on. "So what's new with you?"

"I wanted to check something with Niall. I've had a chance to finish our analysis of the toxins that were used on Judith. I've also examined the debris from the Westbridge bomb to identify the explosives."

"Dammit." I groaned. "Aren't you meant to be post-operative, confined to a hospital bed?"

He grunted. This conversation was decidedly animalistic. "Things are moving on around us, MacKay, regardless of personal irritations. Brad tells me that you've been shot, and there's been the second attack on Judith's office. It's critical that we find out who's doing this and why."

"Brad's there with you?"

“Got here early this morning. He told me he spoke to you on the way.”

“And Judith’s there as well?”

“She’s also on her way, driving over with Cissy. We’ll use this place as a base for the moment. It’s well protected. We’ll gather all the Team members here and consolidate our knowledge. Is Sutherland there?”

I sat up and stretched, rolling my legs over the side of the mattress. I’d spent the night in my clothes, and although my wound was feeling much better, the muscles of my arm had stiffened up. And I’d probably been snoring—my mouth felt as if I’d been eating damp, rotting leaves all night and the skin on my cheeks felt tight. All in all, I was less than vibrant. “He’s still asleep. Tell me what you’ve discovered.”

Joe was silent for a moment, and I could just picture the look on his face, cautious and ready to disapprove. It was almost a surprise when he finally did speak to me.

“There are several concerns that I have. All of the supplies were internal—the poison, the explosives, the fuses. Even the packaging.”

“Internal? You mean from the Team’s own suppliers?”

“Indeed. To the very same specification. One of the fuses only came into our catalog at the beginning of Mission Dove. It’s very new, and was offered solely due to the links Judith has forged with the development team. I mean, it’s not publicly available anywhere else yet. Either I’m leaping to conclusions, or this has serious security implications. I also need to talk to Simon about it, to discuss the control of access to our equipment and stores.”

“Yes,” I said carefully. “You do. He’s not there yet?”

There was another pause. For the first time I could hear medical equipment beeping in the background, and distant voices echoing off plain, high hospital ceilings. “No. No one can reach him, it seems. MacKay....” He coughed. “Maybe you and Sutherland have some views on all this that may help.”

“I’ll let you know when he gets up,” I said. “Maybe we ought to come down to the hospital too. You trust me to pass all this on to Niall without losing things in the translation?” I know I sounded rather petulant, but the conversation had reopened all the previous day’s worries, like raw wounds. As Joe said, things were moving on around us regardless.

“Yes.” His voice was calm and confident. “Of course I trust you to handle the information correctly. I always have trusted you, MacKay, else I couldn’t have worked with you in the first place.”

I was temporarily speechless. There was another *beep* at the hospital end of the conversation.

“How...” I paused, trying to make my dry morning mouth work properly. “So how are *you*, Joe?”

He was quiet for a heartbeat, too, and then he laughed—a short, humorless sound. “Reports of my one legged-ness have been greatly exaggerated.”

Fuck, was that a joke? From Lam? I couldn’t help myself, a smile of relief crept across my face. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“Believe me, it’s good news to me too. It’s bad enough being out of action for several weeks, let alone giving someone the satisfaction of crippling me for life. How is Niall?”

“Not so bad,” I said. “Cuts, bruises, a little shock.”

“The truth, MacKay, not the patronizing trivia the doctors feed you here.”

I swallowed. Like I once said, Lam was a fierce guy. “He’s tense. Reactions a little slowed, a wrenched hamstring. The hearing loss has passed.”

Joe was silent. I hung on to the cell, wondering what else he’d wanted to hear.

“And what about you, Mackay?”

Me? “What the fuck do you care about me, Joe? I’m not the one got buried under the rubble with you.”

“You were shot, Brad said. If we’re still all under threat, it’s important to know what status we all are.”

Status? “I’ll tell you what status we are,” I said, gritting my teeth. “I need a fucking good bath and a decent meal. I need eight hours’ sleep, minimum. My knees are skinned like a kid’s, and my left arm has a tapestry pattern on the skin that’s seriously going to restrict any future career as a nude model. On top of that, I need Niall Sutherland out of my hair and this homicidal lunatic caught and castrated, all before breakfast. That too much to ask?”

“A certain degree of stress, then,” said Joe’s steady voice. I could see him there in the hospital bed, leg up in traction, snapping orders to simpering, too-young nurses. “I warned Judith not to place Sutherland with you, but she seemed to think I wasn’t equipped at the time to make sensible decisions regarding strategy. I didn’t think either of you would benefit from meeting up again under such circumstances.”

“And you’d fucking know about that.” I was tempted to raise my voice, though I didn’t want to wake Niall. But I wanted Joe to get the hell off the line so I could have a proper think about his news. And I wanted a coffee. Or two. Hell, I didn’t know *what* I wanted.

“Yes, I would know,” he snapped back, startling me. “Listen to me, MacKay. I have an almost pathological dislike of discussing my personal life with anyone not directly involved, but I think it’s time that I was a little more forthcoming. Maybe my change of attitude is the result of lying under a heavy wooden door, surrounded by piles of smoking rubble and knowing that someone wanted it to be even more permanent.” He cleared his throat; his voice had become rather hoarse. “You were always very hostile towards my friendship with Niall, and for a while I couldn’t understand why. But someone has recently explained to me that you may have developed some personal—and obviously irrational—jealousy of us. I thought Niall would have made everything clear to you, but then he never seemed to be very objective in his actions towards you. If you had let me explain instead—”

“Now isn’t the time, Lam,” I ground out.

He’d ignored me; he was still talking. “I mean, I can see the attraction, if I were interested in men that way, because he has a good

physique and a superb intelligence. His sense of loyalty and fine ethical standards would make him an excellent partner, personally as well as professionally.”

Roll that across me again, will you?

“Wait up, Lam. You don’t see Niall as a lover?”

“Tanner, aren’t you listening to me? I’ve no time to waste on coy confusion. No, I am contentedly heterosexual, although I don’t have my sexual preferences tattooed on my forehead, and I may not have broadcast the fact around my friends. One wonders why it should be necessary, to be honest....”

“You’ve got a girl, then?” My face felt like it was twisted in an almost painful mixture of humiliation, amazement and a grin. Sure glad I didn’t have a mirror to hand.

“Tanner.” His sigh was very protracted. “I don’t see the point of gossiping about this like schoolboys, but yes, I do have a current relationship with a woman.”

“So tell me who?” Now I wasn’t asking for anything to do with my past relationship with Niall, I was just damned curious.

“I’m not about to tell you over the telephone, MacKay. It’s obviously a private matter.”

“Neither of you want it to interfere with your professional relationship, eh?”

“Well of course we both consider that the main issue, but I hardly think....” He went silent. “MacKay, forget I said that. I despise your tactics.”

“You won’t be the first.” I grinned. I could guess now who he was dating. There weren’t many women could match the proud perfectionist Joe Lam. And it’d have to be someone who could match him in the dojo as well as the classroom. I cleared my own throat, rather self-consciously. “Guess I’ve been a prize asshole, haven’t I?” Joe’s silence confirmed it. “Guess I owe you an apology.” *And doesn’t that sound feeble.*

“None required,” he said sharply. “I never intended that I should be part of the problem, Tanner.”

“I know,” I said grudgingly. “I think you’ll find it was a big pile of other shit, as well, Lam. But I admit my jealousy was no help to the mix.” It was both a symptom and a cause, I thought. My head hurt from too much soul searching at this hour of the morning, and my body was still recovering from the battering it’d taken over the last twenty-four hours. My *heart* hurt from a regret that was both painful and ingrained.

“MacKay... Tanner? Are you still there? There are some things that I have less inhibition in discussing, though I know you still won’t like it. I wanted you to seek some help after the incident at the club, at the beginning of Mission Dove. I thought that your behavior had become erratic.” He coughed again. “Even more erratic than usual, that is. There was no pattern or consistency to your reactions. You were obviously distressed by the attack, though all the attention was directed to Niall’s physical injuries and the punishment of the perpetrator. Neither you nor Sutherland would listen to me about it, though, and we were all needed elsewhere. I thought the best I could do was help get Sutherland discharged from hospital and recovered as soon as possible. I thought the rest would settle itself. I never thought to pursue it further, I’m no psychiatrist myself—”

“It’s okay,” I broke in. “I’m good.”

He made a sound suspiciously like a snort. “That day, the day of your... altercation, at the end of the mission. I got to the pair of you as soon as I could, to break you up, but the damage was done by then. Judith couldn’t have condoned such behavior on duty.”

“Sure. I understand. Own worst enemies, and all that.”

But he didn’t seem satisfied with my continuing self-condemnation, continuing firmly. “You were a good complement to each other, Tanner. I could see that each of you brought out some good traits in the other. It was a... pity to have lost it all. Niall has many regrets about it, I believe. He doesn’t speak easily about personal things.”

“I know.” What fucking inadequate words *they* were, eh? “But we’ve... sort of cleared the air a bit over the last day or so.”

“You have?” He sounded almost admiring. Definitely surprised.

“You reckon we brought out some good shit in each other?”

He snorted again. “Not quite the words I used, but yes. I’ve neither the skills nor the appetite to analyze your relationship any further.”

I laughed, then. “Never thought I’d be taking lonely hearts advice from you, eh, Lam?”

“Is that how it is?” came his earnest voice. “You have a lonely heart?”

“Fuck’s sake.” I groaned to myself. “It’s just a phrase....”

And then *he* laughed.

I grinned, wishing he could see it. “Okay, you got me. Joe... look, I appreciate all this. All that stuff about you being concerned about me.”

He made a tutting sound. “I have to go. The consultant’s review is at 06:30. Call me at once with any theories you have about the materials used.”

“Will do. Give my regards to Judith, okay? When she gets there, keep the welcome kisses to a minimum and tell her to call us as soon as she can.”

“I will.” His angry growl crackled down the line. “That crack about the welcome kisses—I expect you to honor the confidentiality of this conversation, MacKay.”

“That’s a given,” I said, almost cheerily. “Go concentrate on getting better, Hopalong.”

There was a sound of annoyance and the connection was broken at once.

NIALL came grumbling into the kitchen. “Why the hell didn’t you wake me? Brad will be at the hospital by now, and we can contact Judith—”

“He’s already there,” I said rather smugly. “Joe just called. No Judith yet, though. But they’ll all be together soon, all the Team. Just us missing.”

“You called them?” He poured some coffee as he spoke, as if he were on automatic pilot. “Is Simon there too?”

“Ah... no, not yet,” I said. “Not that I know of.” I saw the tightening of his shoulders. There was a slight trail of water on the side of his neck where he’d obviously hurried through his morning wash. He was wearing his jeans and one of my undershirts, noticeable for its lack of ironing. The muted khaki color suited him; it blended well with the dark flush of his skin. We used to do that a lot, borrow each other’s clothes when we stayed over. As I stared at him, words temporarily eluding me, he reached across me for a spoon and the fabric rode up on his torso.

The scar was still there, a shallow, shining red tramline across his side, slashed across his waist. I glanced away quickly, before he caught me looking, and moved a pile of papers from under the coffee pot with a growl of mock annoyance. “Be careful, will you? I didn’t want to wake you, so I laid some stuff out here to work for a while.”

He turned then, examining the sticky notes all over the counter and the doors of my cupboards. “What’s all this?”

“It’s the way I work,” I said, defensively. “Bit of brainstorming. Sketching. Word patterns...”

“I know that.” He shook his head, dismissing the explanation. He was used to the method. I’d moved into several colors of highlighter and three shades of sticky notes. It had exhausted my small supply of stationery. Niall stared at the tabulated numbers and the lines of letters ranged against them. Place looked like a small nuclear device had gone off in a paper mill. “The e-mail address?”

I nodded.

He moved back to the doorway, but stood there watching me. “Tell me about it,” he said. His voice was tight. The tension was still there. “Or do you want to get dressed first?”

I looked down at myself. When I woke properly after Joe’s call, I finally shucked off the grubby sweats and shirt I’d been wearing since I was shot, showered carefully, and changed into some more comfortable shorts. I’d just forgotten to put another shirt on. The thoughts had started to crowd my mind and I’d stumbled into the kitchen, grabbing

for pen and paper to scribble down my first thoughts. Decency was the last thing on my mind.

“No,” I replied, my voice tripping over itself with eagerness. “No, I don’t want to get fucking dressed, I want to tell you about it first! That a problem?”

He smiled, and his eyes lifted from my bare chest. Nine months ago, I’d have recognized the look in his eyes as one of eagerness for some other kind of communication; three months ago, I’d have taken it for distaste and disapproval. This morning I didn’t have the faintest idea *what* it was, but I realized I didn’t want to spend time analyzing it.

“Joe updated me while you were asleep.” I reached to peel my first sheet of notes out from under a couple of forks. The forks clattered into the sink, completely ignored. “He told me the materials used in both the poison attack and the bombing of your apartment were possibly Department issue. He said some of them only came into use since Mission Dove, as in relatively recently.” I ignored Niall’s raised brows and hurried on. “Also, Brad told us to check out his notes, didn’t he? I found them in amongst your stuff.” I looked across quickly, to check he was all right with me rifling through his papers while he slept. He nodded to me. “So I went through the whole pile. Most of the mail that was being diverted was only since we began Dove. Again, within a relatively recent time frame. A lot of it was to do with the raid on the club, right at the beginning—our plans, the attack on you, the subsequent investigation and recommendations—even though there was plenty of other stuff that might have been useful to an enemy. Brad puzzled over this apparently selective process for a while. I managed to decode his own brand of shorthand to read some of his initial thoughts. He just never spent the time on following them through.”

“Did he come to any conclusion?”

I grimaced. “Some. Notably that the hacking concentrated on the attack at the club and its aftermath, then on the subsequent movements of the Project Team members. You, especially.”

Niall frowned, absorbing this information. “What do you think, then? That it’s a personal vendetta? Why the attacks on everyone else, then?”

“No, not personal against you except to the extent that you were on the team that raided the club in the first place. There were several medical reports diverted, fairly boring except for information about your wounds and the weapon used and such. But there were other e-mails selected, full of anecdotal stuff about the rest of us, what our duties were during the rest of the mission, hints as to where our current homes were, what transport we were using.”

He raised an eyebrow. “No,” I said, anticipating the question. “Not a lot about Simon. Just the rest of us, including Judith as controller of the mission.”

“But if someone wanted to know what had happened, wouldn’t they have been better served by stealing a look at the Mission file itself? Everything was in there.”

I nodded. “But it’s only since I looked through Brad’s notes that I realized the file hasn’t been with the Team since then. After the attack on you, Judith’s bosses requisitioned it for the investigation, and everything we did since then had to be passed through them. I think she’s been on some kind of probation, even though the investigation found no one specifically to blame. Most of us knew what was going on throughout Dove because we were directly involved and kept in touch with each other. But it would have been difficult for anyone else to find a single comprehensive record of the mission in one place at any one time.”

“So we’re back with our original theories.” Niall narrowed his eyes and folded his arms as if to protect himself. He looked casual, leaning against the doorway, but I knew different. “It all has something to do with Mission Dove.”

“But not the peace talks, I reckon. The pattern of the intelligence is far more specific than that. It’s about the raid on the club—the attack on you—and the Project Team who carried out that raid. There’s no interest in the rest of the mission except as a means of tracking our whereabouts. No reference to governmental committees, the overseas ambassadors, or the needs of global peace, for God’s sake. It’s all about a seedy club with some abused kids and the team of agents who were in there mopping up the crap at the start of it all.”

Niall glanced up at the sticky notes again. “So did you crack the code?”

“Please,” I said, with exaggerated affront. “You insult me. It’s a nine-number matrix, like those number games that are so popular. You have to fill each box with one each of the numbers 1 to 9, never repeating on a line or in a box or on a diagonal—” Niall coughed, pointedly. I sighed. “I fitted the patterns to the alphabet, though I don’t know how long it’d have taken me if I hadn’t found a couple of messages that Brad intercepted that were also in the code. There was only one letter repeated in the e-mail address, but that helped me to—”

“What is it, Tanner?” There was a dangerous edge to Niall’s voice. Of course, he hadn’t had breakfast yet.

“Melting pot,” I said, simply. “That’s what the e-mail address is. Something that Joe said to me—or I said to him—about mixtures and patterns, made me think about the numbers again, made me consider this kind of encryption. Made me think about the phrase itself.”

“But...” Niall looked stricken. “But that’s what Simon calls the Team office, isn’t it? We’ve all heard him say it. And all your theories about no one having access to Mission Dove—isn’t *Simon* the one whose records would have been the most complete? He knew where we all were, where we were posted, what we were using, how we were resourced. Any gaps in his knowledge were things he could have discovered from us directly because we worked together on the mission. I know I was the one who brought him to mind yesterday, but I really hoped I was on the wrong track. Doesn’t all this lead straight back to *him*? Shit, Tanner, couldn’t you be wrong?”

“Chill.” I could see I was annoying the hell out of him in my refusal to get upset. “Yeah, Simon could have got all the information he wanted from us, Niall, you’ve put your finger on it there.”

“What?”

I started to laugh.

“What the hell is there to laugh about?” Niall sounded both astonished and angry.

“No, I’m sorry.” I hiccupped, trying to rein it in. “But you see, that’s the whole point! That’s why I’m sure now that Simon *doesn’t* have anything to do with it. Why should he go through this ridiculous charade of diverting e-mails and hacking into medical reports when he already has access to any information he might need to turn against us, discreetly and—more importantly—secretly? And this whole hacking thing is just so juvenile that it’d offend me if I weren’t so shit scared of one of us coming to serious harm.” I waved a sheaf of my notes at him by way of emphasis. “Think about it. Which one of us would be so stupid as to use a code name that referred to his own department? To his own personal nickname for it? Even if it’s encrypted, it’s so blindingly ridiculous that it’s alien to us. It’s like leaving the network password on a scrap of paper in the drawer by the local PC. You know?” Niall was staring at me, his mouth half open as if he were trying to find a suitable response to my excitement. “Niall, don’t you see? Simon is no fool, very far from it. And this ridiculous numeric code that’s been used—that wouldn’t have been Simon’s doing either. Dammit, he *hates* these things! I can’t even get him to spend time on a crossword, let alone a numbers game. Only numbers he likes are the serial numbers in procurement catalogues for special equipment, or the telephone and zip code numbers for safe hotels, or the amount of money you spent last month on ammunition alone against the current credit limit—”

“Okay, okay, I get you.”

“So he’d never use ‘melting pot’ himself. It’s been used either in ignorance, or as a deliberate ploy to make us *think* it’s Simon. To turn us all inside out with confusion. I think there are quite a few red herrings swimming around in the murky depths of recent events. Place is starting to stink of them, in my opinion. Soon as we find out where Simon himself is and sort this whole thing out the better. It’s all getting beyond a joke.”

Niall’s expression cleared. I’d never seen such a look of relief. “So we are back where we started. But we know how it was planned and what was used. Maybe even a clue as to why we’ve been targeted. And we seem to know who it’s *not*! We can work on that, right?” He grasped my arm, and I felt his excitement at the prospect of positive

action. Its warmth coursed through me like fresh blood. “That’s smart work, Tanner.”

Then his other hand slipped around my bare waist, and he pulled me in for a kiss.

I don’t think he’d thought it through; it was instinctive, a result of the sudden rush of satisfaction he was feeling after a period of such frustration and inactivity. All sorts of psychological shit like that, you know? I could empathize with it, all too well.

But I didn’t restrain him this time. It was a firm, rich kiss, full of enjoyment and fun and an intimacy that we used to take for granted. Not necessarily sexual, but bringing us as close as we could get. I opened my mouth and joined the kiss with just as much enthusiasm. I tangled my hand in the hair at the nape of his neck and hugged him tightly.

We broke after a couple more moments, both a little breathless. It had been exciting, yeah—but something more than that. Something that thrilled more of me than just my treacherous groin. His hand still lingered at my waist, his fingers warm on my flesh. His eyes were wide and shining.

“Wow,” he said, softly. His lips looked rather swollen. “That was... unexpected.”

“Uh-huh,” I agreed. I wanted to grin. I wanted to cheer to the heavens, to tell you the truth; I hadn’t felt so good for months. Oh, and by the way, I wanted *more*. I leaned back into him, and he looked just as keen to continue.

Then there was a boom of noise and the trailer rocked on its very base. My papers slid spectacularly all over the kitchen floor, and we were thrown back against the doorway. In other circumstances, I’d have joked that the earth-moving was caused by our making out, but Niall’s face was very pale and the sudden reverberation rang in my ears. I knew the sound of an explosion when I heard one—and a damned big one.

Wednesday 09:32

NIALL pushed me to one side and, this time, he was the first to cross the trailer. He snatched up his gun from under the couch as he went, but the minute he opened the door, we saw that this was no new sniper attack. The air outside was thick with smoke and dust. Bricks and torn metal scattered the ground around the trailer; people were coughing and shouting. I peered over Niall's shoulder to see shadows in the filthy fog. I could hear someone cursing. A dog was barking loudly, and although I was no expert on pets, it sounded a lot like Dylan.

Junk's bulk reared out of the mist, his hand wiping at his stained face. "Mac? You okay? What the fuck's goin' on?"

"What about you?" I called back, knowing full well what was going on.

He waved a hand dismissively. "It was under your trailer, man. Dylan was nosin' around there yesterday. Whined all fuckin' night, too, so I let him out early this mornin'. He pulled this bundle out from under your trailer, dragged it over to mine. Fuckin' thing's a *bomb*, I think. Grabbed it from him, pushed it away from ours and Ruthie's. But didn't have enough time to get rid of it. I was callin' some of the guys to help me when it went off."

"Where? Who—?"

"S okay, exploded outside the empty trailer, but there's a couple o' my boys hurt...."

Niall had already left the trailer and plunged into the smoke himself.

"Let him help!" I called. "Get everyone back, there may be more devices." I started coughing myself. "Junk, tell me what the damage is."

Junk moved forward out of the maelstrom, Dylan at his heels. The dog had a layer of dirt and dust along his coat, but he seemed healthy otherwise. I looked down at him and he wagged his tail.

“Fuckin’ animal!” Junk announced proudly. “Saved your ass again, Mac.” Then he caught sight of the wildness in my eyes, and his enthusiasm calmed a bit. “Okay, right. It went off between the steps and the base of the old trailer, just smashed up the corner o’ Ruthie’s and took the windows out o’ Zac’s. If it’d gone off directly under yours, Mac, we’d be pickin’ bits o’ you out o’ the crap for weeks to come.” He looked at me curiously and continued. “Zac’s girl was under one o’ the windows, got her arm injured. One o’ my kids was hangin’ around having an early morning smoke behind the empty trailer and caught a metal panel on the head, dislodged off the roof. Just scratches on him and a bump the size of an egg, and serves him right, ’cause he’s too fuckin’ young to be smokin’ anyway. The older guys are scared but they’re fine, so’s the baby, and if you can let Sheri know all her sisters are okay—”

“Sheri?” I stared at him, my mind racing.

“Ain’t you in touch with her?” His expression was puzzled. “The message came she was helpin’ you out.”

I stared at him. Niall strode back into view, his hair dusty, a single streak of dirt along his cheek. The swirling cloud of smoke and fine debris was slowly settling. He caught my eye and nodded. “I’ve checked the rest of the nearby trailers, no further problems,” he said, curtly. I understood perfectly. This one device was meant to have done the trick. He turned back to help with the injuries and the clearing up, while I stepped out of the trailer and drew Junk to one side.

“Who gave you the message about Sheri?” I tried to keep my voice calm, but Junk’s eyes narrowed.

“Where is she, Mac? Is she in fuckin’ trouble?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “She visited me after the shooting; you’ll remember you were there as well. Niall said she called in later, too, but I was out of it for a while. Neither of us has seen her since. Tell me what you know. It’ll all be fine.”

He glared at me like he didn't believe a word. Not sure I did myself. The concern was glinting in his eyes, but he spoke quickly and concisely to me. "She took that cockroach off the site yesterday afternoon, that kid who was around at the shootin'. He was messin' about around here for a while, scared of Dylan so he said, so she offered to take him to his car. Then I got a message she was going to go help out with somethin' else, somethin' you'd asked from her, and she'd be back later on." He saw the questions in my wide eyes. "No, she never came back last night, though that ain't unusual. She goes her own way, you know? And no, I can't remember who gave me the fuckin' message about her. Someone on the site, they'd heard it from someone who'd heard it someplace else. You know how it is. Didn't come to check it with you, because you were hurt, and... well, because it was a job o' yours. I know she has this sorta soft spot for you. I reckoned she'd be okay."

Niall came back over, hugging a grimy bundle of cloth in his arms. We both turned to look at it. "The dog found this under the empty trailer alongside the device." He glanced down at Dylan, standing patiently beside his master. The Rottweiler's dark eyes stared up at Niall's—seemed like they sized each other up, and neither was found wanting. Niall unwrapped the cloth, and we all stared at the scorched remains of a rifle.

"Guess that's the one that got me," I said quietly.

Niall met my eyes and nodded. "I should have searched more thoroughly, at the time. I should have looked around the site for the weapon, not just the shooter. Maybe the bomb was in place then too. I'd have found it before now. Tanner—"

I held up a hand. "Not now, it doesn't matter. It's just Sheri—"

"Tell me what the fuck's goin' on, Mac!" Junk's voice was full of fury, but fear too. "I'll search for her myself. Just tell me where the hell to start."

I grasped his shoulder. He looked very startled, like he'd never seen me properly before. "We'll find her, you hear me? And she'll be okay." I know I sounded fierce. I was damned angry myself, as angry as the girl's father.

“You swear she will?”

I saw Niall looking at us both, his face creased with worry. “I swear,” I said. I pushed Junk away, none too gently, though it’d take a strong man to propel Junk in any direction he didn’t want to go. “Go and see to the others and leave Niall and me to sort this out. Niall, is that right?”

He stepped up beside me. “That’s right.”

Wednesday 16:40

IT WAS the middle of the afternoon, and we were sitting back in my trailer, the two of us side by side on my couch. The explosion hadn't alerted any emergency services, and no one had come to the park to see what had happened. Guess so many awkward things had happened there in the past, the city neighbors were cured of their natural curiosity. A few of the residents had suggested they call the police, but after Junk and his family talked to them, no one on the park wanted to draw any more attention to themselves.

The sounds outside had quieted down, and the worst of the wreckage had been cleared away. I'd spent several hours alongside Junk's family shifting rubbish and sweeping up the mess. By now, the panic had subsided, and some of the kids were already playing with the last bits of twisted metal and odd knobs and handles that had been blown off doors. I could hear parents yelling at them to leave that stuff alone and the rumble of Phil's flatbed truck as he drove slowly around the site, picking up and disposing of the debris. He stopped a couple of times, I heard, to tell the story over a beer or two.

Occasionally I heard Dylan bark. It was a reassuring sound, as maybe he meant it to be.

My bandage had come loose with the activity, and after a welcome shower, I'd been redressing it. I hadn't been able to do a lot of the heavy lifting, but the wound was healing well, and my arm felt fairly strong again. I looked across at Niall. "How are the injured?"

"Fine," he said. He'd just returned from another circuit of the nearby trailers, and he still shed a little dust with every step. He'd spent all his time since the explosion with the people on the park, helping them to clear up, seeing to any remaining shock or wounds. He was good at that, if a bit abrupt, but I reckon that's what they needed at the moment. "The girl's arm is good, and I swabbed a few more cuts and bruises. They've fetched Hans the doctor again, so he'll take over now.

Junk's son had that bump on his head, so I checked on that, and another had a cut on his leg from the sharp edge of the steps. He's only about ten. He was shocked too. He wailed a lot."

"I didn't hear him."

Niall grimaced. "I showed him my scar in return, and he was quiet after that. All the youngsters were pretty interested in it, actually. It took their mind off the drama."

I let my smile linger. "What does everyone think happened? I don't want them drawn into this any further."

He sighed. "They think it's some random act of vandalism, but a few of them know it's connected to you. To *us*. Some of the guys further around the park want you thrown off. Junk spoke to them and calmed them down. I... well, I spoke to some of them as well. I assured them everything was in hand, and all the damage would be made good."

Huh? "What do you mean?"

"I'll reimburse them. Maybe the Team can get it authorized through the Department, or maybe this'll end up a personal debt. Either way, I'll do whatever it takes."

"You don't need to do that." I was shocked.

Niall's mouth twisted in a small smile. "Can you afford to help them out?"

I winced. "You know damned well I can't."

"I don't mean—"

"It's okay, I know. So I'll find some other way to help. They've been good to me here."

He nodded. "Have you got through to the others yet?"

"No. The hospital admin line is constantly busy, and I'm reluctant to use the emergency call-out when it's not a medical issue. But I can't reach any of the other Team cell numbers either. There doesn't seem to be any reception."

"None of them? The guys should all be at the hospital by now."

I met his puzzled eyes with my own. "None of them."

“Dammit, Tanner, we have to think this through. Who’s behind it all? It’s not Simon—of course it’s not—but a lot of our clues still remain. He’s been the least targeted and holds the most information. He has access to all the systems and is involved in most of Judith’s decision making at some stage or another. His involvement was feasible enough for me to consider it, even while I didn’t want to believe it. He holds so many keys....”

“Or his section does.”

“Not him specifically, then?”

“No,” I said slowly. I’d been doing some more thinking while Niall was out and about on his troubleshooter missions around the site. *Hell* of a lot more thinking. “Consider someone with a similar access to equipment and services, but who doesn’t have Simon’s security clearance or his intelligence. Someone who’d have to dig a little deeper and a little more messily to try to find out more information about the Project Team, but could do it if he were determined.”

Niall’s body stilled, and his voice sharpened. “Someone who wanted to keep tabs on us all but didn’t need to gather much information about Simon himself.”

I nodded. “Yeah—because Simon was the one person our suspect could watch from the inside.”

Niall’s expression darkened. He sat like a coiled spring, staring ahead of him. I remembered this concentration of his so well. He was careless of how he looked; I wanted to reach over and brush the wisps of cobweb from his hair.

“Someone who made us fish for these red herrings, Tanner, who led us to suspect our own colleague, set traps for us and kept us on the wrong foot for days, while trying to isolate and attack the team members.”

“With variable success,” I said, dryly. “You might say someone a little naïve, not very experienced in our ways. But with a determination that’s still fucking dangerous.”

Niall ran a hand over his eyes and sighed. “And I let him go.”

There was a short silence.

“He was good, Niall. I believed him too. He looked too scared, too pathetic to be the real danger. I knew there was something out of place, but I didn’t follow up on my instincts. Anyway, we didn’t find the right gun on him—”

“Because he hid it under the trailers before Dylan caught him. Along with the bomb. I meant it, if I’d only looked further instead of being so damned concerned about you getting shot....”

I shook my head. “He was damned cool. I reckon the bomb was already set before he shot me. We never found any evidence on him of any explosive stuff. Maybe he didn’t plan to shoot anyone, it was just extra insurance for him. Or a distraction, so we never suspected anything else. I don’t know. Lucky the little bastard was a poor shot, like you said.” I took a deep breath, calming my anger.

“No one sent him here officially,” Niall said miserably. “That should have alerted me from the start. But it was his nervous behavior that made me start to wonder about Simon, to tell you the truth.”

“I think that’s what you were meant to do,” I said gently. “He’s been clumsy, but he’s not a complete fool. Damned good actor, at the very least. We both fell for it. He seemed to be a guy in the wrong place at the wrong time, that was all.”

“Fuck it.” Niall groaned. “The dog knew more than I did.”

I shrugged, but I had to smile. “You’re right. Dylan didn’t like Greg from the start, even when they first brought you here. God knows how Greg got him off the site yesterday morning, leaving the coast clear for his sabotage. But then Junk brought Dylan back, nearly catching Greg in the act, I’d guess, but just that little bit too late for us to realize it. And Dylan’s been dog-nosing around the trailer ever since.”

“Maybe he saw Greg hide the gun. Hell, he was still keeping watch, even as we let Greg run back off home to the Team. Remember? Junk said the kid couldn’t get off the site without help.” He must have felt me tense up beside him, because he turned to me at last. “Do you think he has Sheri?”

“I know he does,” I said grimly. “She’s his hostage.”

“Any idea where?”

“I think she’s probably being held back at the hideout that Brad found.” Niall frowned, but I continued. “Yeah, Brad said it looked like it’d been cleared out. But that’d be all the more reason to go back to it, thinking we’d dismissed it, thinking the trail was cold.”

“One of those double bluffs I joked about earlier.” Niall sounded really pissed.

“Uh-huh. At our expense, this time.”

He put out a hand to me, then, patting my arm. It was a consoling, comradely gesture, and one I never thought I’d feel again. I wished I had time to appreciate it. “She’s special to you, Tanner, I know. Will we go get her?”

“Damn straight we will! I don’t know what this guy has against us, but as soon as I can get hold of Brad and find out where this fucking place is—”

The cell phone rang again.

I glared at it. “That phone hasn’t brought us any good news for a while.”

Niall’s hand tightened on my wrist, stopping me reaching for it. “How come you can’t reach anyone else’s cell, but someone’s...”

“...reached me?” I stared at him. “Niall, they could be using another phone, or the interference could have cleared. We won’t know unless we answer, will we? But if there’s a chance it’s Judith, calling us from the hospital...”

He nodded and lowered his hand. I reached for the cell and flipped it open.

The voice on the line was the last one I’d thought to hear. “Tanner? Are you okay? I didn’t know who... who might answer this number.”

I pressed the loudspeaker button again so that Niall could hear as well. “You mean, whether I’d been blown into enough pieces to sparkle in the heavens or not? No, I survived. Niall too. He’s making a fucking

habit of rising from the ashes of various explosions. Guess someone might be really pissed at that, don't you think, *Simon*?"

Simon's voice gave a low gasp, like a mix between fear and amusement. "Thank God. Same old Tanner." The line was clear enough, though I couldn't hear any other voices. There was the background noise of a siren, probably out in traffic. And the distant whine of jet engines, like a plane was passing low overhead.

"Simon..."

"He said the trailer would be destroyed by now, but I was to check whether this line was still operational. Whether there were any loose ends to tie up."

I didn't think I was keen on being called a "loose end." "Who said? You mean Greg?"

"Yes." Simon didn't ask any of that unnecessary nonsense, like "How did you find out," "What final clue led you to the perp," or anything like that. We weren't in a fictional detective story here. Niall's eyes had brightened, and he pressed up against me to listen in more carefully.

"Where are you, Simon?"

"Can't say." Simon's voice was guarded. "Greg wants to speak to you." His next word was a whisper. "Brad?"

"He's safe," I quickly replied. I heard a soft exhalation of breath on the other end. "Does Greg have you covered?"

"Yes." Simon started to speak quickly. "I followed some clues in Brad's notes to try to find him, to try to find what was going on, but I had no time to let him know what I'd found—*who* I'd found. Don't try anything rash. You must protect yourselves. I'll sort it out somehow—" His voice broke off abruptly, as if the phone had been snatched from his hand.

I swore to myself. I could have done with some clue as to exactly where he was, what state Greg was in, what weapons he had. Anything.

But Simon Wagner was another guy who didn't spend too much time out in the field. I felt chilled inside at the thought of what Greg might be doing with him.

“Tanner MacKay?”

I recognized the young voice, of course. There was less of a whine underlying it than before. “Let Simon and the girl go, Greg, and then we can talk, okay?”

There was a scuffling noise at the other end, and the voice sounded furious. “Not okay. Not okay at all. You should be under rubble by now. You and your partner. *All* of you. I’m not letting anyone go until this is all finished properly.”

“Things not going according to plan, Greg?”

“Shut the fuck up. You had no idea who was doing this, did you? I had the whole lot of you fooled. *That* was a plan, wasn’t it?”

Until we found him out. “What is it you want?” I noticed that Niall was leaving me to do the negotiation, which was fine by me. Personally, I’d have liked to take the kid and rip his head off, nice and slowly and with a side order of spicy relish, but fuck, that’d maybe have to wait. “Why are you doing this, Greg?”

“I said, shut up. You’re nothing but trouble, Tanner. Damned pity I missed your head with that shot. I don’t know why Sutherland didn’t get out then, why he stuck around you. But it’s all the better for me, I guess, because I’ve got you two in one place, everyone else in another. And now I have some bargaining chips to keep you there.”

“Let them go, Greg,” I repeated. “They’re no good to you.” I hoped I kept the tension out of my voice. “I mean, we’re not interested in negotiating for *them*. The girl... well, she’s expendable of course. She’s nothing to us. And Simon knows what this business is like. He’s just an agent, same as us all. He knows he’s on his own.”

I heard the indignation flaring in Greg’s tone. “That’s fucking typical of you—of *all* of you!—abandoning him like that. When he’s the one who keeps it all rolling, the only one who understands what’s going on.”

I glanced at Niall and raised an eyebrow. Greg’s behavior was very erratic. His aggressive language jarred with our perception of the kid we’d previously thought of as respectful, timid, and basically ineffectual. Yet his defense of Simon was interesting. I spoke back into

the phone as calmly as I could. “Simon thinks highly of you, Greg, we all know that. So why don’t you let him go, and he can speak for you? We’ll sort this out between us.”

“No way.” Greg laughed, a short, sharp, scornful sound. Wasn’t I the one who’d said he wasn’t a complete fool?

“So *you* tell me,” I said. “You can speak for yourself, right? That’s if you can make us listen. If you can make us care.”

I made myself sound as scornful as I could. I realized what other nuance I’d heard in Greg’s voice. Not just anger, not just resentment. It was pleading, too—the need to justify, to boast. Wasn’t he just itching to do that?

“Shut up,” he snapped back. “Yes, of course I can speak for myself. None of you have the right to tell me what to do. And you’d *better* listen.” His voice sank in volume as if he’d turned his head away for a moment. Then it returned as strongly. “You’ll both stay there until I arrive. I’ve got things to say to you in person.”

I could feel Niall tensing beside me. Would Greg really come here? It could be of advantage to us if he did. Despite all that, I put the edge of a whine into my voice. “Why the fuck should we stay here? You might have all kinds of other stuff planned, and we’re not sitting here like fairground targets to get blown up again.”

He gave a low growl of disgust. “You’ll have to take that risk. I’m the one in charge now, aren’t I?”

I looked at Niall, who spoke quickly to me under his breath. “There’s no risk of another bomb here. The blast under the trailer was low level, less explosives than were really needed. Maybe he’s used up all his supplies, or is using them somewhere else.” He grimaced. “And I’ve checked everywhere else on the site. Twice.”

“The hospital?” I hissed back.

He shrugged. “I’d say too big a target, too difficult to organize an effective attack there. Especially if he’s acting on his own. But I don’t know for certain. He doesn’t sound stable.”

I turned back to the phone. “Greg.” I wheedled. “Maybe we should come and meet *you*. Tell us where you are.” Out of the corner of

my eye, I saw Niall roll his eyes, but I got the right response from Greg.

“So you can send the Team after me? Don’t be stupid. I’m coming to you. But if I don’t find you there I’ll have to leave another calling card. Maybe another person will lose limbs, another person will learn what it’s like to be shit scared and desperate. And get that fucking dog away from the site. If there’s anything that smells of a trap, or any kind of obstruction—”

“We’ll stay here,” I said swiftly. “Don’t get hysterical. You’ll bring them both with you, won’t you? Simon and Sheri?”

“Maybe,” Greg said. He didn’t like me talking to him like a kid. “Maybe not.”

“Greg,” I said. “That’s fine. Chill. We’re completely at your call, aren’t we? But aren’t you worried we’ll call in some back-up? If you can’t give me any idea of when you’re coming...”

And he laughed. Loudly, and this time with a rather pleasantly melodic tone. *He feels superior.* “Do what you like, MacKay. But I think you’ll find the back-up isn’t available at the moment. Not for you, anyway. In the meantime, I’ll be there when I’m there. And *my* back-up? Well, just remember who I have with me. You understand?”

The call ceased. I turned to Niall.

“Is he insane?” Niall asked, frowning. I think he meant it genuinely. “Coming to meet us here? Warning us he’s on his way? He could have got clean away, he could have tried some other remote attack again. Not knowing we were on to him—”

I held up a hand, quieting him. “Yes, I believe he’s nuts, but not in the way we can measure. He wants to see us for some reason. He wants us all to be here together. He wants his day in court.”

Niall still looked confused. “What did he mean, another person might lose limbs, another person might learn what it’s like to be scared and desperate? He can’t mean us, surely.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. It’s melodramatic crap, his head’s in a mess. He must think Joe is still likely to lose his leg or

something like that. He hopes he's ruined that life, if nothing else. I don't know *what* he's thinking about the rest of us."

"How long do we have? I mean, he could be here in the next ten minutes or the next ten hours."

I shrugged, but when he frowned at me, I held up a hand. "Okay, so obviously we're not meant to know, but that's the idea, isn't it? To unsettle us and keep us on tenterhooks. But it was important to keep him talking. I heard planes in the background. That confirms it for me—they're all at the place Brad found, like I thought. Remember Brad said it was near both the airport and the club where you were stabbed?" I glanced at my watch. "That's almost an hour across town. And at this time of day, anyone who tried to cross the traffic in town in a rush really *would* be nuts. I reckon Greg will wait for commuter time to pass. Then he'll come here when it gets dark, when there's less chance of witnesses. Especially if he's got Sheri with him. Imagine if he tried to pass through the site with her in tow for everyone to see?"

Niall winced.

"Yeah. It wouldn't just be Dylan he'd be in danger from." I thought quickly. "That's going to be after nine tonight."

"So there could be time to get to the hospital and back?"

I took hold of Niall's shoulders and stared carefully into his face. I could almost see the plans rolling around in his brain. Here was a guy who *was* created for field work, right? "Maybe there would be time, Niall. But I'm not going to risk it. Not for Simon, not for Sheri. If you want to try it, go ahead, and I'll cover for you. But I'm staying here until Greg comes, and I'm going to find out what the fuck this is all about. I'm going to get Sheri and Simon back, and then—*then*—I'm going to beat the holy crap out of this kid."

Niall looked back at me, and I wondered if he'd chew me out for it, for not considering other options, for just sitting back and waiting for trouble to come to us, for... well, for not being *him*.

But he didn't.

"Right," he said, nodding. "Good call. We stay here. We'll wait together. I can rig up some early warning system, and I'll see what

weapons we can get around us. We won't be sitting ducks, if and when he turns up." He turned from my raised eyebrows and flipped open the phone again. "We can still call Judith, ask for cover. We must be able to get through by now." He shook the cell phone, peered at the screen, held it up to the window.

"No signal, huh?" I asked. "No coverage, no connection. Your phone's gone the same way as the others. I understand what's happened now." Niall was frowning at me, puzzled. I wanted to laugh, but I was just too fucking angry. "You know what he's done? He's cut them off! The guy works in procurement. His section—Simon's section—pays the bills. How easy is it for him to cancel the contracts, cut us off from each other, just like that? If we rang him back now, I expect that connection would be lost too. It's served its purpose. How fucking obvious, how fucking *mundane*." I was shaking my head, half impressed. "Until we find alternative lines or set up proper radio contact, the Team can't communicate, can't plan anything as a group. It's so simple it hurts. He's living in a cheesy thriller of his own mind's making—and dragging us in after him."

Niall stared. "But he's working alone, Tanner. We can take him out, no trouble. He's unprepared for all this. None of us were meant to survive his remote attacks. He's been very naïve, and clumsy too. He's making mistakes, he's making it up as he goes along."

"But that's what makes him dangerous!" I saw Niall flinch. "I have to think this through before he arrives. I think he has Simon under some duress, and God knows what he's done with Sheri. It's not a matter of just jumping the kid when he turns up and handcuffing him. You have to realize the danger of unpredictability, of irrationality. I underestimated it once before, and I've regretted that ever since."

Niall's eyes narrowed. "You're going on about it again. That mission —"

"No," I said, firmly. "I'm learning from it at last." I stared steadily at him until I saw some acceptance flicker in his eyes. We both glanced together at the door out of the trailer.

"So we need to evacuate the people around this trailer," said Niall. "And fast."

IT WOULD have been amusing to watch Junk arguing with Niall if I hadn't been so tense about the coming hours. I stood in the doorway of my trailer and watched them standing at the foot of Junk's front steps. Dylan stood between them, looking from one to the other and panting softly.

Most of Junk's family was filing out past them, carrying small bags of overnight things, smoking or muttering. Or both. Two of the younger girls looked over to me. One of them had a tear-streaked face. I gave them a half smile and a thumbs-up.

"You have to go," Niall repeated for about the fifth time.

"Fuckin' don't," Junk said bluntly, and loudly enough for us all to hear. "Don't have to do a fuckin' thing you say. You're some punk that Mac hooked up with, and you know squat about this place. This is my world, she's my daughter, and I go my own fuckin' way."

I stepped down from my trailer and went over to them. "You have to go, Junk, like the man says." He glared at me, ready to protest again, but I spoke quickly before he could. "We don't want anyone else to get hurt, you know? You must trust us to help Sheri. This is *our* world now. Anyway, I need your help."

"Huh?" He looked back and forth between us, full of angry suspicion. His head was a ridiculous mirror of Dylan's, except without the long panting tongue.

"We need to contact our other friends, but Niall's cell has just... died."

Junk shrugged dismissively. "How many d'you want? Phil has a box of them."

"No," I said. "Our friends' cells aren't active either, at least for a while." I sighed, wondering how much to tell him.

"So you need a radio."

I looked up, startled, and met his shrewd gaze. I nodded. “Well, yeah, that’d be great, just what we could use.” I looked at Niall, who nodded too.

“Brad will have radio contact,” he said. “Wherever he is, and particularly if the cells are out of action. He’s always said he prefers using it anyway, and he’s drummed into us plenty of times the frequency he’d use....”

“...in an emergency, yeah.” I wondered how often we’d use that phrase before the night was done.

“We just need some equipment.”

Junk laughed, a short bark. “If there’s one thing Phil has, it’s *equipment*. I’ll take you to him, and you can choose what you need.” He snapped his head to one side, indicating for Niall to follow him to the nearby trailer.

“Then you’ll both leave the site for the night,” I said.

Junk looked back at me, and his smile was strained. “Sure. It’s up to you then, Mac.”

Wednesday 18:15

NIALL came into the living room dressed in nothing but a towel around his waist, rubbing his hair dry with another one. The dust had crept into our clothes, into our hair, into everything. He'd finally showered the filth off him to his satisfaction.

"I've been around the site again," I said, my throat suddenly a little dry. I'd changed into clean clothes, just a pair of loose sweat shorts and a bright, logo-printed tee shirt. I'd found another set of sweat pants and shirt for Niall to use, and they were folded on the couch beside me. *Should have taken them into the bathroom for him. Poor bastard doesn't need to be wandering around looking for some decency.* I stared at his half-naked body for a moment, seeing the glistening remnants of the warm water on his ribcage. My own clothes felt suddenly awkward on my body, like they didn't fit properly. Guess he looked a sight better in my stuff than I did myself. Especially the towels.

I coughed and stood up clumsily. "Most of the trailers around mine have been emptied now, though some of the guys went more grudgingly than others. Junk went off with Phil in his truck. They rounded up some of the kids who were still playing around and took all the dogs as well."

"Good." He nodded. "We don't know what to expect from Greg, so it's best we don't involve any more civilians." He twisted slightly to catch a stray trail of water running from his hair down his back, and the muscles at his side flexed briefly along the pale pink slice of his scar.

He'd always done that to me—made the heat flare like a brand through my body.

"How long since Greg's call?"

I cleared my throat again. Damned thing still felt like sandpaper. "Hour and a half, or so. I've been working on the radio you got at

Phil's, though I think it's more your kind of thing. Just need you to tune it in. When you're ready."

Maybe there was something edgy in the tone of my voice, but Niall stilled. He pulled the small towel away from his hair and let his hand hang down gently against his side. He stared at me, and a slight flush appeared on his cheeks.

I found it hard to breathe.

Then both of us glanced at the strangely shaped metal casing that sat on the card table. It looked like a cylinder sliced in half with a few inset dials and meters. Some electrical wires looped along the central seam of it like mustard trails on the top of a hotdog. There was an external aerial, a microphone, and an amplifier attached, so we could both speak and listen in. Phil's "Rare Parts" business had found us something rather unusual and probably of suspicious origin. But I'd been playing with it while Niall was washing, and it had the best fucking reception I'd ever heard on a radio. It may have looked odd, but the components were obviously the best. I was thinking of asking Phil to build me some kind of wacky-but-awesome music system sometime.

Though I was also wondering if some new human body parts might be more appropriate after tonight. I had no idea what Greg might have in store for us.

"It's good," I said, referring to the radio, though maybe not, if I were being honest. Niall was still staring at me with *that* look. I bit at my lip and joked as only I knew how. "Going to pick up the early evening jazz channel as soon as you've reported back to the boss."

He pursed his mouth and for a minute there was a flash of irritation in his eyes, just like the old days. Brief confusion followed, and then there was the beginning of a smile. "Idiot," he said, his voice low but strangely affectionate. "You think we've got time for a song and a sax?" My jaw dropped at his rare teasing, but his smile grew broader. He stepped past me to examine the radio.

And I just let him.

IT WAS a hell of a relief to hear Brad's voice on the radio. Niall had scorned my request for particular music frequencies as the joke it was, and spent just a few moments with what sounded like a shrieking banshee and a hissing goose until human voices came back to him from the contraption. He knelt at the foot of the couch, holding the earpiece and amplifier between us, and he spoke clearly into the microphone until he got a response.

Brad's call barked out of the silence like a slap to the face. "Niall? At last! We lost all cell phone connectivity."

"Yes, we did too. It's all part of the campaign against us, Brad. We're being isolated, we're being manipulated and made vulnerable—"

"I know," Brad said, interrupting him. Even with the diluted reception, I could hear the suppressed emotion in his voice. "Is Simon with you?"

Niall looked quickly up at me then back at the mike. "No, he's being held hostage. He came after you and Greg has him—" He never got a chance to finish the sentence, as there was some kind of angry, gargled cry from the other end of the channel and a deep scraping sound as if furniture were being thrust aside.

The next voice we heard was even more welcome. "Niall? Tanner too? I need to know what's happening at your end. *Now!*"

I dropped to my knees beside Niall and called urgently into the mike. "Judith! Are you okay? Do you realize who's behind this? It's—"

Brad was talking behind her, his voice sharp and fast and angry, but I couldn't make out the words. "Tanner, *be quiet!*" Judith said, urgency in every syllable. "Brad says this frequency isn't secure."

"Forget it," I snapped back. "Greg won't be surfing the radio waves to catch us, he's on his way over here right now."

"What the hell?"

“Did you know it was him?” I talked right over her exclamation. “He must have been trailing us all for months. He’s got access to all sorts of places, he’s been stealing equipment and setting traps.”

“I know now,” she broke back in, and the tone of her voice was so stern that I swallowed my personal anger. “All of us here had come to that conclusion—but not soon enough. After the last attack on the office, I found all my records disturbed, some of them destroyed or damaged. Some files were removed completely, including my unofficial notes on Project Dove and the early raid on that obnoxious club, where Niall—”

“—was hurt, I know. What’s the connection, Judith? I don’t think Greg has any interest in the political agenda of Dove. It’s something far more personal than that.”

“He’s only been with us for a while.” Her voice sounded like she was struggling for control. “He took his own personnel records from my office, of course, but I have a copy of all those files at an off-site location, and I’ve had it brought to me here at the hospital. I’m searching the details now. His background checked out fine. There was nothing suspicious, no family history to concern us—an orphan, no family noted at all, actually. And we only took him on as a general assistant. We would have monitored his performance over the course of the next year or so. But somehow he worked his way up more quickly than that, making himself useful to Simon, appearing to us all as a committed and loyal employee. He joined us about six months ago, just about the time that Niall was in hospital.”

Six months ago....

“I signed off his application,” came Judith’s voice. It was small and sounded young. It was the first time I’d ever heard her show any distress, any uncertainty. “I treated him as I treated Cissy—as Simon’s best assistant. As a trusted companion.”

I felt the prickle of premonition on the back of my neck.

The thread of anguish in her voice was unmistakable, and when I turned to look at Niall I saw that he’d heard it too; he was very pale again. No one needed specialist sociological skills to recognize

overwhelming misery when they heard it. “Judith...” I drew a deep breath. “What’s happened to Cissy?”

“She was driving me to the hospital. We’d rescued what we could from the offices and evacuated. We didn’t know what other devices there might have been, what sort of timers they may be on. We left it all to the bomb squad and got out. We assumed any further attack would be directed at the building, like before. Not me, specifically. Cissy was driving,” she repeated. There was a shuddering gasp from her, and it was obvious that she couldn’t speak any more about it.

Niall stared at me.

“A car bomb?” I whispered.

“I should have checked everything.” Judith’s voice was a whisper. “*Everything*. But I was too busy just getting away.”

We were all silent for a moment, the horror stark and hideous in our minds. Cissy had been a friend to us all. She’d been an innocent in all of this. I thought I could hear Joe’s voice in the background, but I couldn’t be sure. I had a sudden, deep compassion for Judith, who treated all of her staff fairly and firmly, and yet showed a personal care for them. In that moment, I didn’t envy her the responsibility, or her pain.

She was the first to speak again. “I’m on my way, Tanner. Niall. You need backup.”

“No!” I tried not to snap, but I knew she’d take no notice anyway. “We can handle it, believe me.”

“Don’t be stupid, MacKay.” Like I said, she took no notice of me. But it was good to hear the imperious Judith back on track. “He’s dangerous.”

“No,” I said firmly. “He’s *history*. Niall and I have some issues with him, and we’re going to deal with them. On our behalf—and yours, as well.” Beside me, Niall nodded. His eyes were on me, and despite my refusal of backup, his gaze reflected my own determination. We couldn’t risk scaring off Greg anyway, but I was sure we were both aware now that Judith had enough to concern her.

“Judith? What you need to do is to get someone back to Greg’s hideout, the one that Brad found. Simon said he’d read up on some of Brad’s notes and was trying to follow the route that Brad took, to catch up with him. He suspected Greg as well by that time, I’m sure of it. So he obviously found the hideout himself, discovering not Brad, but Greg. There’ll be some more clues there, some evidence. Whatever—”

“Tanner,” she said, her voice firm again now, the very epitome of our efficient boss. “Leave it to us. Brad’s already left.”

I FELT both weary and tense—a strange combination. Niall had spent another hour on the radio since Judith signed off, but there wasn’t much that could be improved. He’d gone quietly into the kitchen to make coffee, and I just stood staring at the set. Neither of us wanted music on, or to go through Brad’s or my notes again. Neither of us quite knew what to do with our time before Greg arrived.

Niall was still dressed only—and barely—in that fucking towel.

When he came back out of the kitchen carrying a couple of mugs, I was rather snippy. “Why don’t you get dressed? You don’t want to face our lunatic guest in just your birthday suit. And this ain’t easy for me either, you know? I’m pretty reluctant to waste what time I may have left with a bunch of regrets.”

“Regrets?” His murmur licked around me like spilled, sticky honey. Messy, sweet, and too tasty for words. He put the mugs down on the table, and my nerves twitched with the sensual memories of many months ago. Straightening up, he gazed at me. “If you have any regrets left, Tanner, shake them off now. I think that things are moving too quickly for us to be protesting what we should have said and done in the past, right?”

I nodded dumbly. Fine words, and true. They made me feel fucking stupid at having carried my grudges and my jealousies for all this time, eating away at my pride like ravenous sewer rats. But the words also provoked in me a wave of amazing relief.

Things were, indeed, moving too quickly. When did I drift from resenting Niall's very presence to comparing him to the sweetest, richest stuff that could ever slide over my eager tongue?

I was a fucking idiot. And I was—I suspected—going to be even more so.

When he moved, it was toward me, when I'd expected him to wheel around and take the clean clothes to the bathroom to dress. His body still carried the slightly damp aroma that skin has after a shower; it had that clean, soft look that follows. Then his hand lifted to slide around my neck, and I was having trouble remembering why I was so fucking tense in the first place.

"I don't know how to say it, Tanner." He breathed his words into my ear. "I don't know what's going to happen. I'm angry with Greg, and I'm upset for Judith and the others, and maybe I'm nervous, too, though only because I don't know what I'll need to see me through this. But what I *don't* need is to dig around in all our old stuff as well, all the old misery."

"Sure." I cleared my throat. "What we feel—"

"What I feel is *you*, Tanner, every time I breathe, every time I turn around." His voice was ragged. "That's the only real thing I can think about at the moment. I mean, where the hell have I been for the last three months, not coming to find you, not calling you, not remembering what I liked about you rather than what pissed me off?"

I let my head drop back as his lips nudged at my neck. My vision was going a little hazy. His mouth at my ear was making me even more of an idiot, couldn't he see that? Couldn't *I* see that? "I constantly provoke you, Niall Sutherland," I whispered back. "Bait you, when you hate argument so much. I'm jealous and volatile and demanding and judgmental."

And always so fucking, fucking wrong about you.

"Yes." His laugh brushed my throat with its vibration. "You have your moments, I'd say. So it unnerves you to see me half naked. Well, I could say the same for you. If you don't want this to happen, you need to stop wandering around in those pathetically loose shorts. Don't you

realize how low the waistband slips? How I can imagine tracing the trail of your hair all the way over your belly and *down?*”

His breath sounded uneven. His fingers were very tight on me. I thought I’d never feel anything so good!

Then his mouth was on mine, and I stopped thinking altogether. He grabbed my shoulder tightly, pulling me to him. In return my fingers snagged on the thin loops of the toweling fabric at his waist, tugging him in tightly against me so that his hip grazed mine, and my knee nudged in between his thighs. He tasted as good as he felt, but then I’d always known that, hadn’t I? My mouth pressed so hard on him I was afraid I might split his lips, but I wanted to taste it all, lick at it all, smell the skin and taste the mouth and feel his smooth muscles flexing under my fingers.

I couldn’t help but notice the towel was slipping at its knotted fastening.

“*Tanner.*”

Time was telescoping into just this minute, just this need. I couldn’t take note of anything else in life, even if it were full of danger, bereavement, mystery... fear. The need roared its way through my veins and begged my arms to hold on to Niall, *tight*.

“What the fuck are we doing?” I gasped. When he started to laugh, I stuttered on, “I mean... hell, of course I know. But *now?*”

“You want to stop?”

Stupid question, another of those rhetorical ones. “You know those movies?” I wasn’t keen on the begging note in my voice, but I guess I didn’t have a lot of control over it at that particular moment. “When the guys and girls are facing hideous danger but they still find time to make out? How many times have you thought how unrealistic, how damned stupid that is?”

He laughed again, but very softly, and close against my neck so that the sound tickled the hairs. I decided to abandon any protest. After all, since when was life like the movies?

“You said we had time. He wouldn’t arrive until dark.”

I threaded my fingers through his damp hair and tugged his head back. He groaned, and the lids drooped over his eyes like they were too hot to stand it. His throat convulsed, and I watched the throb of the pulse in his neck.

“I did, didn’t I?”

Niall gasped. “We’ve both been around to check the site, we’ve both had some time to prepare for Greg. Now it’s just us, Tanner, just us for this brief hiatus. I don’t know what else I want to be doing but this.”

“Jeez....” I might still have argued, but the thrill in my nerves was too vivid now to think straight. I just wanted to laugh, and punch the air and other ridiculously childish things! My whole body seemed to be shaking, and I wondered and marveled at how I was so affected by him. I kissed him again—and again—and then took my mouth around his jaw and along the rim of his ear, licking playfully at his neck. He shuddered under me, his tongue darting out to moisten his own lips. Then I found myself standing in a pool of damp toweling, and the skin pressed against me and writhing under my hands was stark fucking naked. *Niall* was naked, and his hands were up and under my shirt and it was the most magnificent feeling I’d had since birth.

“*God.*”

It was a breathless, awed little sound, and I had to double check that it had really come from Niall. He peeled my shirt back up off my head, and I was happy to let him. When he pushed forcefully at me, I stumbled, and my legs banged back against the couch. His fingers brushed against one of my raised nipples, and I moaned aloud. “Same from me.”

“Huh?”

“Gasping like school kids. Listen to us.” He bent his head down and tightened his lips around my nipple, flicking his tongue over the tip.

I winced and bit back a sob of pleasure. “Okay, point taken. Someone doesn’t act like one.”

“Tanner, I don’t want to hold back.” He sounded—astonishingly—shy. “I don’t want this to be confused. To upset us... to anger us.”

“Never. I want this. I want *you*.” I was back to the begging, and I didn’t give a shit. How the fuck had I ever managed without him all this time? I’d been some kind of pale imitation of myself, an empty shell, a washed out impression.

Niall pressed up against me, and I could feel the muscles of his legs as they tightened. Better than that, I could feel the heat of his groin against the thin cloth of my shorts and the swelling insistence of his erection, hot and greedy against my thigh. I ran my hand down over his hips, tugging at skin that was too taut to grab hold of, then across his belly and down between his inner thighs. He tensed against me, and when I curled my fingers around his shifting balls, he groaned. I fondled one, sliding my palm around it, feeling its creases, the way it nudged against its partner, both of them hanging heavily in the sac. His feet shifted and he spread his legs further apart. His breath was very, very loud. His cock twitched above my knuckles, nudging its damp tip against my belly, the pubic hairs tickling between my fingers.

I ran my other hand down his back, tracing the knobs of his lower spine, running a single finger down between the crack of his buttocks. His breath hitched, and his head dropped forward on to my shoulder.

“Tanner. Oh *God*.”

We stood there, naked apart from my shorts, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip. He had one hand at my neck and one at my waist, his fingers digging into me as if he thought I might make a run for it. *As if*. His tongue darted out and licked at the sweat in the hollow of my throat, and he moaned softly.

I kissed at his forehead, the only part of his face I could reach, but it was enough. With one hand, I caressed the skin between his legs; with the other, I teased at his ass. When my front hand closed firmly around his swelling cock, his head snapped back up. His eyes were very bright and for a second they didn’t focus on me. But when they did, the ferocity was deep, dark and shocking. And fucking brilliant.

His skin was flushed, his lips slightly parted. I stabbed at them with my tongue, and he opened up and sucked hard on me.

I started to pump his dick and his back arched, pressing his torso against me even more closely. At the same time, I slid a couple of fingers further down between his cheeks, probing for his asshole.

“Yesss....” This time it was my moans we listened to, gasping with childlike delight. “Want you, Niall. Want to touch you, fuck you.”

My fingers found the indentation of his entrance and stroked the creases of skin around its pucker. They felt very taut, the hole closed. He felt like a treasure that hadn’t been discovered yet, and I was no fucking Indiana Jones, was I? I was suddenly, embarrassingly nervous. Three months apart was feeling like years. I nudged at him with just the tip of my digit, feeling my way. He arched more, pushing his ass out against my hand, and then my finger slid into him.

We both cried out. Shakily. Delightedly! It was a shock, but it was also a thrill beyond anticipation. For a few delicious seconds we still stood there, holding each other tightly, as I gently pumped him and thrust my finger into him in the same rhythm. Then he grunted and planted his hand on my head, tangling his fingers in my hair and tugging at the roots of it. I felt the pressure and paused. When he started to push me down, I dropped carefully to my knees in front of him.

“Please,” he whispered.

I didn’t need asking, I can tell you. I kept my hand on his ass, my finger still teasing in and out of him. I could feel the muscles opening and closing around me, his conscious effort to relax, his body acclimatizing to the invasion. Had he been with anyone else since we parted? The thought had never occurred to me, despite my ridiculous accusations of him, my jealousy of him with anyone else. And I’d given him up to whoever else he wanted. Hadn’t I?

My body ached with passion and frustration. I couldn’t think of it, I couldn’t accept it, not right now. I’d be sensible later, I’d be mature later, but just now I needed him as *mine* again. I thrust my fingers back into him and heard his groans, as I was too hurried. I slowed and took my other hand off his cock, the thin trails of silvery pre-come looping

the space between him and my fingertips. I anchored myself by grasping his hip. His swollen cock jutted out at me, shining with blood-red flesh, quivering, demanding. I moistened my lips, then leaned forward and licked at it.

The cry that stuttered out of him was hoarse and incoherent.

I'd always loved that—sucking him off. It was a greedy pleasure of mine. I loved to feel him shudder against my tongue, loved the way he swelled even further inside my mouth, loved the way he thrust instinctively against me, fucking me in mimicry of how he'd be when he was actually inside me. I started the long, lazy sweep of my tongue from the seeping tip down to the thick base of his cock, sucking the skin back up as it strained against me, flicking the point of my tongue against the thread where it swelled out to the crown. Up and down, and then I sank my lips over him fully. He filled me; I latched on to him, licking, smoothing saliva around him to lubricate it all, pulling back up just to play with the crown. My fingers still slipped in and out of his ass, though my concentration struggled to cope over the pounding in my head. My own cock was hot and heavy in my shorts, and I was sure I had one of those embarrassing wet patches at the front.

I couldn't care less.

This was what I'd been missing. Did I really think I could forget? I ached for him. I could feel the muscles of my belly complaining, tensed as I knelt there, my groin nagging for attention. His grip tightened in my hair and his ass clenched around my fingering. A low growl rumbled in his throat.

He was close to climax. I was shocked to realize how surely I knew that. How my body still reacted to the shivers of his, how the path of his pleasure was still imprinted on my memory and nerves.

He's mine.

"Tanner?" He tugged at my hair again and I looked up at him, my lips still busy. "This is... fuck... I can't stop...."

I nodded to let him know I understood. His head dropped back again, his eyes rolling. Coherent speech wasn't really an option for either of us; neither of us had full control of ourselves. I stopped the movement in and out of his ass and just concentrated on the caress of

my mouth. A shudder ran the whole length of his body, and I gripped at his legs, hoping to hold him upright if they buckled. He grunted something that sounded like my name; then he tensed and became totally still. I relaxed my lips and waited. My reward came seconds after. Hot, sharp-tasting seed filled my mouth, spitting out of him in eager bursts, the thick shaft throbbing gently against my teeth. I felt my throat tighten eagerly, ready to suck it down. It puddled on my tongue, thick and sticky and as tasty as anything I'd ever had.

The pain in my groin was becoming less of an annoyance and more of an agony. I rocked gently back on my heels and let Niall's softening cock slide out from between my lips. They felt well used and slightly numb. I opened my mouth again, a little gingerly, and let the come trickle out into my cupped palm. The inside of my mouth felt cold again, the warmth and fullness of him no longer there. I put my free hand back to the couch to steady me and I got up on my feet.

He was swaying, and moisture shone in his eyes. His skin was gorgeously flushed, and I could still see the pale impression of my hand's grasp on his hip. The tendons in his neck were raised; a trapped nerve in his thigh twitched instinctively.

"Shit." His gaze came back into focus and sought me out. "Tanner," he murmured, neither question nor statement. He gave a rueful laugh, a very gentle, awed sound. "*Shit*. Your mouth."

I smiled back. I always reckoned I gave good head. I hoped he'd return the favor. I needed release, and I needed it from him. I slipped my unencumbered arm around his waist, breathing in the delicious smell of sweaty flesh, fresh come and *Niall*.

Unexpectedly, he pushed at me, and I sat back down on the couch with a sharp whoosh of breath. "Hey!"

He stepped forward, far too quickly and gracefully for a guy who'd just shot such a luscious load into my mouth, and he straddled me. He reached down to my lap and started to push my shorts down off my hips. *At last, at last!* The blood in my body was in a delicious quandary as to whether to rush to my head or places more pragmatic. I think I was suffering from the flushed business, too, and when he looked into my face again, he smiled at me. It was a smile like I

remembered from when we first met. It was one of those smiles that creased his usually serious face, and shone behind his eyes, and lit a flame under my body like I was tonight's a la carte menu.

A smile to fall in love with.

I wriggled my legs and feet about, got the fabric down to one ankle, and then I was naked underneath him. My cock sprang up, bobbing shamelessly, and his gaze fixed on it.

"It's been...." He paused. He was making one hell of an effort to get the words out, and I felt a tug of sympathy inside me. This was more than I deserved, I reckoned. Way more. "It's been a long time since I did this, Tanner." His voice was hoarse. "I never wanted anyone after you."

I stared at him. Ridiculous really, our bodies no more than a foot apart, but all of our actions in sudden paralysis. "Niall," I said. "I... Niall." Fuck, now *I* was having problems in the speech department. "It's the same for me. There's been no one." I started gabbling nervously. "Dammit, I don't even have supplies to hand, don't need them... *didn't* need them."

His eyes softened, and he glanced down at the glistening seed in my hand. "Smart move to hang on to that, then. Because I don't have anything either."

I half-laughed. Worried he'd think I was presuming something. Pressuring him. Whatever. "Look, it's okay, we don't have to do anything more. I don't want... you know."

He shook his head briefly, as if to clear his nerves or maybe to dismiss my ramblings. Then he put his hands on the back of the couch, either side of my shoulders and he leaned down. His knees brushed against my thighs. "Oh, but *I* do," he muttered. "I want very much."

On the count of three, my heart started again.

I grinned. I reached between his legs with my precious little handful of lubrication, and I slipped it around my fingers and up into him again. I stretched him as quickly and as best as I could, afraid I'd rush him like before. My cock twitched awkwardly on my belly, distracting me. It had reached the state where it demanded to be the

number one priority of my young life, and I was keen to agree. Niall arched above me, and maybe it was uncomfortable for him, but he was impatient, too, I could tell.

“I’m fine,” he said. “It’s good.” He didn’t exactly push my hand away, but his knees gripped at me, and he started to lower himself down, so I grasped his hips instead. I wanted to ask him if he was sure about this, but I also wanted to be deep inside him. Then my mouth was too dry to argue the point anyway, and next thing I knew, my cock was pressing against warm, slicked skin and easing its way through the initial resistance. One more hitch of my hips and then the head burst hungrily into him.

I gasped. He groaned.

I’d been content with just his hands on my torso, I kept telling myself. After all, I’d never expected to be truly happy again. I’d thought I’d never see him again; I’d built a wall of self-disgust and untenable resentment, and I’d been fucking proud of it. Yeah, I *had* been a prick. And instead of being left to wallow in a pit of my own making, I’d been given a second chance to talk to him again, and hold him, and now to fuck him.

Incredible.

I held him tightly, and I moved in and out of him as smoothly as I could, as if each stroke were precious. It was just as I remembered, yet something fabulously new. Skin to skin, as we’d always been, as soon as we settled as exclusive lovers. His torso was damp with sweat, and my fingers slipped a little when they rested on the glossy surface of his scar. I felt the pressure of his thighs on me and the warm, crinkle-skinned contrast of his balls against my groin. He was panting, and at some point he started to take control of it all, moving his hips up and down according to his own rhythm. Didn’t bother me in the slightest. I was on my own private expressway, and happily losing my direction all over again.

When I grunted, he dropped his head down to gaze at me, his dark hair falling messily over his forehead. Determined eyes glinted out from underneath it. I watched him rise up on me, then sink back down.

A rivulet of sweat trickled from the hollow of his throat and down between his nipples.

“Never been anything like it,” he whispered. “Never been anything like *you*.”

I sobbed aloud, swear to God I did. I’d never heard him say such a thing in my life. It had been too long for me, too, and what defense did I have against such pleasure? “I’m sorry.” I didn’t even know what I was apologizing for. “I’m sorry. I never meant... it’s perfect....”

Incoherence snatched at my throat again, closing it to nothing but guttural sounds. My legs tensed, and my hands gripped him way too fiercely, but I wasn’t really in control of anything anymore. I dragged him down, sitting him on my lap, trying to get deeper and deeper inside him. I panted and I cried out, none too quietly.

He took a hand away from the couch and grabbed the hair at the back of my neck, wrenching my face up to look at him. His lips were pursed, and he looked grimly beautiful. We sort of glared at each other, and then as the climax started to roll its relentless path through my body and my limbs started to shudder, we clung to each other. He dropped forward to press more of his upper body against me, his reawakened erection squeezed between our heaving bodies. I licked at his skin, desperate for his taste, and then stretched my head up, bracing my teeth against his neck.

As he came again, I heard his growl, and felt the warm wetness of his come against my belly. I don’t remember many more details, or not any that made sense. My climax was wild and messy in coming, and my head throbbed like when I’d been shot, when I felt nothing but sharp sensation and the falling, falling....

My hips lifted up from the couch and my sweaty flesh slapped fiercely against his, and I pumped for an impossibly long time up into him, again and again, never wanting to lose that feeling, never wanting to lose that touch, that intimacy.

Never wanting to lose *him*.

Wednesday 20:05

I GUESS in the movies the lovers lie post-coitally in bed, heads resting on plump pillows, arms artfully draped over each other, while maybe sharing a cigarette. Their upper bodies shine with stray—and attractively lit—trails of sweat, and the bright white, well-laundered sheet crumples modestly over their legs.

Didn't I say before, life's not like the movies? But at that moment, there was no question I preferred my real life.

I was slumped on the couch, and Niall was sitting on the floor at my feet. We were both still naked. His upper body rested against my legs. If he turned his head just that little bit more, he'd be staring directly into my lap and he could probably reach over and take a taste of my dick, those firm lips enclosing the crown, that rough tongue teasing the fragile skin that strained around the shaft....

I was getting hard again. It defied medical science. I thought I'd already died from joy.

The towel lay an arm's length away from him on the floor, discarded after he'd used it to wipe us both down. A stray bead of sweat ran down his upper arm, but he ignored it now. His sigh was small but satisfied.

“Niall. You said something this morning.”

He leaned back on the couch cushion and looked up at me. “Yes?”

When he licked his lips, my cock stirred gently on its bed of curls, maybe in anticipation. *What the fuck are you doing, Tanner, opening up these wounds again?* “You said about falling for me.”

He nodded. It made his body nudge deliciously against mine. “It's true. It always has been, I just never told you properly. I should have told you a whole lot more, but it was never my forte. I admit I didn't try hard enough.” He sighed into my lap.

I watched my pubic hairs stir with his breath, and goose bumps rose across my lower belly. This was where I wanted to be, right? Who I wanted to be with. I should never have let myself lose it all. “And I should have told you a whole lot less,” I said, hesitantly. “I should have learned when to keep my mouth shut.”

“But that’s not your way, Tanner. If you weren’t talking—”

“—we were fucking. Yeah, right.”

He grunted. “It’s not that simple.”

“I fucked up.” *That’s simple, right?*

“No. We both made mistakes. Get over it, Tanner. Trust me.”

“I do,” I protested, but not totally convincingly. “I accused you of things I’m so fucking ashamed of I can’t even bring myself to apologize for them. I let you down when you needed me.”

Abruptly, he braced himself on the couch and knelt up. He was almost face to face with me, his eyes dark and angry. “This is what really pisses me off, Tanner. I never blamed you for those things, not like you seemed to think. I was angry with you. Yes, a hell of a lot of times! Especially at that stupid fight. I punched you, right? You were talking such crap—I was talking such crap—but I didn’t know how else to stop it. But my anger didn’t come anywhere near, did it? Nowhere near the anger you had for yourself.”

“I... what the fuck do you mean? I didn’t—”

“Yes, you fucking did!” His body shook with his exclamation. “Will you trust me on this too?” He touched my jaw, as if tracing the shape of where he’d marked me all those months ago. “You’re fine as you are. You’re good. You’re *so* good! I fell for you just as you were, and I stayed with you because of what I knew you could be. That’s all I ever wanted. I never went seeking anyone else in bed, I’m telling you the truth. But not just there. I never wanted anyone else, period.”

“Niall...”

“I tried to make it work with us. I tried, but badly, and I blame myself for what I did wrong, but I want to make it good again.” He flushed. “You probably didn’t know what to think of me.”

I had to laugh at that. “I thought you were the greatest thing that had ever happened to my life.” Fuck, didn’t I ever tell him that?

He frowned. “I thought you said things like that for fun. I thought it was all just a game to you.”

“No,” I protested, but more gently now. His vehemence shamed me. I’d been wallowing, all right. Shit, I’d turned my humiliation and misery into a career in itself. Everything had sunk into self, self, self. But now—well, now I had another body, mind, and soul to consider, didn’t I? I shifted around to be able to touch him better, but I was damned careful not to push him away. I could feel the gentle stirrings of his cock against my leg. “Maybe that’s how I played it at first. I said I talked a lot of shit, right? But some of it was true. It just got... lost.”

“The way we felt... it was strong stuff.”

His hand cupped my face, and I nuzzled up against it. “Strong stuff? Fuck, we were in each other’s pants before we even knew how many sugars we took in our tea or what newspapers we read.”

Now it was his turn to smile. “How should the game have been played, then? I think we both needed guidance.”

“Got none.”

“No,” he agreed.

Our eyes met. “More of a partnership, I guess,” I hazarded.

“Like we have been these last couple of days? Like we’re facing up to this crisis now?”

“Yeah. We’re pretty damned good at that, aren’t we?”

“Pretty damned good,” he echoed. “When we’re not fucking, of course.”

I started to shake my head at him, laughing again, but he reached to nibble at my ear and I kind of forgot the plot.

“I still feel like that, Tanner.” He looked askance at me, a little wary. “It’s still strong stuff for me.”

“Me too,” I whispered back. I expelled a slow, relaxing breath. It felt like a barrier crumbling in my chest.

He sank back on to his haunches, his body nestling on mine once more. I hadn't mistaken the stirring between his legs. A trickle of pre-come dampened my thigh. "It's been bad without you."

"Yeah? For me, it's been *shit*." I sounded almost cheerful. "You're the one who exposed me. I never settled properly here, never got myself any new stuff, never put any effort into bringing old friendships over. I never felt *right*, here on my own."

"You never set your music up."

I shook my head. "No, I didn't, did I? That was my self-punishment, I think. This trailer was never meant to be anything but a bolt hole."

"Despite that, you have friends here. You get along with everyone, Tanner."

I smiled and rested my hand on his head. "Sure, that's Tanner MacKay, that's Mac, the trailer me. Friends with everyone. The only guy I ever had trouble with was you. Still do." I ran my fingers through his hair. "I hurt you."

"I'm tougher than you think, maybe. Tougher than you in many things."

I started to protest, but decided against it. "Enough already. We're just different."

He laughed softly against my skin. "I don't want to *be* you, Tanner. Old or new. I just want to be *with* you. I want to do it all again."

"The sex?"

He rolled his eyes. "That as well, though you're going to have to find some lube somewhere."

"In the kitchen," I said, indecently quickly. "I've remembered, I think there's something in the first aid kit."

He ran one of his hands over my hip. The pads of his fingers smoothed the muscles in my thigh, the back of his hand nudged my legs apart. "I'll go fetch it."

I nodded. Then nodded again, when he didn't seem to be moving in that direction.

“Though the tension between us isn't so bad, sometimes. Is it?”

I grinned. “Look, I'll still provoke....”

“And I'll still struggle with it. We're opposites in many ways. But you know how I feel.”

His hand stroked gently, firmly. *Yeah, I knew.* “We can try again.” I whispered it, half-frightened he'd hear my weakness, half-wishing he would.

He shrugged, but he smiled more broadly, and I felt the shiver that ran through him. “It's what I want. That partnership.”

To get it right. I arched gently underneath him, like a well-fed cat who could still find some appetite for dessert. “Three days ago I hated your guts, Niall Sutherland.”

“I wasn't too keen on seeing you again, either. Both liars, right?”

“Hate's meant to be the flip side of love.” And then it was too late to bite it back.

Niall drew in a sudden, sharp breath. “Is that what it is for you?”

Yeah. “Yeah,” I said aloud, feeling a great sense of relief at admitting it, at making myself so vulnerable, at wallowing in such a pathetic dose of sap. But boldly.

“Good,” he replied. He stood up, letting his fingers trail across the ticklish skin of my sides.

I waited for him to reply—maybe say that it was love for him, too—but he turned and silently walked over to the kitchen. Then I realized I shouldn't need a reply. Not spoken, anyway. What more did the poor bastard have to do or say to make it clear to me? That's what it was about. Understanding, without having things spelled out to me. Trust in the other person; the ability to take some things for granted.

“I still say it's a fucking stupid time to be planning a future with some lunatic about to arrive,” I called out. The ache in my groin didn't agree, of course.

Niall came back through the kitchen arch, holding a small tube in his hand. “Sure.” He didn’t sound like he wanted to discuss it right now. His eyes were on me as he walked back toward the couch. I had the most perfect view of his naked body—of muscles, sinew, skin. Of strong arms, of long legs, of the cutest, thickest, tastiest cock I’d ever had the fortune....

“Turn over,” he said.

“We’ve just got to get through this damned thing with Greg.”

“Uh-huh,” he grunted. He dropped to his knees beside the couch, ran his hand up between my spread legs and cupped my balls.

“Then whatever happens, we can see what we want—”

“What I *want*,” he snapped, “is your ass. Will you shut the fuck up and let *that* happen?”

Shit. I didn’t know whether to laugh, whimper or roll over.

He didn’t wait on my bizarre indecision; he just pushed me over onto my belly on the couch cushions. Then he drew me up on to my knees and ran his lips across the soft hairs on my thighs and ass. I nearly came from that alone. His fingertips probed at me, parting my cheeks and finally licking very purposefully—and eagerly—along my crack. I gripped at the tubular arm of the couch and I opened quite shamelessly to him, like I had from the first time I met him. Like I’d decided by now that I always wanted to.

He was almost too careful with me when he pushed in, lying just inside my entrance long enough to let me adapt to the intrusion. He was breathing very heavily. But when he balanced one knee on the cushion and started to move more purposefully inside me, I pressed back to encourage him. We found a rocking rhythm that I was pretty sure would send both of us off some kind of orgasmic cliff, fast and furious.

I tried not to cry out, tried not to shout and babble with the swelling excitement and the rush of ecstasy. Obviously I didn’t succeed; I never had done, not with him. I was briefly glad that none of Junk’s younger kids were around to hear the astonishing variety of swear words and sexual exhortations that I offered up as I came. And, all too quickly, I was shaking with it and my body jerked, and then I’d

come. I was limp underneath him and the couch was stickily wet, and I just held him and didn't want to let go.

The coffee he'd made us earlier lay untouched and forgotten. We had other tastes to satisfy us.

Wednesday 21:00

I STOOD inside my trailer, facing the door. It was slightly ajar, and the furniture had been moved around to allow us better access in the cramped room. I was freshly showered—taking care not to disturb my dressing—and fully dressed in shirt and jeans. So was Niall. We'd even eaten, just some stuff on toast that I hadn't really noticed because I'd preferred to catch his hand and lick the butter off his fingers and watch the lustful smile creep across his mouth.

We'd stopped talking a while ago. We didn't need to chat. We wanted to touch, so we kept doing that, and that was enough for anyone.

I intended to stand in this position for as long as it took. I knew Greg was coming.

I was ready for him.

Wednesday 21:15

FOR a second, I didn't understand what I was hearing. Sounded like feeding time at the zoo and a walk in the Rainforest, all rolled into one. Guess I hadn't really registered the unusual silence outside my trailer until the parakeets set up their cries.

I must have jumped, because Niall touched at my arm to calm me.

"It means he's here," he said quietly.

Dylan wasn't on the site to bark a warning when anyone approached, of course, and when I'd suggested to Niall that he rig up some string and tin cans across the corridors between the trailers, I'd been treated to a particularly contemptuous glare.

So then he'd told me that he'd negotiated with Zac to leave his pet birds behind him for a few hours. "They're used to the usual crap that goes on," Zac had told him. "But if anything different happens around my trailer, without me around, they'll scream like blue murder."

And it looked like we were hearing that in action.

GREG'S shocked and angry expression as he approached my trailer would have been more amusing if it hadn't been for a couple of things that disturbed me way more than any joke. One was Sheri's horribly white face as she stumbled along beside him. He must have driven to the park, though there was no sign of a car. But he could have parked it behind any of the nearby trailers and it'd be hidden. The walk to mine was a short one.

I couldn't see if she'd been seriously hurt, though she was walking okay by herself. He'd tied her arms behind her back and gagged her, and he kept her close to him by means of a belt around her waist. From a distance, the bindings looked simplistic but effective.

She wore one of her brilliantly bright, skimpy shirts and cropped jeans, but her shoes were badly scuffed and her legs dirty, as if she'd tried to run away but fallen in the attempt. Her gaze darted from me to Niall, then back again. She was scared and bewildered, and trying very hard to be brave.

I was the one she looked to. She was only nineteen.

The other thing that disturbed me was that there was no sign of Simon Wagner.

I didn't step right out of the doorway, but I knew Greg could see me quite clearly. He halted about ten feet away. His looks were as young and fresh and keen as ever, but now his eyes were wide and wild and his whole demeanor had changed. He was wearing a heavy jacket, with bulging pockets that hinted at trouble. Sheri wriggled a bit, and he jerked angrily at her belt. He reached inside his jacket with his free hand, and I thought I saw the glint of a knife at his own belt. When he settled her and returned his attention to me, there was a gun in his hand. It rested almost casually against Sheri's side.

I could feel Niall moving at my shoulder. I stared only at Greg.

“So where's Simon, Greg?”

He ignored my question. “What the hell's that noise? If you're up to something, MacKay—”

“Chill,” I said, as calmly as I could. “It's only some birds. What, you wanted me to clear every last shred of nature off the site? Be reasonable.” Niall came and stood beside me so that Greg could see both of us framed in the doorway. I lifted my voice a little so that it carried well enough for us all to hear. The birds were quieting down by now, the intruders having passed Zac's trailer and moved on out of their territory. “Greg, where's Simon?”

He glared at me, still not answering. “I know you have a gun, Tanner. Niall does, too, of course. Throw them out here to me.”

I hesitated. He wrenched at Sheri's binding, and she gave a soft cry. I reached to the back of my jeans and pulled my gun out of my waistband. I threw it over to where he stood. After a brief, tense moment, Niall did the same. Greg nudged them with his foot and then

kicked them over toward Junk's trailer. They slithered in the dust and came to rest just under the steps. They wouldn't be seen unless someone was specifically looking.

"Simon?" I had a tight edge to my voice. "Don't fuck with me, Greg."

He shrugged slightly. His eyes slid sideways to look at Sheri, then his gaze snapped back to me. "He's safe."

"He's not here," Niall said, his voice low. "Why should we believe you?" I could feel the tension vibrating through his body.

Greg stared back at Niall. "Niall Sutherland. Another of Judith's finest. Guess you'll have to take my word for it, won't you?" He tugged sharply at Sheri, and she stumbled a little. "Just the two of us. Deal with it."

"So why are *you* here, Greg?" I pulled his attention back to me. "To tell us all about your campaign of horror and violence?"

His eyes narrowed. I wasn't sure he could tell sarcasm from admiration. From me, anyway. "There are things I want you to know. Both of you. Things you need to know, why you deserve what's happened to you. What's *going* to happen to you. Telling you how stupid you've been."

"You mean about the bombs? The booby traps? The poisons by post?" Niall sounded a little too sharp for my liking. I didn't want Greg spooked. Not just yet, anyway.

"Cool it, Niall." I felt his growl of frustration, but I didn't turn to meet his look. "They didn't work, though, Greg, did they? The campaign has been fitful, to say the least. We're still here, you can see that. That's something *I* need to tell *you*."

He scowled. I was provoking him, but carefully, I hoped. "You *shouldn't* be here, Tanner. The rifle should've taken you out, if I hadn't been distracted by that fucking dog. And then the bomb... I still can't understand how it didn't destroy the whole damned trailer."

"You have that fucking dog to thank for that as well," I said dryly. I watched him carefully, but at the same time I was measuring up the distance between us; the hold he had on Sheri; the stability of his

grip on his gun. I suspected that Niall was doing the same. “How’d you get the dog out of the way in the first place?”

A fleeting smile chased over his face, an important assessment of his mood. “I had a good look around the park when we brought Sutherland here that first time. The damned dog was keeping an eye on me, and it was obvious the big guy was his owner. I noticed those gaudy scarves he wears, and there were a couple hanging out of a back window of the trailer. So while I was waiting for you to finish your chat with Judith, I borrowed one. Easy to do it on the pretext of strolling around the site, checking security. I reckoned it’d come in handy if I came back to the site. Which I did, of course.” He moistened his lips, eager to tell us how clever he was. “It seemed ridiculously easy to plant a bomb under a trailer, especially in a dump like this. So I came back early yesterday morning, to set it up. The scarf was really useful then, you see. It lulled the stupid brute. He recognized the smell and half-trusted me. It was enough to get him over to my car. I fed him some meat full of sedatives and dragged him in when he started to collapse.”

“No one saw you?”

He unconsciously lifted his chin. He was damned proud of his resourcefulness. “No, of course not. I parked the car behind some empty trailers. No one was around. But I admit it all took longer than I hoped. He’s damned heavy, you know? I only had time to drop him in the warehouse across the way. I’d hoped to take him to the docks and lose him in the river once and for all.”

I shivered slightly. I think Sheri whimpered under her gag.

“Then I came back to set the bomb, but by the time I was ready to get the hell out of here, *you* turned up and got in the way. So I thought there was no harm in taking you out a little ahead of schedule.” He looked at my shoulder pointedly.

I shrugged, making a huge effort to make it look as limber as the other one. “You missed.”

He caught my eye and smirked. “Not completely.”

I couldn’t answer; couldn’t deny it.

“You made yourself out to be a clumsy novice on the shooting range,” came Niall’s voice beside me. He sounded calm. I think he’d tuned in to my own tone. “Which are you? Unskilled—or unlucky?”

Greg frowned. “I’m okay. But I admit I didn’t want you thinking I was any kind of a shooter. It served my purposes to be thought of as a dumb newbie.”

And maybe you really were crap, anyway. But that was barely enough to console me today.

“And what the fuck do you care?” he continued, belligerently. “At this range, I won’t miss either of you.” He lifted his arm and aimed the gun speculatively at us.

“That’s fine,” I said quickly. “We get the picture, okay?”

He glanced back at me, his eyes wary but with a flicker of self-satisfaction. “You’d still never have caught me. You were down, and your *partner* was bent over you, and there was no one else around. I couldn’t think where the hell everyone had gone, but it meant I could make an easy getaway. I was on my way back to the car when that dog came bounding back.” He looked both angry and amazed. “Can you believe it? The idiots from this park had been right on my heels, searching for him. For a *pet*. I mean, how stupid is that?” I reserved judgment; I assumed he wasn’t looking for an answer. “I had barely enough time to hide the gun, then the crazed beast bit my ass and I was hauled into your trailer by its owner. Damned guy looks as mad as the dog.”

I saw Sheri’s red-rimmed eyes widen angrily. “Shut up, Greg,” I said.

He raised an eyebrow, grinning insolently at me. “It didn’t matter in the end. It took me a few hours, but I got away from you again. Easily.” He smiled then, and I was shocked to see the contrast between this slice of malice and his pleasant grin of previous times. “And I set the timer on the bomb on my way out. Plus I gathered a hostage.”

“So clever,” I murmured.

He took my words at face value. It was like he swelled up with pride. “You never thought I could do all this, did you? But it’s served

my purposes to be seen as the loyal little sidekick all the time I've been at the Team. A bit of a kid, no spunk, no threat. I sat and whimpered in that pathetic trailer of yours, and neither of you had any idea who you were holding. When Cissy told you she had an e-mail from Simon requesting me back at base, you never thought twice about letting me go."

"You'd set that mail up in advance," Niall said.

Greg just smiled again. "Easy to do, with Brad's help. Not that he realized what he was showing me. His notes have often found their way to my desk. I just haven't passed them on for anyone else's attention."

There was a brief silence. I could see tears in Sheri's eyes and no relaxation of Greg's hold. Niall and I could have rushed him, and maybe if we caught him unawares, he wouldn't have hit anyone with that gun.

Or maybe not.

"What about the other attacks? On buildings? On cars?" Niall touched my arm. Had he guessed what I was thinking?

Greg shrugged. "Okay, so you can call it my practice. To see what worked. Or maybe to confuse everyone, before I homed in on what I really wanted." He himself looked mildly confused. I wondered if his campaign had been more luck than judgment; whether he'd started in passion, rather than to a plan. Whether he'd over-reached himself.

I could only hope.

"Why?" Niall asked. "Why did you do all this, Greg?"

Before anyone could speak, a drop of water tapped on my shoulder and dribbled down my arm. It had run down from the roof and pooled on the top lip of the doorway, before falling on to me. "It's starting to rain," I said.

Greg looked briefly irritated.

"Come inside," I said. "You know we're unarmed. Bring Sheri in, and we can talk about everything there."

“For God’s sake, Tanner—” Niall began angrily, but I ignored him, just holding Greg’s gaze.

“We can stand here, Niall, and get drenched,” I said quite sharply. “Or we can go inside. What’s it matter? While he has Sheri, he has the advantage.”

Greg tilted his head, weighing up my suggestion. He looked from my determined face to Niall’s scowl. Then he gestured with the gun for us to go in ahead of him, tugged at Sheri’s belt, and the two of them stumbled forward to follow.

WE ALL crammed into my living room, but it wasn’t like we were gathering for any kind of tea party. I switched on the lamp, its light creeping dimly over the shapes of people and furniture. Greg waved the two of us over towards the kitchen alcove, and he nudged Sheri down on to the couch. He stood beside her, watching us on the other side of the narrow room. There was nothing but the card table between us. I’d cleared it of everything except for the radio, perched on top of it.

There was no sound in the trailer except for our labored breathing.

I leaned back carefully against the wall, trying to look a little more relaxed than I actually was. Niall stayed in the alcove, watching Greg. I couldn’t see his face except in profile, but I hoped he wasn’t going to try anything rash.

“So we’ve established you’re a good actor,” I said steadily. “What performance do you have for us all now?”

Greg brushed some drops of rain off his jacket. Then he looked up and stared at us both. I couldn’t see what he was looking at, or for. But Niall drew in a sharp breath at my side. What did he see?

“Greg.” I made my voice sound calm and reasonable. “Let Sheri go at least. She’s got nothing to do with all this, has she? How can she? No, let her go and we can sort it out between us. I understand how you’re feeling—”

“Shut the fuck up!” His head shook sharply with the words, and I paused.

“Okay, that was patronizing. I’ll apologize if you think it’ll make any difference. I just don’t see why she has to be involved.”

“That’s the way it always is, though, isn’t it?” He sounded angrier now, and I was alarmed. “People who’ve done nothing to anyone get dragged into your mess, and you’re the *last* to see anything wrong in it.”

I carefully blanked my expression. “Greg, tell me what it is I’ve done to you. What we’ve all done. It’s obviously important to you, and I want to understand. Maybe I want to learn where I’ve gone wrong.”

He didn’t really seem to be listening. Sheri huddled up on the couch, keeping as far away from him as possible, but she was still well within firing range. He leaned slightly forward to give extra emphasis, and he seemed to lose total control of his breathing. The words started to spill out of him in erratic, passionate bursts. “It’s *all* fucking wrong. It’s not just important to *me*, there are all kinds of people it affects. But what do you care? They’re not part of your special little clique. They’re all nothing! Invisible... ignored. The fucking Team, its stupid agenda, and its arrogant, self-important missions. That’s all that matters. Your decisions, your orders, your actions. What makes you think you’re the good guys? You fuck up lives, just the same. Hell, people are just trying to get by and make some money, or keep themselves off the street. But no, you think you know better. And all the time, you’ve actually sold out to the bad guys. Those slimy public figures—you sweep over their fuck-ups, ignore the mess they’ve left behind. And if anything doesn’t fit your image of yourselves? You just dump it, smack down anyone who tries to fight back—”

“Kes,” Niall said, suddenly. “The boy, Kes. You’re related to him.”

Huh? That was the name of the boy who knifed Niall. The air seemed to freeze in the room. My flesh ran cold.

Greg’s head snapped quickly toward him and I didn’t mistake the flash of grudging surprise in his eyes. “So you’re the smart one, Sutherland. How did you guess?”

“Your eyes,” Niall said. His body was very still, and I knew that was a measure of his tension. “There’s something in them now I recognize. Your resentment about the Team and its missions. Your talk of us challenging those who fight back.”

I was wondering whether to pitch in. I was still in shock, but of course Niall would know the look of the boy who tried to kill him. How hard was it for him to look into the memory of those eyes?

Greg’s voice sharpened. “My brother. He’s my little brother. He was young and scared and you all fell on him like avenging gods. You locked him up for life with lunatics and psychos.”

“He tried to kill me, Greg.” Niall’s voice was very flat.

“He was defending himself!” Greg shouted back. “I taught him to use a knife in case he was ever scared and threatened. Why’d you attack him?”

“It wasn’t like that.” I could see Niall was struggling with the memories, with the need to handle Greg carefully.

“Kes isn’t in some lunatic ward, Greg. He’s getting proper psychiatric help.”

“That’s crap, Tanner!”

“How would you know?” I asked, quietly but very clearly. “You’ve never been to see him. He’s never had any visitors or family contact at all.”

A stricken look snagged across Greg’s face, and the gun shook in his hand. I saw the muscles in Niall’s arms tighten.

“I can’t do that. I can’t go to see him, can I? They’ll lock me up too.”

“Tell me, then,” I said. I straightened up from the wall, but I didn’t move any nearer. He was very volatile. “Tell me about Kes. Tell me why you’ve cut him loose like you have.”

THE rain outside was getting heavier; I could hear it pattering on the roof of the trailer. Greg had been silent for a few moments, his eyes flickering fiercely as if he debated with his own mind.

“I’m listening,” I said. *A captive audience*. “Why were you afraid to visit your brother? Surely we didn’t even know you then, you hadn’t joined the Department. We didn’t see any connection between you and the club. You weren’t there during the raid.”

He wasn’t soothed. “Your kind doesn’t need evidence, does it? You’d targeted that place, and the whole fucking lot had to be *cleansed*. They were just kids! They didn’t know what the fuck was going on.” He glared at me, full of pure anger. “I read the report! This great Team of some kind of secret fucking agents, charging in to the rescue. No, I wasn’t there, but then, anyone who was on the payroll would have run the same risk of being hounded and persecuted and thrown in the same kind of shithole as my brother—”

“So you were on the payroll. Of that brothel.”

His tone was defensive now, and maybe a little proud. Misplaced, you might say, but then he was drifting way beyond rational at the moment. “Yes, I was. I helped set the place up, you know? In the early days, it was just a small club, a personal space, just for some special people I knew. They’d helped me when Mom died, helped me start up on my own. They deserved their entertainment, and they were good to the youngsters. They’re the kind of people who know what it’s like to be a kid on the streets. They offer protection, offer an alternative. I was proud to take that.”

I thanked God he was too engrossed in his own narrative to see the horrified disgust I was sure shone in my eyes. I’d met more than a few of that *kind of people* in my life.

He was babbling on, regardless. “That guy you arrested, the one who was the owner? He’d taken the club away from me a year or so back, flooding it with kids who were too young to control, opening the membership far beyond what was safe and discreet. But I... I didn’t have the money any more to keep it going, and he did. I knew exactly how much money he had, actually. I’d stayed on to do their books.

That, and to keep watch over Kes. Anyway, that was until your raid on the place put me out of a job.”

“Maybe you should have moved on,” I said. “With your brother. Did you think of that, Greg? Did you think of *that* alternative?”

He ignored me. His mind was embedded in the past, the memories festering. “Just one morning away from the place... just *one morning!* I *always* visited at least once a day, but I had to go to the bank that day. Just one morning and this gang calling itself the Team sweeps in like human garbage men.”

“Your brother was being used as a whore,” Niall said, his voice steady again. He was with me on this, on nudging the pathetic confessions out of Greg. But it must have cost him, revisiting the mission, hearing the shocking tale from the other point of view. I’d never wished more fiercely that I could touch him, comfort him, support him.

“We came to help the kids,” he said. “Not hurt them.”

Greg whirled on him, a sneer on his face. “What did you know about what help they needed? What help *he* needed? It was all under control for Kes and me, I can assure you. We had a plan for the future, money and transport, I was going to take care of everything. Just sticking it out for another year or so more, then we’d go away. He understood that. It wasn’t so bad there. He was fine with it.”

“You pimped him,” Niall said, unrelenting. “He was one of those kids for *entertainment*.”

“No! That’s crap. I protected him. I brought him up. He relied on me. And now you’ve split us apart.”

“There was no record of a brother on your file when you joined the Department,” I said.

He laughed. “There never has been anything to connect us officially. We had different fathers, or that’s what I assume. Neither of us knew any parent except Mom, and she... had a drug problem. She didn’t bother registering him when he was born. She was careless with stuff like that. We didn’t even answer to the same surname. When she died, we went out on our own, and he didn’t need documents and

numbers. He had *me* to sort everything out. It was the same at the club, and he knew I'd always look after him there. Besides, with all the kids that came and went, it's easy to lose identities, to twist records and confuse authorities. It never bothered us, but I guess it caused problems for *you*. When you took him away, was it easy to establish his identity? To trace any family for him?"

"There was nothing," I said. It had been a bad time for me personally, of course, but that hadn't stopped me poring over notes in the dark hours of the night, finding out everything I could about the raid, following every scrap of documentation I could find in case it looked different on the hundredth read-through.

"Yeah. Nothing there. See? So great, the spies and soldiers of the Team. So great, you couldn't track a few children. So clever, to bully those children and turn them out of their home."

Murderous children. Abused children. Children whose idea of "home" was twisted way out of the normal.

I held out my hand to Greg, palm upward, as if to offer friendship. I took a step forward, away from the wall. Sheri's eyes followed my movements. Her pupils were hugely dilated with her fright.

"But you joined us," I said. "You joined the very Team that had closed down your enterprise. The Team you're so disgusted by."

There was that smile again; the creep of insanity, the curve of cruelty. It was a shocking contrast against the pale youthfulness of his face. "Yes, I did, didn't I? And it was so fucking easy. Easy to smile and open my eyes wide and show gratitude for the chance to work with you all. But it was all for my own reasons. If I couldn't be with Kes, I'd join the very organization that had ripped us apart. To do the same in return."

"You were always planning something?" Niall sounded amazed.

Greg shrugged, like that was the least of it. "From the day of my induction. I just needed to find the right time. Just some minor sabotage and confusion to start it all off... then some deliberate attacks on the precious Project Team." He was looking at us, but his eyes had glazed over. "I'd make you all feel the same pain and misery. Make you see

how stupid you were, how arrogant. And how easy it was to destroy it all, just as you did for me and Kes.”

I drew a deep breath without seeming to. My eyes darted to Sheri, hoping my slight frown warned her to stay still. “And Simon? You worked so well with him, Greg. You may be a fine actor, but I think you had some reluctant admiration for us. I think you were proud to be associated with the Team.” I made my tone conciliatory. “I always saw Simon as your friend and mentor.”

Greg looked at me warily. “He’s the only one of you that deserves any credit at all. The only one who gives a thought for the victims, who cares for anyone beyond Team directives.” I’d been right; he had one hell of a crush on his boss. “I don’t hold him specifically responsible for the raid. I found out who was there, you see. I know the main Team members, and I know those who took Kes away.”

Niall glanced at me. “I don’t understand how Simon could have been so misled by someone who worked closely with him.”

I shook my head. “Greg genuinely admires Simon.” *Cares for him.* “Isn’t that true, Greg?” I watched the young man flush slightly and his brow crease. “That’s what Simon would have sensed when he worked with him. He’d have assessed the loyalty, not suspecting the underlying treachery.”

“Simon found me invaluable.” Greg showed pride again “And I found his protection and his knowledge also invaluable.” His smile was softer, but still chilling me. “Yes, maybe I did enjoy my time there. You all seem to consider each other a family of sorts. But that’s not important to me, is it, because I have my own family already.”

“You let us suspect him, though,” Niall said. “You let us think, however briefly, that he might have had involvement in the attacks. You encouraged us to think that.”

“Niall,” I said, my tone warning. “I’m sure Greg didn’t—”

“But he’s right,” Greg interrupted me. “Whatever I think about Simon personally, he’s still one of you, isn’t he? One of the Project Team.”

“Yes, he is,” Niall said. “Tell us where he is.”

Greg just laughed. “I’ve been watching and following the whole bunch of you for months now. At last I know exactly where every one of you is—and it’s information that you don’t have yourselves! That’s a good feeling, Niall Sutherland.” His eyes darkened and he brought the gun around to point towards me again. “And now I can deal with you both. Properly.”

I WAS measuring the distance between us and the gun—thinking how I might distract Greg, how I might keep him from going for the others first—when Niall’s words startled me.

“What makes you think you’re going to be any more successful now, Greg? I mean, we all still seem to be around, despite your efforts. All those attempts... all that planning. And we’re still alive.”

“*Niall.*” What the hell was he doing?

Greg flushed with anger this time. “Fuck off, Sutherland. I can still kill the girl, you know. I can still kill you *all.*”

Niall shrugged. He’d also taken one step away from the alcove, moving back into the room to stand beside me. “But you haven’t managed it so far.”

“What the fuck are you trying to do?” Greg sounded amazed at Niall’s rash behavior. Chances were we all agreed with that. “The whole Team’s in chaos! I think I’ve caused enough damage so far to impress even you. Lam’s lost a leg—”

Niall sighed, as if the whole thing was starting to bore him. “No, he hasn’t. He’ll soon be walking again. He’s a very resilient man, you see.”

Greg’s eyes narrowed. He didn’t know whether to believe Niall or not. Judith was now playing things very close to her chest, and obviously the news from the hospital hadn’t filtered back to base yet. “You’re just saying that. I know how you’ve all fawned over Judith and her relentless climb to power. Not any more! There’s failure and disaster written all over her precious Team. If she survives, she’ll never

be allowed on anything more than junior field work again. What has her loyalty for her people done for her? The silly, devoted Cissy—”

“She had nothing to do with Dove!” It burst out of me before I could stop myself.

“Yes she did, as much as any of the Team’s personnel. She was Judith’s right hand, wouldn’t you say?” His mouth slid up into a smile again. “And what worse thing can you do to a leader than disable their right hand?”

Disable... his vicious little bomb had *killed* Cissy, whether the strike had been aimed at Judith or not. It had hurt Judith more than she’d ever admit to us. I had to say that I’d never felt I could kill a person in cold blood before, but staring at Greg then, I felt the first glimmer of a pure, white-hot hatred.

“And Brad Richards...” Greg was continuing. It was like some hideous litany of his, his resume of sadism. “The mysterious Brad, closeted away with his gadgets and his secrets. Hanging around Simon, thinking he’ll share his life and affection, thinking he’s a match for him, when he’s only got half the brains and nowhere near the charm.”

His expression twisted with the jealousy he probably thought he’d kept well hidden. I wanted to rip his fucking head off for what he’d done and what he was saying about my friends and colleagues! Greg had no idea of Brad’s strengths and resourcefulness. He’d seen the attraction between Brad and Simon, but he’d underestimated its depth and devotion. Or chosen to ignore it. He accused *us* of arrogance, but who the hell was he to talk?

“So will Brad be the one to chase after his partner? After my elusive boss?” He caught the flash of shock on my face, and knew he’d guessed that right. “Maybe he’s on the way even now, trying to find out where he is. *How* he is. So let’s see what happens if he finds him. That’ll be nothing but useful for me.”

My face felt drained of blood.

Niall stepped forward again, arms held out at his side to try to reassure Greg he wasn’t threatening him. But from the clench of his fists, it looked like he was barely holding himself back. He spoke through gritted teeth. “All right, so Judith is devastated, but she’s still

leading this Team. We'll still follow her; you can't destroy that loyalty. You're a fool if you think we're so easily swayed. Joe will recover eventually. Brad will find Simon and release him and your whole vendetta will crumble around you, a catalog of inefficiency and clumsiness that the whole Team will pick over in years to come as a study of how spectacularly you failed—”

“No!” Greg raised the gun. Sheri shrank back on the couch.

“Shit, Niall!” I gasped.

“I think you're jealous,” Niall persisted. He stood a little way in front of me now, and I could see the glint in his eyes. “You probably wanted to be on the Project Team yourself. You spent all your time pretending you were no kind of a field agent, just happy to be on the support side, loyal and unassuming and amenable to others. But that would mean you'd never get a chance to move on up the organization. You'd never be anything more than an assistant.”

“I don't need the Team!” Greg's eyes looked wild. “I don't need your praise, your contempt means nothing to me. I'm the one who wrecked your homes and your lives, remember? I'm the one in charge. I'm the one with the *gun*.”

My heartbeat doubled.

“So who's to be first?” He hadn't slipped the safety yet, but surely it'd only be a matter of seconds before he did. “You, Tanner? Or maybe Niall, the guy with all the brave talk tonight?” He took a step toward us.

We both stood transfixed, but only for a second.

Then I stepped in front of Niall.

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“TANNER, you stupid *bastard!*” Niall’s snarl was vicious.

To my surprise—and let’s face it, my momentary relief—Greg laughed. “Tanner, he’s right. You truly are a stupid bastard. If he wants to push me to shoot him, let him, right?”

I dropped my gaze, shaking a stray hair from my eyes. My voice faltered. “Greg. Please. Look, can’t we talk some more? Can’t we make any of this right again for you?”

Greg looked disgusted. “I despise you both. There *is* no right for me anymore. Niall here is nothing but bluff and aggression, and you, Tanner—well, you’re just pathetic. I can’t believe how eagerly you want to give yourself up for him. Just to give him a few more minutes before I shoot him as well. It’d be touching if it weren’t such a romantic cliché.” He glanced between our faces, curious. “But then you’re close, right? The pair of you. Or at least you used to be. They talked about it at the office. The two of you couldn’t keep your hands off each other. Someone said they caught you once, making out against the vending machine. That there were places in the parking lot that were regular venues for your lunch hour. They said you’d once been living together in that apartment I blew up.”

Greg hadn’t known much about us in the early days of Mission Dove. By the time he joined the Team, we were on our slippery slope toward splitting up, and we were probably nothing more than the subject of scrawled graffiti on the toilet wall.

“That’s got nothing to do with any of this.” I could see Sheri’s gaze on me, fascinated despite her fear.

Greg laughed. I had my eye on his gun. He’d lowered his hand a few inches. “I’m not so sure. I heard you lost the plot for a while. Not as reliable, not as careful. Not as smart. I think your mind must have

been someplace else. Maybe down Sutherland's pants. Wasn't he interested any more?"

I frowned, looking angry. "I tried damned hard not to let it compromise anything professionally."

Greg looked at Niall's equally angry face, then back at me. He seemed to be enjoying the tension between us. "Maybe Niall doesn't agree with you. He doesn't seem to think much of your *professionalism* here tonight. And you've messed up before, haven't you, Tanner?"

"Fuck off," I said, but with little energy. Like he said—*he* was the one with the gun.

"The subject of two internal investigations in three months, Tanner MacKay." He was taunting me. "They all talked about that. About *you*."

"It's over," I said shortly. Greg knew I was on suspension. "I'm on my own now, aren't I? Maybe you're right. I fucked up one time too many."

"Tanner, shut up!" Niall hissed behind me. "For God's sake, he doesn't need to hear all the sordid details."

Greg sneered. He seemed to be enjoying our discomfort, especially mine. I shifted in front of him, blocking his view of Niall, demanding he look at me. "Just let Sheri go, Greg. She really is no good to you." I sneered. "You know how they are, girls. They cry and howl and generally get in the way."

Even through her tears, I could see Sheri's eyes glare at me.

Greg seemed to give it some consideration this time. "Why should I? I'll lose my hostage. Give you and Sutherland the chance to plot some way of fighting back."

It was *my* turn to laugh, and there was a hell of a lot more bitterness in it than his. "Me and Sutherland? Don't talk about us like we're still an item. Okay, so maybe we had something going once. But you heard *all* the rumors, didn't you? How we fucked up a surveillance, fighting like school kids? The bastard punched me! He got me suspended. It's his fault I'm here in this hole, stuck with its lowlife, scraping up a living, no respect from anyone anymore."

Greg looked taken aback at my outburst. “Judith talked about you coming back into service.”

I snorted. “She’s a smooth one. She said that to keep the industrial tribunal off her back, didn’t you know? No, there’s no question of it. She wants me out. She blamed me for the debacle at the club when your brother was taken, she blamed me for the fight with Niall when he was the one who started it. He’s the Team’s hero. *I’m* the villain of the piece.” My breath was short, and I knew my eyes would look wild. Greg certainly looked shocked by me. “Just don’t include me in with him like that. I’ve got no desire to work with him again. Shit, you saw how it was when you brought him here. He can’t stand my guts. He’s only here under sufferance.”

Greg shrugged, but I could see a flicker of relaxation in his eyes. “It makes no difference to me how you two work together.”

“Except that maybe it does.” I moved another step toward him, my whole attitude the embodiment of a man on the edge of panic. “It was Niall who was there in the thick of it at the club. *Niall’s* threat that your poor brother struck back at. I was just trying to keep the peace, to be honest, but he wouldn’t listen to me. Even then I knew what a psychotic bastard he could be. He saw them all as enemies, even the innocent kids.”

Niall had nothing to offer but a gasp behind me. Sheri went even whiter.

Greg raised an eyebrow. “You were in the Project Team together. You were together off duty too. Lovers, they said.”

I laughed again. “So because he was in the Team I have to respect him? Because I *slept* with him? Hell, Greg, I can admit I made some bedtime mistakes in my life, and Niall Sutherland was definitely one of them. He treated me like shit, and still hardly has the time of day for me.” I brushed my hands against each other as if I swiped unpleasant dirt from the skin. “But I dropped him just as quickly.”

“Tanner.”

I ignored Niall’s low, urgent grunt. I smiled fully at Greg. “Can’t say he was much good in the sack, either.” I stretched my arms and

arched my back, as if remembering physical events of the past. “He comes *way* too quick. Distinct lack of imagination as well.”

Greg’s lip curled. “So you’re happy to pass the whole blame on to him, trying to save yourself? That’s some kind of betrayal, Tanner.”

I shrugged. “Just know which side my bread’s buttered, that’s all.” I appealed to him again, moving slowly across the room. “I can help you out of here, Greg. I know them all on the site. Let the girl go, and they’ll get you an unregistered car and whatever else you need. You can be away from here before anyone gives the alarm.”

The dynamics of the room had changed quite significantly. Suddenly there were three of us together on one side of the room, gathered around the couch. There was the card table between us and the kitchen, the radio balanced precariously on top of it. And then there was Niall.

All on his own.

Greg looked at me, then at Niall’s face. He seemed to like what he saw there. I was having difficulty facing the man, myself. But then I knew what expression of hatred he’d reserve for me.

“Okay,” Greg said. “You can untie her.”

SHERI was still huddled on the couch, trying to get the circulation back into her hands. Her eyes were swollen from crying, and her mouth was marked with a red rash from where the gag had bitten too deeply into her skin. I’d hunkered down by the side of the couch to reach the ropes that Greg had used to bind her, and now she looked down at me with as much suspicion as she did her abductor.

I rolled the ropes around my hands, aimlessly looping them up. “I can take her out of the trailer—”

“No, you fucking can’t,” Greg snapped. He’d watched me carefully while I untied the knots. My fingers had been pretty clumsy, but he hadn’t moved from his position by the couch. He could cover all three of us with the gun from there. “She shuts up, and she stays here for the moment. I’ll let her out when I choose.”

I straightened up. I made sure not to step any closer to him. “Look, let me help you. I want to show you I’m not here to add to your grief. I can be really useful to you, Greg. I’ve got no loyalty to the Team, after all. Not after the way they’ve treated me. And definitely no loyalty to *him*.” I dipped my head in Niall’s direction.

“I’m going to kill him. Kill you both. Are you talking about helping me with that?” Greg looked bemused.

I bit my lip. “Okay, whatever. Maybe we can negotiate what you do with me. Maybe not. But if that’s what you need....” I heard Sheri whimper softly behind me. I gave a sly grin. “It’d be rather fitting, wouldn’t it, to have one Team member kill another?”

Greg was aghast. “What crap is this? I don’t know what’s got into you, MacKay, but I don’t believe it. You wouldn’t do it. You’ve lived with him. You’ve fucked him!”

“Jeez.... It was just one of those things, Greg.” I guess I sounded pretty embarrassed about the whole damned business. “A lot of guys go through it, you know? Just an experiment with my sexuality. An immature identity crisis, I expect the headshrinkers would call it. I like girls, too, to be honest. Maybe if I help you out, you’d give me the girl for fun.”

Sheri moved angrily at that, as if to throw herself at me, but I pushed her back on to the couch. I glared at her.

Greg was watching me even more closely. “Niall tried to save you when I shot you. He stayed around when I thought he’d be racing out of here to save himself.”

I mustered up the hatred that had festered inside me for months and I glared at Niall. “So he’s a fucking fool. So he has some kind of death wish. Still doesn’t mean he can have my ass.”

“*Bastard*,” Niall hissed. He hadn’t moved, but his eyes were dark, boiling pools, and they were fixed on *me*.

“Shut up, Sutherland.” Greg’s gun wavered back around to cover Niall.

But he hadn’t told *me* to shut up. “Look, Greg. I understand you, believe me. You and Kes. You’ve been pushed around and excluded all

your life, and all you wanted to do was set the pair of you up for a reasonable future together. You see, I've never fit in either. I didn't know my dad, like you. I left home early, had to make my own way. And it's no better at work. They all tolerate me, but they've never treated me as an equal. Niall was fun for a while, but even he never respected me." I let the slightest of sobs catch in my throat. "You were right, Greg. I've fucked up, but I was never given any chance to redeem myself. I let them down, and now they all despise me." I stepped away from Sheri to stand closer to him. "I'm well out of it. Fucking Project Team! I hate them all. They used me like they used you, Greg. Like people used Kes. Sounds like your little plans for revenge have come none too soon." Greg was looking confused, and I kept talking. "That was what your brother thought, you know. He said as much to me before Niall came bearing down on him—"

"*What?* He said...?" Greg's face had blanched, and his pupils were dangerously dilated. "Did he speak to you?"

"Whatever." I shrugged. I settled carefully on the balls of my feet. I risked a glance at Sheri and flickered my eyes to the door and back. She'd shifted a little so that she was on the end of the couch nearest to the door. I didn't know if she were taking any notice of me. I also didn't look at Niall, even out of the corner of my eye. It was probably best I didn't, at this very moment. "I mean, of course he did, obviously Simon mentioned it somewhere along the way, didn't he?"

"No!" Greg's cry was anguished. "He never said a fucking word about it. There was nothing on e-mail, or in anyone's notes."

There was a slight hiss from the table, not loud enough that anyone was distracted.

"What did he say to you?" Greg came right up toward me, brandishing his gun. "Tell me what the fuck he said! Did he call for me? What did he say about me?"

The hissing noise was louder now, accompanied by a crackle of static. Greg whirled quickly back toward the table to see Niall bending down, as if to touch the radio.

"Back off!" Greg shouted.

“Tanner, stop him!” Niall cried. “We must answer that call. It’ll be from Judith, telling us what the plan is.” He reached for the mike, and he was nearer to the table than Greg. But Greg had the gun.

We both moved at the same time. Just as Niall got to the table, I flung myself at him, knocking him away. Greg pointed the gun at us, but it was difficult for him to establish any kind of target with both of us flailing about in front of him. We were shouting together too.

“Niall, leave it! You can’t do anything now—”

“Tanner, you’re scum, you hear me? All you had to do was hold him back while I took the call. Which fucking team are you playing for now, anyway?”

“Mine! I’m on *my own* fucking team. The team that’s going to save my ass!”

“Bastard! Selfish, fucking bastard!”

We wrestled fairly uselessly for a moment or so, grunting and swearing at each other. Niall slammed me against the wall, his lean body moving swiftly across Greg’s line of vision. I saw Sheri staring at us, amazed. She was up on her feet, and I really wanted to see her moving toward the door.

The radio hissed again, and I saw Greg’s eyes glint with a sudden sly light. “Shut the fuck up!” he yelled, and for a second we both paused, panting, hands gripping each other’s clothing. “Guess I’ll take that call. Maybe *I’ll* enjoy knowing where the rest of your colleagues are and what they’re planning.”

“*No*. Don’t you dare!” Niall’s expression was furious.

But Greg reached smugly for the radio, planting his hand confidently on it as he looked for the microphone.

And then he screamed.

We both flinched at the loud, unearthly wail that sounded like it came from his very gut. His eyes grew unnaturally large and his legs shook, jerking up and down at the knee. His arm went rigid where he touched the radio, his hand clasped to it as if glued. The set rattled on the table, and Greg’s body started to fall back. The gun clattered to the floor as his free hand reached out helplessly for some salvation.

Neither of us moved to offer any.

Sheri was screaming, too, by now. She looked terrified that Greg would fall on her.

“Don’t touch him!” I yelled to her. “The current’s running from the radio through him. Move *away!* Niall, get the gun.”

It was all a blur: Greg on his way down, Niall diving to the floor to grab the gun. I was twisting, trying to regain my footing, trying to get Sheri out of the way. I could smell burning, of both wiring and flesh, and there was a loud hum in my ears as the radio’s remaining static crackled and spat at us all.

Timing was critical.

Greg’s shocked body was still shuddering from the contact with the radio, his legs stumbling erratically toward the couch. Niall was on the floor, but had the gun in his hand and had him covered. But Sheri was sprawled awkwardly half on, half off the couch, her body about to get really tangled up with Greg’s. Why he hell hadn’t she moved out of the way? Obviously she was too scared, too shocked, too bruised. I was desperate by now. I launched myself across the room toward her, knowing Niall couldn’t do anything to Greg until she was clear.

Greg crashed down on to the couch, but as he fell, his free hand grabbed out at Sheri. He couldn’t speak or aim; it was a reflexive movement. Sheri cried out and wriggled out of range of his grasp, but her body thudded against me, halting my headlong dash. We both tumbled to the floor. I heard Niall curse in the background, and the pain in my hip told me I’d caught the edge of the table as I went down. The radio rocked, its cord popped out from the wall, and it also fell. The heavy, awkwardly shaped casing thudded into Niall’s legs as he crouched beside the table. I heard him yell in pain.

We were all going down; we’d lost control of the scene. We rolled on the floor, a mess of expelled breath and twisted limbs. I wrenched my head around, trying to see who was where.

Greg lay on his back on the couch, his mouth open, his voice making incoherent sounds. He looked terrified, shocked, and presumably very, very angry. The gun had slipped out of Niall’s grasp when the radio hit him, and he was scrambling to retrieve it. I was

doubled up with the agony in my hip, and my vision was clouded with involuntary tears of pain.

But I had no trouble seeing the flash of a blade; Greg had drawn his knife. At the same time, I saw Sheri's slim body move across him, her cries high and hysterical. I didn't know what she was trying to do, but it looked like she was trying to wrestle the knife out of his hand. Niall was also scrabbling back up on his feet, though I couldn't see if he had the gun. They both converged on Greg, even as I tried to pull myself up to support them.

There was a cry of pain, and Sheri wheeled away from her attacker, clutching her hand. I could see blood on her palm. I also now had a clear view of Niall and Greg. Sheri had bumped into Niall and knocked him off balance; he fell back on one knee on to the jumbled cushions of the couch. Greg was still shaking and his eyes didn't look in focus, but he was obviously alert enough. Turning toward Niall, he grabbed Niall's shoulder and thrust his knife up toward his chest.

I was up off the floor in a second. I don't remember directing my limbs; they just acted of their own volition. I roared with some amazing sound that didn't even sound human, and I threw my whole body at Greg, my long legs carrying me across the narrow width of the trailer like a falling tree.

Time suspended, just for that moment. I saw Niall turn to me with *that look* on his face—shit, that was only a memory, surely, wasn't it?—and I had the memory of a boy crying. I saw the slice of a blade through clothing and into flesh. I smelled the fresh, sickly thickness of drawn blood....

Niall!

I snatched back my mind from both the past and the future. I gripped Greg's wrist with a strength I didn't know I had, wrenching it back and away from Niall. My eyes misted over, and I felt the sudden ache of new pain in my injured arm. I heard Niall's cry, and it sounded anguished. I couldn't see the knife, couldn't make enough sense of it all. Had I been too slow? Had it happened all over again?

I heard the barking of a dog, a sharp, shocking noise against the human cries.

Then my limbs seemed to lose control like the strings had been cut on them. I sank to the floor amongst a jumble of bodies and furniture and angry exclamations. I saw Greg's legs take him in a stumbling path toward the door; I saw Sheri lying on the floor on the other side of the room, sobbing.

"*Fuck!*" It was Niall's voice, I'd never been so glad to hear him cursing in my life. It meant he was *alive*, didn't it? "He's getting away!"

The trailer door burst open, letting in a gust of cold air and a hissing wave of rain. And then the silhouette of Greg's body hurtled outward into the night.

NIALL shouted something incoherent.

I hadn't passed out. When this was over, I thought crazily, I'd wonder whether I was pleased about that, or whether it would have been a blessed relief, because everything hurt like fuck all over again. But not now. Not *now*.

The coil of rope that Greg had used on Sheri was lying on the floor, within my reach. I grabbed it, and I slung it as hard as I could at his retreating feet. It was a poor throw, though he was moving erratically, like his own legs weren't responding well. I think I caught at his ankles because I heard him grunt. But I knew it wasn't enough to stop him. I knew we'd lost him. I was aware of Niall's body over by the couch, but he wasn't moving much, and I *really* didn't want to think about why that might be.

I had to get up somehow, even though nothing on or in my body seemed to be working properly. I had to stop Greg. Our guns were outside, under the trailers. He'd be armed again in seconds, while we were still groveling about on the floor and Sheri was still vulnerable—

Then suddenly he vanished from view. It was really odd. He gave a cry of furious surprise and his whole body sank beneath the doorway. Had he dropped down for some reason? Had he fallen? All I could hear was the rain and the wheezing of my own breath. I lay on my belly,

fighting down waves of pain and nausea, and then I dragged myself—far too slowly—over to the open doorway and peered out through the rain and darkness.

Amazing things were happening outside in the previously deserted trailer park. There were way more shapes than Greg's, swirling in and out of the shadows. I heard the sound of running and some loud, shouted orders in a woman's voice. I couldn't really compute that one. My vision was still blurred, and my brain felt as if it had been hit by a baseball bat, then folded into the size of the ball and squashed into a plastic souvenir cup.

I thought I saw a silhouette that couldn't have been anyone but Junk, and then I definitely saw Greg's blond head rear back up. Everything was lit eerily by the dim lamp light that was spilling out from inside my trailer, and then distorted by the rain. I couldn't judge the distances. I tried to raise myself on an arm that felt increasingly like it was made of marshmallow to shout out a warning to the big guy.

Seems I didn't need to.

In a whirl of shadowy limbs, a slim figure leaped up and shot a straight leg out at Greg, connecting decisively with his gut. Greg doubled up, grunting with pain. I saw his knife flash, but it spun out of his hand and away, flying in a glittering arc in the wet darkness. I heard a muted cheer, but that may have just been a symptom of my delirium. The shadowy figure straightened, then dropped onto Greg's hunched figure again, and I didn't mistake the loud scream of pain from him that time.

I heard only one coherent word from him—“*Bitch!*”—and then he collapsed completely onto the rough ground with a thud, like a sack of wet sand.

Someone turned on some lights in another nearby trailer—it may even have been Junk's own place—and the area outside my door was suddenly brightly illuminated.

I could see Greg lying face down in the dirt, one of his legs twisted awkwardly under him. Several other figures stood by him. I recognized Phil and Zac and a couple of Junk's older sons. Junk himself hovered by his trailer, his face turned toward my door,

obviously looking for Sheri. For a second, all the participants seemed cast in gray stone, their silhouettes frozen around the prone body.

Then Greg made the smallest of movements. Every single person whirled around to look down at him. A woman stepped out from behind Junk; she'd been unintentionally hidden from my view. She moved with both grace and determination, and was clothed in tight-fitting black shirt and pants. Her hair was soaked and clinging to the shape of her head, but I knew it would be blonde when dry. Her breath was steady, and she took up a fighting stance as if she were born to it.

Her appearance was accompanied by a snap of Junk's fingers and the slick crunch of guns being cocked, all at once. Several other figures stepped forward, and I heard the snap of many switchblades. Greg had every inch of his body covered by assorted weaponry. There were guys in a circle around him that I'd never seen before on the site; guys who had tattooed muscles where I still had puppy fat; guys that'd make me re-think my life insurance many times over before I disagreed with them.

Dylan trotted slowly forward, his tongue hanging out, and he placed his front paw on Greg's neck. His coat was shining and dripping with the rain, but his eyes were as bright as usual. He growled, and the body fell very still.

Judith—for of course it was she—turned to look at me. Her smile was very grim, but unmistakably full of triumph.

And then I passed out.

Thursday 01:50

I FELT a great lassitude in my limbs. I didn't really want to wake up. Did I?

Sheri's voice rattled in my ear, demanding attention. I recognized the tone. It had the soft lightness of a young woman, but the vocabulary of the family she lived with.

"Mac, are you okay? Mac! Tanner! Whatever your name is. Speak to me, for fuck's sake."

"Watch your language, girl." That was too low a pitch for her, unless she'd been taking testosterone for recreational purposes. Must've been Junk.

Sheri snapped back, but her voice sounded shaky. "I'll fucking watch my language when he answers me."

My eyelids felt as heavy as if the Statue of Liberty and her sister were perched on top of them, but I slowly dragged them open. I was still in my trailer, now laid back in a half-slumped, half-sitting position on my less than comfortable couch. I doubted I'd be keeping this crappy piece of furniture much longer, despite whatever sentimental value it might have gained over the last few days. It had seen too much action, of a variety of kinds.

"Sheri?" I grunted. "You okay?"

"Shit, Mac." Her face swam into view, her dark red hair drawn back scrappily from a pale, blotched face. She didn't look quite as carefully groomed as usual. Tears were rolling down her cheeks, but she didn't seem to notice them. There was a small cut on her lip, and she nursed her hand to her chest. It was wrapped in a very efficient bandage.

"You look good." I smiled.

“Good?” Her expression struggled between distress, relief, and insult. “What the fuck do you mean, spouting crap like that, after all that’s happened, when we nearly got killed, and I must look such a mess.”

“Just like I said.” I sighed. “Girls. Always crying and howling.”

“You bastard.” She was frowning and smiling at the same time. It was an odd kind of combination. “You saved me, Mac. You saved my life!”

I tried to wave such nonsense away. I couldn’t really take the credit, could I? I could hear shouting outside the trailer and the throaty sound of powerful vehicles. Zac’s birds were screeching loudly in the distance. I couldn’t hear the rain on my roof, so maybe it’d eased off, but the park sounded like it was humming with the excitement of recent events. A few neighbors poked their heads in at my door, so obviously people were moving back into their homes.

Inside the trailer, there was a small knot of visitors by the alcove to the kitchen. I started to get up, but Junk’s head whipped around from the middle of a muttered conversation with Phil. He glared at me.

“Get the fuck back down on that couch,” he growled.

It looked like—yet again—there were people around me who insisted I take it easy. Lying injured on the couch was getting to be a bit of a bad habit. But I sank back gratefully. The throb of pain in my arm had woken up at the same time as me.

Phil had followed Junk’s look, and everyone saw I was awake again. There was a buzz of new sound, and Judith pushed her way to the front of the group. I was amused to see the big guys parting ways to either side of her.

“So glad to see you.” I grinned. “Boss.”

Judith smiled back. She looked tired and drawn, but as fierce in her defense of her Team as ever. Just a little tousled, where she’d obviously dried her hair with one of my less-than-luxurious towels.

Junk stood behind her, almost protectively. He looked a little dazed by her. *Join the club.*

“You really got him, Judith,” I said, my voice dropping to a warmer tone. “I don’t know why you came over here when I told you that Niall and I had it all under control, but I’m damned glad you did.”

She raised a fine eyebrow. “I said we’d be over to back you up, Tanner. Last time I checked, it was my job to give the orders, not yours. I’m only sorry it took us so long to get here. We only arrived at the end of it all, as Greg was making a break for it.”

“And isn’t it *your* job to have guys to do the heavy stuff for you?”

She was disconcerted enough to blush. “I was a field agent before I took the desk job, you know. Nothing wrong in keeping up the training.”

“In special cases.”

She nodded. “In special cases, indeed.” Her eyes met mine. *This one was personal.*

I grinned again, though there was a painful tug to my shoulder that made it difficult to move any of the muscles around it. “Joe Lam’s going to be glad he’s found someone who can whoop his ass on high days and holidays. You make a perfect couple.”

Her brow furrowed. “Tanner, you may be injured, but that’s no excuse for appallingly rude personal comments.”

“Hey, cut him some slack,” Junk broke in, and to my surprise, Judith didn’t immediately slap him down. “He knows a kick-ass woman when he sees one. Like we all do.”

I saw Judith’s mouth open, then close again. I was even more amused to see a flush appearing on her cheeks.

Junk grinned at me. “Just look at this gal! She’s got the balls without needin’ to carry the bat between her legs, right?”

I bit the inside of my cheek very, very hard trying not to laugh. “Right, man.” I saw Judith was nursing her left leg, standing slightly awkwardly. “Your ankle again?”

She shrugged, but when Junk pushed her gently to the couch, she sat down quickly beside me. “It’s okay. It’s just flared up again from the activity. I’m already having treatment. Joe says I should consider

acupuncture, and we'll discuss the benefits when he starts a course for himself..." She broke off, as if embarrassed at talking about something personal.

"Someone told him yet you took the guy down yourself?" I asked softly. She shook her head and we exchanged rueful smile. I imagined there'd be hell to pay when Joe heard she'd put herself back in the front line. Despite a physical equality in their work, I suspected they might both be harboring a strong protectiveness towards each other. The way she'd rushed straight to the hospital; the vulnerable tone to his voice when he'd spoken to me on the phone. I felt a strange warmth at being back with her, at sharing things again.

"But what the fuck happened?" Memories were trickling back into my mind. I looked across at the door, suddenly reminded of Greg's strange exit. "Greg was groggy from the electric shock, sure, but he could still have dodged you and run for it. But he went down outside the door like a ripe pear from a tall tree. What happened?"

Judith grinned then, a smile of pure pleasure. "Don't I always say the simplest strategies are the best?" Junk coughed rather self-consciously behind her, and she laughed. "This smart man came back to the site at about the same time as we arrived."

"Junk?"

He had the grace to glance away. "No one fuckin' tells me to leave my own park, you know. Especially not kids like you two. Ruthie just needed settlin' with her cousin in town, then most of us came straight back."

Judith pursed her lips. Maybe it was her turn to hold back a smile. "Junk showed me the quickest way to your trailer, the way through the back so that Greg wouldn't see us approaching. We had no way of knowing what lookout arrangements he'd made, what weapons he might have had. And then when we heard the furor inside the trailer and heard someone fumbling with the door, we had to find a quick and safe way of stopping his flight."

"So?" I stared at Junk suspiciously.

"I took the fuckin' steps away," he said cheerfully. "I said your trailer was a box o' crap, didn't I? Those steps ain't been fastened

properly for months. You can kick 'em back 'n forth, easy as pie. Dylan knows it well, he's been nosin' around 'em the last couple o' days, seekin' any more shit left behind by that kid. So I just whipped 'em off to the side, and when that bastard came out front, he took a runnin' step into fresh air. Never saw it comin'. And once he was down, he never had a chance against kick-ass princess here."

"Call me Judith," she said, a little tightly. I smirked and stored Junk's nickname away for future reference. From the glint in her eye, she *knew* I had.

"And Niall..." I said, slowly. I'd been biting my lip, trying not to gabble on about him, trying surreptitiously to read Judith's expression. "I mean, if he were hurt *badly* or something, you'd have told me by now, right? If he had to go to hospital... if there were any kind of serious problem at all."

"Well, of course." Judith looked genuinely startled. "I thought it'd be the first thing you asked, but I didn't know what you remembered, how you were feeling, so I didn't say anything directly. Surely you knew he was all right?"

I breathed a little more deeply. "Yes, I knew. You see, no one does a bandage quite like Niall Sutherland." I smiled pityingly at her confusion. "I saw his handiwork on Sheri. So I knew at once he was okay, more or less. But now that's enough of the chat and the update on Greg's capture, and I just want to know that Niall's *more* okay, not *less*, and I'd appreciate being put out of my suspense as soon as fucking possible."

Another body pushed through the people by the door, and then Niall was beside me. I stared at him—no, much more than that! I drank in the sight of him. My eyes ranged up and down him, checking him for injury and finding nothing. No searing stab wounds; no bloodstained shirt; no cold, gasping breath and tortured gaze. He looked tired and messed up, but his eyes were steady and warm and welcoming like some kind of human hot chocolate, and he was offering the whole damned sweetness to *me*.

"Sheri says you saved her life." He smiled. I was watching his smile, reading the meanings behind the words, just enjoying the low

timbre of his voice in my ears. “And then, dammit, you saved mine too.”

“He didn’t...? The knife?” I didn’t seem to be able to make a decent sentence. I reached out a hand, and he moved quickly to crouch beside me. He held my hand and let it rest in his own. His movements nudged Judith to one side, but she didn’t protest. I wasn’t about to, either. I only had eyes for him.

“No, he didn’t get me. You got to him just as he tried to stab me. You took the back edge of the knife on your injured arm, and it reopened your wound. That’s what your pain was. I was winded, and I couldn’t get up fast enough to stop him escaping. All I could see was you on the floor, and blood all over your chest....”

I looked down at my shirt then and saw the mess for myself. Someone had ripped the material apart at my upper arm, and I was sporting another of Niall’s professional bandaging efforts. I was in considerably more pain this time around. Guess my body was getting well and truly pissed at being target of the day, *every* day.

“But you’re okay,” I said, a little stupidly.

“Yes. Thanks to you.”

We continued to stare at each other for a while, until Judith coughed for our attention. “Did you see Greg carrying anything other than the gun and the knife?” she asked. “We’ve searched the trailer and the path from his car to here, but we can’t see any more evidence of explosives or hidden weapons.”

Niall shook his head. “I think he was at the end of both his resources and his imagination. His whole vendetta was folding up around him. That just made him all the more desperate.”

Sheri appeared at Junk’s shoulder, holding the rope I’d thrown. “But you got the other guy out as well, right?” she said, looking from us to Judith, then up at her father. “The cute blond? Greg had a pile of this rope, and much thinner stuff, and he’d wrapped it all around him, along with some electrical-looking gadgets like Phil has in his trailer. I didn’t know what it was all for, but then he dragged me out into his car and we set off for here, so I never got a chance to say anything to the poor bastard.”

Much thinner stuff... electrical-looking gadgets.

Niall's eyes met mine, wide and shocked. "Fuses," he said. "Detonator." He didn't need any more in the way of explanation.

The other guy....

I lurched up, feeling the pull on my wound all over again. "Simon!"

How the fuck could we have forgotten the danger he could be in?

"Brad's on his way to find him. Brad's going to walk right into whatever booby trap Greg set up." I was babbling, I knew, but it didn't matter because Niall was already reaching for the battered radio, and Judith grabbed a cell phone from Junk's hand. She spoke rapidly and sharply and then clipped it shut.

I met her horrified eyes.

"There are people on their way now to that hideout," she said. "Believe me, they'll be there in minutes."

"Call Brad!" Greg was in custody and no longer a threat to us. But his legacy still held one of our Team members in captivity—our friend—and it sounded like he'd still had some of those explosives left to play with.

He'd left one hell of a calling card.

Thursday 02:20

WE ALL waited for the call. I'd never felt so tense in my life. Phil hunkered down with Niall and got the radio working well enough for us all to listen in. Judith stood at their side, trying desperately not to look as fraught as she obviously was. Now and then the cell would ring and she'd go off to answer the call in privacy by the kitchen alcove. At one point, I could see the anger in the set of her shoulders, and she seemed to be bawling someone out. Seconds later she was obviously more satisfied with the response, and was nodding firmly.

Sheri tried to get me to rest, but I batted her away and went to sit on the floor beside Niall. She didn't complain. In fact, she brought a cushion to me and tried to get me as comfortable as possible. Then she went to stand beside Junk as our small group clung to whatever hope and prayers we had to call on.

When Brad's voice came through, there was a collective sigh throughout the room.

"Status report, Brad," said Judith. Her voice was very tight, but she was obviously trying not to snap. "Both you and Simon."

Brad's voice sounded odd, as if he were sleepy. "We're... alive. I'm at the hideout. I'm injured, but not badly. There was a small explosion on my entry, and the door burst apart in my face. Simon is..." His voice failed.

"Why have we lost transmission? Is it the reception?" Judith urged someone to explain, *anyone*. Phil shook his head, bemused.

"No, I'm here," came Brad's voice again. Now he just sounded distraught. "I'm sorry, Judith. I only have my small portable radio with me, and anyway this is... hard."

I caught Niall's eye. If I looked half as miserable as he did, things were bad. Brad's voice continued, shaky but tenacious. "Simon is bound at the far side of the room. He seems to be connected up to some

more explosives. It doesn't look too sophisticated, but I'm no expert. Trouble is, when I came in and the first bomb went off, it seems to have triggered the fuse on the stuff around Simon."

"You mean he's primed now," Niall said.

"Yes," Brad answered. "I don't know how long we have."

I had a sudden, vivid image of Brad staring desperately at Simon across a dirty, abandoned room and yet not being able to go to him. My chest tightened painfully. Niall was watching me but I couldn't even formulate words to explain my vision.

"Can he talk to us?" Judith leaned in beside me.

"No, his mouth is sealed too. I... don't want to get too close... in case there's more... in case I accelerate it." Brad's voice got suddenly higher and faster. "I need help here, Judith. I don't know enough about explosives. It could be ready to blow any minute."

"You should get out, Brad, while you can," she urged. "I have bomb disposal experts on their way now—"

"You should know better than to say that," he snapped back, sounding more like the Brad we all knew. "I'm staying here. We get saved or we go down together. Whatever it is, I don't go anywhere without him."

Niall looked up at Judith, keeping his voice low so that Brad didn't hear. "What about Greg? Can we persuade him to tell us anything about the device?"

"No time," she muttered back. "He's on his way to a high security facility with federal agents. They'd not release him quickly or easily enough." I saw her hold his gaze. "Niall, you must help him disarm it."

Niall stared back at her. So did I. "Judith, I don't have specialist knowledge of explosives." I thought it was fucking amazing he sounded so calm. "I can't see how it's configured, can't see what we're really dealing with. I could only guide him through the basics."

"So we'll have to hope Greg knew no more than that," she said. "At least until the experts get there."

“We can’t risk it,” Niall persisted. “I think Greg did know more than that.”

“But so does Joe,” I interrupted. Everyone turned toward me. “Look,” I rushed on. “Joe Lam is more of a combat guy, I know, but he has a damned good knowledge of weaponry as well, almost as good as Niall. And he’s been studying the explosion at Niall’s apartment. Maybe he has some idea of what Greg used, how he set up the devices, if he has some kind of signature.” I could feel the weight of their gazes on me. I could almost hear the crackle of Brad’s breath on the other end of the radio connection. “I mean, I don’t fucking know, do I? But it’s worth a try.”

For five seconds, I don’t think anyone breathed.

Then Judith nodded and handed the cell phone down to us. “You call him, Niall. I’ve programmed in the hospital number. Tell them you’re calling on my behalf and they’ll connect you to Joe.”

Niall stood up, flipped open the phone, and keyed in the number. As he waited for it to answer, he looked into my eyes. “This is okay with you, Tanner?”

“Fuck, of course it is,” I said, but I knew what he was saying to me. He was asking if I was truly rebuilding my bridges, if I’d truly made peace with myself. Three months back, I’d have rather cut his hands off than have him spend any more quality time alone with Joe Lam. But then, I’d been the prick then, hadn’t I? I was on a new lease of life now. “I want you to work with him on this, Niall. We’re all on the same side. The two of you will work it out. We must save the guys. In fact, I’m fucking well *insisting* you do this!”

“Okay, okay.” His mouth quirked in a small, twisted smile. The hospital connected him, and he moved away from the radio to hear his call more clearly. He swiftly started speaking to Joe.

I turned back to the radio. “Brad, how much did you hear of that?”

His voice was just a thread by now. “You mean you and Niall arguing? Just like old times.” The joke was weak. His voice caught again, and he continued more slowly. “I understand you want me to disable the bomb on Simon. Niall and Joe will talk me through.” There

was a scuffling noise in the background, but it might just have been interference. “Look, Tanner, if anything happens to us, I want you to know how much we care about you all—”

“No, it’s cool,” I said quickly, breaking in. “Don’t say any more. You’ll both be fine.”

There was silence from his end, then soft shuffling as if he were easing his way a little nearer to Simon. I could hear him murmuring words, but I couldn’t make them out. From the soft, caressing tone of them, I knew I wasn’t meant to. They were for Simon alone.

Niall came back over with a grim expression and an open connection to Joe Lam on the cell. He spoke directly to me, not Judith. “Joe thinks that Greg had a favorite way of setting his detonators in a domino effect. That’s what happened at the apartment. It sounds similar to the initial explosion at the hideout, when Brad broke in. There can’t be many stages to find in a small house, so if we can disable a switch somewhere along the line we can probably delay the process until the bomb guys get there.”

Phil spoke gruffly, stepping forward from beside Junk. “I know about detonators,” he said. “I can help some. So long as you ain’t bothered how I got the practice.”

I started shifting backward on my ass, to keep out of their way. “So get on with it!”

Thursday 04:10

THE low, muttered conversation had been going on for many long minutes. I was too far away to hear all the words, but it felt better for me to have some distance. Occasionally Niall turned toward me, and I could see the sweat on his face and the white of his knuckles where he held the cell phone to his ear. I guessed it was going well, but I had the hideous feeling that I'd only know to the contrary if I heard a God-awful explosion through the radio. Phil was standing close to Niall, offering help when needed. I prayed the radio connection would last long enough to get through the job.

Sheri sat beside me on the couch with a glass of water for me. She was also watching Phil.

"He's done a good job," I said, just for something to break the tension. "Are you two dating yet?"

She swung around, a look of surprise on her face. "He asked, but I don't know... fuck it, Mac, I didn't tell you, did I? So how come you know that stuff? You drive me nuts. If you hadn't saved my life, I'd kill you myself right now."

"Funny kind of gratitude, I must say." I felt very weary. I was terrified about Brad and Simon, and if I clenched my fists much tighter to keep back the pain from my arm, I'd be through to the bone.

She was peering into my face. "You know why I haven't said 'yes' yet, don't you? It's because I've been waiting for *you*." She had such a refreshing bluntness; I think I was meant to be flattered. "You're cute, and you're good to me. I like you. A lot." She was trying to sound so cool, but she blushed regardless. I hoped Phil was going to be good to her, too, else I'd want to know the reason why. "But you've just got me really messed up."

I knew I'd regret it, but I thought I owed her the discussion anyway. "Why's that, honey? I never meant to."

“You and this guy, Niall....” She pushed an escaping lock of red hair back behind her ear and frowned as she concentrated on her words. She looked so confused and so much younger that I wanted to hug her. “Couple of days ago I thought you were an item, even though—let me tell you—I think that’s just the most disgusting waste of two such *hot* guys, you know? But then there was all that crap you said about him to the terrorist guy....” When she faced me again, her expression was very bleak. “Was that all true? That he treated you like shit and you were glad to turn him over? You were really upset, and then you were *fighting*, for fuck’s sake. You said you hated each other’s guts, you even offered to kill him. And the look on his face....” She put a comforting hand over mine. “Shit, Mac, there were a couple of times I thought he’d go for your throat!”

I listened to her perceptions of Niall and me from the last hour or so, and I was sobered. I knew I’d sometimes had those thoughts myself, over the past few months alone. The hatred, the anger, the aggression, the resentment. I knew how they felt, deep in the core of me. I’d put passion and sincerity into everything I said to Greg. But I also knew what an actor I was.

I’d never been happier that I could occasionally turn that dubious skill to my advantage.

“It was an act, Sheri,” I said, as gently as I could. “It was something we planned between us. Anything we could think of to unnerve Greg, to unbalance him. I wanted him to despise me, to think me no better than the shit he and his brother had heaped on them in their lives. So that’s what I showed him. I was a failure in my work, suspended from duty. Niall had nothing but contempt for me. He needed to see Niall and me as hostile. Then I could pretend an affinity with him while Niall was the bad guy. He could enjoy the fact we hated each other, rather than banding together against him.”

“The business with the radio?” she asked, in a small, rather sulky voice.

“Niall had it wired up so it shorted the live to the casing. I kept Greg preoccupied, and then Niall pretended we were going to receive an important message. It tempted Greg to touch it first. We knew he’d

get a hell of a shock. I just needed him distracted, then we'd overpower him. Though it didn't work quite as I hoped."

"I got in the way," she said.

There was growing distress in her eyes. She'd been through such a lot, and I reckoned she was underestimating the effects of shock. I heard a gasp from the group of people around the radio and was desperate to know what was happening. But Sheri's hand was still on mine. I think she'd forgotten she put it there.

"No you didn't," I said firmly. "You hear me? You helped us. You had a go at him yourself, didn't you? Hurt yourself, too, which I won't forgive any of us for. Anyway, we're friends, and I value that. We sorted him out between us. It's all over now."

"Not just with the Greg guy," she said, her voice very low. "I meant I might have been in the way with Niall too. I'm sorry."

I smiled. "Look, I think you and Phil will have a lot of fun together. I'm not exactly your dream guy, but I've never been that to anyone, so I wouldn't know what to do to live up to it."

"You are to him," she said, and suddenly her face cleared. "To Niall. I mean, he's a good actor like you, you know? You both had *me* fooled." She blushed, embarrassed about it. "But when he wasn't looking daggers at you, he had a really deep, strange look in his eyes."

I thought it might have been the anticipation of "mission-mode" that she'd seen. But didn't I know now that Niall was made up of a whole bunch of other feelings that I'd only scratched the surface of? I was hoping I'd have a good long time to burrow beneath that surface.

"You look stupid," Sheri said, grinning broadly. "A right dork. If you could see your face... like you're in love or something. Two *guys*, sheesh! What a fucking shame."

"He's everything to me," I said. Quite suddenly, it was all very clear to me. "I want him. I need him. I'm not at my best without him. Shit, I'm nowhere *near*! I want him with me all the hours we can spare; I want to know he needs me in return. I want to come home to him, to know I can talk to him when I need to sort things out, and I can hold him when I need comfort. And I need to know I can do all the same

stuff for *him*. I want to tell him how he makes me feel—that I feel warmer, and richer, and smarter, and sexier.” I grinned, partly in amazement at the strength of my feelings, partly because I’d finally owned up to them. “And you know what? He *always* made me feel that way, it was always running underneath all the shit and the tension. We just let the crap take over. Fucking shameful. And now he’s done it to me again over these last few days. Woken me up to how pathetic I’ve been, kicked my ass like no one else does, brought all the feelings back.”

The affection. The love. The passion.

The need to roll us both down on to some nearby surface and be fucked by him until my body’s so worn I don’t have the breath to beg or laugh or cry out with pleasure any more.

Sheri’s eyes were wide as she listened to me. I grinned again, suddenly just as embarrassed as she’d been. “I’ll tell you more about it one day.”

“Think you’d better tell *him*, not me,” she said sharply, but her eyes were sparkling. “Guess he knows already, though. *Sheesh*. I still say, what a waste.” She slipped quietly off the couch as a man walked over to me. It was Niall. He ran his hand through his hair like he was exhausted, which he probably was. But his face was creased with a triumphant smile. Behind him, I could see Phil and Judith doing high fives and Junk fighting off what looked like the urge to bear hug her. There were excited cries and calls out to the people outside the trailer. We had quite an audience tonight.

“It’s okay,” Niall said, knowing I’d know what he meant. Knowing I’d know he knew I knew—oh, whatever. “We disabled the switch nearest to Simon, and then the bomb unit guys arrived. They seemed to think it was a walk in the park for them to take it from there. They dismantled the whole thing. Simon’s free, and unhurt.”

“Brad?”

“He’s okay. His upper body took a bit of a beating from the initial explosion, but there’s nothing broken. He’s exhausted and a little in shock, so they’ve taken him to hospital. But apparently the both of them were demanding they were taken there together, and they were

calling for Judith to authorize early discharge, so they sound like they'll be back in circulation pretty quickly." He smiled at me, and it had nothing to do with Simon or Brad or Joe or Judith. "They said thanks to us. To us both. Simon was understandably a bit emotional, but he kept babbling that we made a fine team."

"Look, Niall...."

"I heard you," he said, simply. The smile got softer. "I heard what you said. About what you want and what you need."

"Shit." I sighed. "That smile of yours. Does it for me every time." We gazed at each other like grinning, inarticulate teenagers for a bit longer, but neither of us seemed to care. "So how soon can we have this place back to ourselves again? What I really need are some elephant-ass painkillers and some rest and some fucking privacy."

"Never a truer word spoken," he murmured. "But then you always did try to speak enough for us both."

Guess he caught me unawares, because there were people moving through the room around us and I was half watching them. Whatever the reason, the next thing I knew was him leaning down and sliding a hand around my neck. Then, ignoring any of those other damned people, he kissed me full on the mouth.

It was nothing short of pure, perfect bliss. It was sweetness and sympathy and a rough, sexy sensuality, all rolled into one, deep kiss. I opened my lips and his tongue thrust hungrily inside me. I reached my good arm around his torso and pressed my mouth back against him, murmuring my pleasure. He tasted of tiredness and tension, but every damned flavor of Niall Sutherland was nectar to me. Maybe someone else around us grunted, maybe someone laughed nervously. Like I cared. This was all I wanted to do for *at least* the next three months of my life, and I wasn't too sure whether I'd even bother to break off for food and some washing of my essentials.

And I heard the words, whispered into my mouth, for me alone. *I love you.*

I wouldn't have had it any other way.

We broke at last, gasping for breath, shared saliva still glistening on our lips and our fingers curled into each other's clothing, gripping us together like we didn't want to be parted. And like I said—that was *exactly* what I wanted.

“Niall,” I panted, and watched the desire flicker in his dark pupils. “Whatever I said to that maniac earlier, I'd say that entitles you to have my ass any day of the week you care to choose.”

He smiled. He understood. And he wanted me too. Just as I was.

Judith cleared her throat in the background. “Time to go,” she said. Junk and Phil were still whooping away until she caught their eye. They sobered up pretty quickly.

I glanced at my watch. 05:30. *Good God.*

Now wouldn't you agree that all I needed was for all those other guys to hurry up and get the fuck out of my trailer?

Four weeks later

I ROLLED over slowly on the mattress and groaned. An elbow dug into my waist, and a stray fingernail scratched down my arm as I pulled it out from under the sleeping body beside me. *Got to get a bigger bed.* But then I thought the same thing every morning, these days. It was a large single, and let's face it, the trailer didn't really allow for king-size anything, but sharing it regularly with another person was far from comfortable.

But then, comfort can be way overrated, can't it?

The sun was that special color of too-early bright, making my brow crease with complaint. My body ached, and it felt like I was dragging myself up from a really late night and some unusual physical exercise that utilized muscles that had been sleeping for far too long. I was squashed up on one side of the bed so that my foot hung down over the edge, and the pins and needles were just starting to aggravate me. My right leg was bent awkwardly under my left knee, cramping the muscles of my thigh.

I grinned.

Like I'd want things to be any different.

I slipped my legs over the side of the bed and shook my foot back to life. I stretched my arms up, feeling a couple of joints pop satisfactorily. We'd spent the previous day out on the trailer park, working with Junk and Phil and the others to finish up the repairs on the damaged homes. Things were almost back to normal on the site now. The only thing left to be fixed was my set of steps. I wasn't sure I'd bother to change them now. They were a kind of memorial to the end of a scary time.

Niall stirred behind me and breathed out a half-snore.

I grinned again. The unusual physical activity wasn't just to do with working around the site, of course.

I flexed my shoulders, feeling his steady breathing tickling my back.

“You do that one more time,” came his voice, muffled into the pillow, “and you can forget about breakfast for another hour.”

I licked my lips. Then I flexed my shoulders again. Breakfast was another overrated thing.

His hand curled around my bare waist and tugged. Hard. I tumbled back on to the bed, and the sheet slid carelessly to the floor. He rolled me on to my side and spooned up behind me. I could feel the whole line of his bare body up against mine. We liked to sleep naked. Actually, we liked to do all sorts of things naked.

“You said I could have your ass any day of the week,” he growled. “This is another day starting, right?”

“I’m not keeping a diary.” His cock rubbed a thick, damp, early-morning warmth against my thighs. “But twice already since we came to bed last night sounds kind of self-indulgent.”

“And three times sounds downright greedy.” His tongue slipped out and licked at my ear. I arched back against him, unable to do anything but respond. Unwilling, to be honest. “And that’s what I *am*... greedy. But not for breakfast.” He shifted carefully behind me, scooting down the bed. I imagined it was *his* turn for a foot or so to be hanging off the side. Then he started to lick his way down my spine, and I started to moan in earnest. My skin shuddered with each lapping stroke. I could feel his smile widening as my goose bumps sprang up against his lips.

When he got to my ass, he pushed my upper leg up, bending the knee and exposing me to his tongue... and his lips... and his *hands*, nestling around my painfully erect cock, slicking my own leaking pre-come around me and pumping almost lazily. Damned fine, *strong* hands....

“And I got bagels.” I sighed in mock sorrow. He laughed softly and continued pumping. At the same time, his tongue licked slowly and languorously up and down between my buttocks, the sticky saliva dribbling down the inside of my thigh. He lapped a trail down to the

irresistibly sensitive patch behind my balls, and then sucked one into his warm mouth, savoring it there for a while.

I was almost sobbing by now. “Fuck the bagels, Niall. No, wait, fuck *me*.”

His answering sigh made my balls shift and wrinkle against his chin and my cock jump in his palm. “Shut up, Tanner.”

I did. Remember, it’s not often I do what I’m told without any say in the matter.

His hands released my cock, leaving it quivering just this side of total agony, and they returned to my ass, prizing my buttocks apart, stroking the flesh with his thumbs. His tongue flicked its strong tip at my entrance, softening it, lubricating it, stimulating the nerve endings around it. I was panting now. I could feel myself relaxing and contracting with his caress, the puckered skin peeling open, shamelessly anticipating more than such a teasing touch.

I bit my lip because my begging was getting far too common, however much he claimed it turned him on.

He tugged at my hips and brought me up on to my hands and knees, then wriggled himself into position behind me. He let go of me for a moment to stroke some lube along his cock, and nudged it eagerly between my cheeks. I dropped my head to the mattress. Maybe I was sore from a lively night already passed; maybe I felt well and truly used. But I was just as eager. My legs spread further apart and I reached for my own swollen cock to cajole it to another aching, spurting climax.

Like I said—comfort is overrated. At least in comparison to the joy of Niall’s body lying over my arched back, his hot breath grunting into my neck, and his hand tangling into my sleep-tousled hair, gripping me close to him as his cock slides into my ass.

Breakfast was looking even further away.

WE HAD an early lunch surrounded by neat piles of Niall’s paperwork. Things had been pretty quiet since that night Greg was caught, and

we'd both been allowed some vacation time. Lots of it, really, if you considered the usual statutory allowance for the Team. Either Niall felt more guilty than I did, or he had a stronger sense of commitment to his work. Whatever the reason, he'd offered to carry on with some research work he'd started a few months ago and asked for the files to be sent over.

I'd sort of helped him, on and off. And then I took a call from Judith one afternoon and agreed to do some correspondence training for a few guys who were looking to take on a role like my own. Guess I was feeling my own sense of commitment stirring out of its laziness.

We were both reinstated, both back on the payroll. Niall had bought a new couch for the trailer to celebrate. I'd bought us some outrageous new sex toys, including something with a remote control that was fun to play with when I was in the kitchen and he was languishing in bed, *indulging* himself.

He didn't complain.

Judith had also taken leave and was rethinking the Project Team. She'd come over to meet us yesterday to tell us she was suspending operations for a while. It had been a difficult conversation.

"The Team was seriously compromised," she said. She looked very worn. Her confrontation with the powers above her couldn't have been easy. But as she continued to speak, I thought I detected a relaxation in her manner. Maybe it had been a huge burden for her all this time.

"We should never have fallen prey to Greg. He played to our weaknesses and highlighted our vulnerabilities. From what you told me, he had some of the issues right. Maybe we *were* too arrogant."

"We did damned good work," I murmured.

"And we never suspected attack from within," Niall protested.

"Then at the very least, we were appallingly naïve. The Team will be suspended for the time being. I'd like you both to stay on with the Department, of course, and you can be deployed on other work. Then we'll review the situation in six months. Will you consider that?"

Niall looked at me, and we both turned back to her. He answered for us both. “We will, of course.”

“But you will promise to review the Team?” I sounded quite vehement. “You can’t deny the success we’ve had so far just because of one guy’s grievance.”

She smiled back at me then. “You and Niall have both suffered a great deal because of that one irrational young man. So have the others. I’m not sure that I can face risking that again.”

I grimaced. “But the Team has been one of the best things in my life, boss. Doesn’t that count for anything?”

She stared at me and sighed. Her smile was slow and her expression grateful. “Yes it does, Tanner. Joe will join me in the review, and maybe together we’ll make something stronger and safer next time.” When she went to leave us at the door, she shook our hands, then dropped them and hugged us instead. It was all kind of emotional, but I rather enjoyed it.

She went down my shaky steps with her minder keeping fairly innocuously to the side. I saw Junk standing outside his own trailer with a beaming smile on his face that wasn’t for us. I was embarrassingly pleased to see Judith go over to speak to him before she left.

WE’D talked about Judith’s visit at the time, but tonight I returned to it, as we lay together on the new, vastly more comfortable couch. We were listening to some traditional jazz on the new sound system that Niall had asked Phil to make up for me. The speakers were unbelievably clear and were reproduced in every corner of the trailer; the controls needed nothing more than a nudge to balance the sound beautifully. Niall even had it fixed up like I used to have it in my apartment, turning itself on as soon as we came in from outside.

“The Team will regroup again, I’m sure,” he said. “It just needs time. The internal investigation will take months, I expect.”

I nodded. “You heard from Simon and Brad since the first couple of weeks?”

He smiled. “Heard *about* them! They can’t be parted. All that time of keeping a low profile, now apparently they’re Couple of the Year at the Department and loving the whole damned notoriety. They’re off fieldwork of any kind, but their specialty is on support, of course, and they’re invaluable wherever they are. They said they’d come over next week.”

I snuggled up against him a bit, and maybe he took it as a cue.

“Are you worried about the job, Tanner? The Team?”

“Not sure it’s the job for me after all,” I said slowly. “Can’t deny I’ve made some royal fuck-ups. Maybe this is the prompt for me to take a break.”

He tensed against me, but he didn’t insult me by shouting me down. I could almost feel him gathering the words in his mind before he spoke. He was much more forthcoming these days, and it was astoundingly welcome.

“You’re very good at your job,” he said. His thoughtfulness was like a special gift to me. “You always have been. The mistakes haven’t always been your fault. The way you played Greg was magnificent. I couldn’t have done it like that. You saw what would provoke him, and what would placate him. You saved us all, probably.”

“And you? Do you question your future with the Department?”

He was quiet for a moment, but I was a man of change too. I was teaching myself to allow him time to think, restraining myself from leaping into his silences with impatience and provocation of my own.

“I’ll see. I’m enjoying a break from what you call my ‘mission-mode’ for a while.”

“You look good on it.” I lay back against his chest and could feel his heartbeat, deep and steady against my own. *Fucking fine*. I didn’t curse quite so much nowadays, at least not aloud. Getting mellow, I guess. It wasn’t the worst way to be.

Niall shrugged, but his voice sounded pleased. “I’ve had some discussions with Phil. There are new components on the market that we

think we could make up into cutting edge sound equipment. It's just a thought, but he's very skilled on manufacture."

"What about Sheri?"

Niall sighed. He knew my teasing by now. "Yes, she was there too. They're good together. She needs to talk about it, though, every now and then, with someone who understands. I mean her kidnapping, the scenes with Greg. It's her way of coping."

"And you're her confidante, not me," I said gently. "It's cool."

"And I want to spend time with *you*," he murmured against my ear. I turned so that he wouldn't get a mouthful of hair and got a mouthful of my kiss instead. It was hungry again; seemed we were always hungry for each other.

The couch sagged with satisfying flexibility as I twisted on top of him and nipped at his throat. We were heading for another session of touch and passion and satisfaction. I wondered if he'd tested the couch in the shop before he bought it, lying back in its comfort with thoughts of me beside him, sinking my head back against the cushion and spreading my legs to grip around his hips....

It was a pretty fine place to be.

IT WAS when we were yawning and ready for bed—to sleep—that he put a hand on my arm and turned me to look at him.

"Tell me what's on your mind, Tanner, if it's not the work for the Team."

I shrugged. "It's nothing maybe. Just wondering when you'll be looking for a new apartment. I'm sure the Department will still help. Guess I could go back to my old place, too, some time. Brush off the cobwebs, get used to those five flights again."

He pursed his lips. "We could look for somewhere together."

We could indeed. My heart started beating faster, and I didn't think it was because of the thought of all those stairs. Dammit, I felt

like a giddy kid again. He did that to me on an embarrassingly regular basis.

“But not yet,” he continued.

“No?”

“I’m happy enough here, aren’t you?” He looked worried, really, at the thought of moving back out. We’d made quite an impact on this trailer park, but they didn’t seem to want to stone us out of it yet.

“Yes, I am. It’s good. We’re good here.”

“And if we’re not, we have Dylan to watch our steps for us.”

We both smiled at that. Junk was still getting used to Niall, but Dylan gave his full approval. Apparently, he still thought he had to keep up his guardianship, in case of future attacks. He often slept at the foot of my trailer steps, he checked out every visitor we ever had, and he accompanied Niall all the way out of the park every time he went to the store.

It was a good feeling.

It was late, and we’d made out all damned evening to the sounds of smooth, sexy music, but Niall still ran a hand down into the small of my back and sighed *that sigh* that told me his mind was on fucking, not faithful friends.

Damned guy was insatiable. Thank God.

“I’m sort of tired,” I began weakly.

“Won’t take much of your time,” he wheedled. His mouth brushed at my jaw, and I instantly relaxed, like I’d stepped into a warm, relaxing bath. “After all, don’t I come *way* too quick?”

I remembered a long, lusty session last night; wave upon wave of pleasure and torment as he took me up to the brink of orgasm and back again; the sight of him lifted above me, shining with sweat and eyes glinting in the darkness, for hour after hour....

Who the hell ever said that about him?

Then I remembered and groaned. “You’re never going to let me forget that.”

“...and I have *a distinct lack of imagination*....”

“Shit.” Of course, that had been a total fabrication. In reality, Niall’s imagination made my heart sing and my toes curl. Niall’s imagination startled me into erotic pleasure time and again. Niall’s imagination was deep and sometimes rather dark, and way beyond normal description.

But maybe he’d believed me. Maybe my acting had been just that little bit *too* good.

Then he laughed softly, the vibration thrumming against my neck, and I let him tease. It was all part of the delicious game we enjoyed together now. His fingers slid into my loosened pants, and I nudged my hips up against him. He had me off balance; he had me captured. He had me fooled, time and again, and I didn’t care.

Yeah, this was definitely the *very best* place to be!

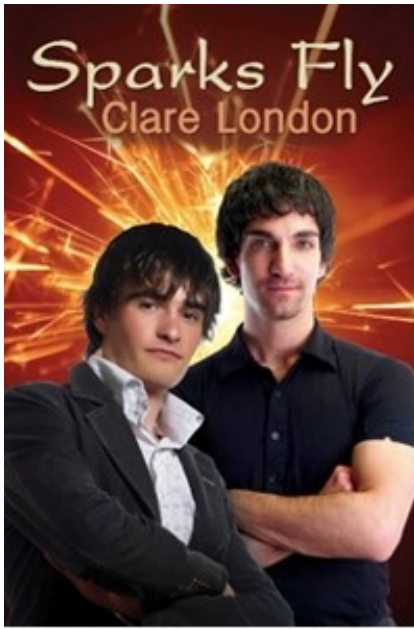
CLARE LONDON took her pen name from the city where she lives, loves, and writes. A lone, brave female in a frenetic, testosterone-fueled family home, she juggles her writing with the weekly wash, waiting for the far distant day when she can afford to give up her day job as an accountant.

She's written in many genres and across many settings, with novels and short stories published both online and in print. She says she likes variety in her writing while friends say she's just fickle, but as long as both theories spawn good fiction, she's happy. Most of her work features male/male romance and drama with a healthy serving of physical passion, as she enjoys both reading and writing about strong, sympathetic, and sexy characters.

Clare currently has several novels sulking at that tricky chapter three stage and plenty of other projects in mind... she just has to find out where she left them in that frenetic, testosterone-fueled family home.

Visit Clare's web site at <http://www.clarelondon.co.uk> and her blog at <http://clarelondon.livejournal.com/>.

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