

# **Catalyst**

**D. Andrew Campbell**

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**D. ANDREW CAMPBELL**

**Novels by D. Andrew Campbell**

Catharsis

Catalyst

Catastrophe (Coming 2015)

## CATALYST

For my family,

For my students,

And for my grandfather.

None of this is possible without you



## PROLOGUE (the before- we-get-into-it-again part)

It has been a little less than a year since that dark night I willingly took another human's life. I have now performed the same awful task three other times, but it's the original deed that will forever stay with me. The feel of Mr. Black's life draining away as I held him still haunts me as I try to rest at night.

Don't get me wrong; I'm not saying I regret what I did. I don't. I still believe to this day he had to die for what he had done to Lazy and me, but killing a person is not something easily wiped clean on the ol' moral slate. It is something that *should* stay with you. It should never be an easy decision. The other three people I have since chosen to retire from the living world all deserved what happened to them, too, and their deaths still haunt me. But not like his does. They died in the name of justice. Mr. Black? He died to fulfill a sense of vengeance.

Since that late autumn night last year, I have dedicated myself to becoming stronger, faster and more agile. I have to believe I was inflicted with this cursed

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infection for a reason. I was given these powers for a purpose. I've come to accept the truth about my powers stemming from darkness, and the influence evil will have on my destiny. But until the day the Dark Hunger finally consumes me and I can no longer fight it, I will continue to focus on the golden light of goodness driving me forward. I still have a choice in this life. And I choose to be a force of good.

And now I no longer have to face that choice alone.



# **PART ONE**

## **-The Evil-**

## CHAPTER ONE

I watch the handsome, well-built man cross the street and walk into his small, immaculately-maintained house, and I wonder - not for the first time this week - if he will become the fifth person I've ever killed. His death is certainly not my intention as I follow him, but I've come to learn over the past year that sometimes my - let's call them "darker" - instincts have a bad habit of exerting control over me when I become extremely emotional. Usually it's just anger. A good bout of anger still has the ability to flip my time-to-go-rampaging-crazy switch. I'm getting better at controlling it, but it's a slow process. And this tall, blond, impressively good-looking man is rumored to have made some choices that could very well prevent me from controlling my decisions.

Truly evil people tend to have that effect on me. And I should know about evil; for over a year now I've been

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hunting people so that I can drink their blood. It's not all necessarily by choice, though. It's either that or starve to death, and I fear what might happen to my soul if I choose to abstain from eating and commit suicide. I've been given the ultimate version of "screwed if you do, and screwed if you don't". I either commit a sin by feeding on other people to stay alive, or I commit a sin by not feeding and eventually killing myself. (Thanks Fate for that sick little twist on life!). So I choose a life drenched in evil so that I may do the greater good. I use the evil that's in me to try and make the world a better place (At least that's what I tell myself every night as I lie in my homemade sensory deprivation box – I refuse to use the word 'coffin').

And if Renny is right about this guy, then the blond man definitely qualifies as a steaming sack of something nasty. What that particular *nasty something* is will be up to me to find out.

Tapping the small microphone on the band around my neck, I whisper into it, "Are you sure this is the guy? I've been following him for almost a week, and I've seen nothing suspicious. Maybe he is innocent like he's claimed."

The response comes from an earbud that's been tucked into my pocket. With how sensitive my ears have become, there is no way to actually have the speaker *in* my ear without it also causing me pain and possibly deafening me. Luckily with my heightened senses, I can still pick out my friend's words quite clearly. From a tiny wireless speaker. Turned down to the lowest volume setting. In my pocket. Some days it really does pay to have superhuman senses.

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"It's him, Cat. Don't let his charisma fool you. He's a complete toad. Once you get close enough to him, you'll be able to feel the slime on him. I know it. He might be able to fool people from a distance, but in your presence he'll fall apart. I know he's guilty. Just confront him already."

I've begun to believe that Ren is a bit jealous of my powers, and his having to stay back at the warehouse and guide me from a distance is slightly emasculating for the poor guy. Ren has become a good friend over the last several months and his guidance has been invaluable, but at times *his* drive for justice and vengeance (and occasionally even bloodlust) outweighs mine. I like the guy, but sometimes his insistence can get on a girl's nerves.

"Ok, Renny. Don't get so worked up. If you say he's responsible for those girls, then I believe you. I'll take care of it tonight."

The response is slow to return (And his tone is a bit grumpy.), "Thanks Cat. And you know I don't like it when you call me that..."

Smiling, I tune out anything else he says and concentrate on my prey across the street. Due to the sensory overload of being out during the daytime (I have gotten a lot better at tuning out extraneous sounds and smells, but it is still something I'd rather avoid. The fewer distractions, the better.), I had planned this particular encounter for late evening. Thankfully late autumn has been very beneficial to me with all the extra hours without a blazing sun overhead. I can now begin my hunts much earlier in the day.

The fit-looking, light-haired guy I've been following for nearly a week doesn't appear to be evil at first glance.

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He just looks like a middle-aged surfer who has settled down into a normal job to live out the rest of his life in obscurity (As an accountant according to Ren.). But that's not who he is. He just puts up a really good front.

According to the papers (and the court documents that Ren managed to get his impressive little fingers on), this man, this Mr. Chadwick Morrin, is allegedly responsible for the disappearance of half a dozen young girls and for the appearance of some frighteningly inappropriate pictures of them online. But nothing has been proven. He claimed, quite effectively, that he was just the victim of coincidences (wrong place, wrong time shenanigans) and bad luck (Amazingly enough, there is more than one Chadwick Morrin who also exists in this world and who can also make poor choices and dilute the police databases.). That plus his added good looks and disarming grin have helped him walk away from all charges.

And that is where I come in. I am a force that is unaffected by a person's looks or charm. Well, that and the fact that I've developed the ability to prevent somebody from lying to me. It's an ability that tends to painfully twist the – let's call them cognitive intestines - of the receiving party.

And that's just too bad for Mr. Chadwick Morrin.

## CHAPTER TWO

From my perch on his neighbor's roof (When you have the ability to easily scale the side of a building using just your fingers and raw strength, it becomes a tough habit to abandon.), I can tell Mr. Blond Ex-surfer has settled down for the night. His evening routine this past week has been rather...routine. Home by six, mostly downstairs until about nine (Assessed by following which lights he turns on.), and then upstairs in his bedroom for the rest of the night. Watching him has been mind-numbingly boring, but I want to make sure he's guilty before confronting him (My normal prey of drug kingpins and poison-pushers had to take a backseat when Ren came up with the idea of meting out justice to a different kind of corruption who thought they were above the law). Unfortunately, the past week spent watching him and his house has given me no evidence towards his innocence or guilt. Ren is right (And wouldn't he just love to hear me say that!); just watching him is getting me nowhere. I need to take this to the next level.

Frowning, I look down the street to my left at the unmarked police car that's also been tailing this guy the entire time I have been. Judging by their absolute lack of

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subtlety, I'm guessing they don't plan on catching him in the act of doing anything nefarious. They just want him to know he's being watched. They want to prevent his next act of horror and debauchery (Or at the very least delay it from happening.). That's a great plan for them; unfortunately, it also prevents me from catching him in the act and determining his guilt. As long as they've been watching him, he's been nothing but an upstanding and model citizen (Or maybe he truly is innocent, and they are harassing the poor man. Maybe the reason I can't catch him doing anything wrong is because he was right about the coincidences and bad luck. It wouldn't be the strangest thing I'd ever heard of.).

I can't approach the front door with the police watching it (No point letting them know I'm involved. Or that I even exist for that matter. I've stayed under their radar so far, and I don't want that to change now.), so I'm going to need to find another point of entry. Until I know for sure he's guilty (or at least suspect it a lot more than I currently do), I won't just break into his house. That leaves the back door. Which could work.

Lightly leaping off the house's second-story roof and away from the two officers of the law in the dark blue sedan (The same strength and agility that allows me to climb the house with little effort also allows me to drop the thirty feet to the ground without injury. It truly is a wonderful ability to have.), I jog a circuitous route through several yards and a side street until I find his fenced-in backyard (Low, evenly spaced, white-washed boards. The man does know how to landscape well, I can tell you that much.). With a quick hop, I jump the fence and walk the short distance towards his glass-windowed back door

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(There are blue and white curtains blocking off the view of the yard, though).

"Be careful." I hear Ren's voice pipe up from my pocket, and it startles me (not an easy thing to do).

"Why?" I ask him as I step onto the beautifully finished deck surrounding the rear of the house. "It's not like he's violent. Or a threat. At worst he's a child-abuser who takes on people much smaller than himself and does evil things to them. At best he's just a guy with good taste in lawn decor and a case of bad luck. I'll be fine."

"Think about it, Cat. If he is guilty, then he's very crafty. He may keep his violence saved up for teen girls, but he's also smart enough to get away with it. Don't underestimate him. Seriously. He worries me."

I pause and experience a flashback to every bad action movie my dad ever made me watch where the partner warns the main character of danger, and the cocky protagonist just shrugs it off. "What?" They say. "Me in danger? No way." And then they open the door and the bomb goes off.

Ren's smart. Really smart. If he's worried, then it's for a good reason.

"Ok, buddy. I'm going forward with eyes open and senses alert. Let me know if you notice anything I miss."

In a quieter voice, he responds, "Thanks Cat."

Looking around the back deck nothing appears to be out of the ordinary or throws up a beware-of-crazy-resident flag. There are no obvious booby traps out here (Then again isn't that supposed to be the point of a booby trap? Not easily seen.), so I step up to the door and lean in close to it. Inhaling as deeply as I can, I let my sense of smell take over and filter what it can from the air seeping



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through the doorframe of the house. I can detect one person inside and exceptional cleanliness but very little else (Dirt and filth actually have a scent all their own, and I've become rather adept at figuring out the tidiness of a house just from the smells.). There are a few other random scents peeking through the chemical cleanser fog, but I can't really place most of them. He appears to be a single guy who likes a clean house.

"Nothing odd so far," I whisper just loud enough for the microphone on my neck to pick up. "I can smell him inside and lots of chemical odors like bleach and disinfectant. Nothing out of the ordinary, though."

"Can you hear anything?" Ren asks through the tiny, piping earpiece in my pocket. He's known me long enough to be used to my odd assortment of abilities. Actually he's adjusted to them much quicker than I have (Must be that whole happening-to-someone-else thing that makes accepting their oddities a bit easier.), and he seems to delight in witnessing them in action. Even if it is often just over our two-way radio.

"Just him walking around the first floor. A television is on in the front room - sounds like a car commercial. And I think he's making dinner. I'm pretty sure I heard dishes in the kitchen a moment ago, and that would help explain some of the odd smells I picked up earlier (Having not eaten a normal meal in almost a year has hurt my ability to recognize food scents. It's annoying)."

"Sounds normal enough, but I still don't trust him," he tells me.

"Agreed," I respond before something catches my attention. "Wait. His heartbeat and breathing just

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changed dramatically. They're speeding up. Something has him nervous or excited."

"What is it?"

"Heck if I know," I hiss back at him. "I'm out here, remember? I'm not picking up anything aside from his vitals changing and the fact that he stopped walking. I think he's just standing in the kitchen. Maybe he's excited for dinner (I miss being excited for a home cooked meal. Shoot. I miss just being home. But that's a depressing avenue of thought for another night. I don't need the distraction.)."

"I don't like it, Cat."

"Accepted," I pause and stare at the door and what might be waiting for me on the other side of it. "I'm going to knock and see what's up. Maybe I can catch him off guard. Keep your ears on and your voice off."

"Be careful," he whispers and then gives me our customary three clicks over the radio to signal that he'll be listening to everything, but he's turned off the transmitter on his side. I don't really worry about anybody being able to hear him in my pocket, but I figure why risk it (A few months ago we had a problem with a blind guy who somehow managed to pick out Ren's voice every time he spoke. I guess the loss of his sight had caused his ears to get stronger. It caught me off guard and almost got me really hurt, so now we turn off his end as a precaution once I'm around people.).

With one last look around the yard (dark, empty, desolate and impressively maintained) and down at my own outfit for the evening (Jeans, red Converse tennis shoes and my favorite black hoodie – one that Ren found for me while he was shopping for supplies for the

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warehouse.), I sigh and knock on the house's back door three times.

*Let's see where this is going to take me, I think and wait for the door to open. How bad can this guy really be?*

## CHAPTER THREE

I can hear that the man in the house - I'm still assuming it must be Chadwick Morrin as he's the only person I saw enter - is not moving even after I knock. He's still standing in one place, but his heartbeat has just jumped a few more rpms (Do hearts have rpms? How would I even measure the speed of a beating heart?). I'm sure he heard me, but he isn't coming to the door.

*Do I knock again or wait?* Weird. I kind of expected a different reaction.

Shrugging, I raise my hand to knock again when I hear the person inside start moving towards the door. I hear him drop something heavy on a hard surface (Sounds like someone putting a book down on a table. Well, if he was reading when I arrived then that makes a lot more sense! An exciting part of a book would cause the heart to go faster, and it would explain why he wasn't in a hurry to respond.). A moment later I hear him approach the other side of the door.

"It's fine," I whisper to Ren. "I think he was just reading a book."

A quick rush of relief tingles through my body at the thought. Ren's warnings had gotten me more spooked

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than I had wanted to admit.

Two different locks are twisted on the other side of the door (Guy must be a bit paranoid.), and then it opens to reveal the person I've been listening to for the last few minutes.

The bright, incandescent lights of the house are momentarily blinding to my sensitive eyes (One of the drawbacks to developing super-powered senses is not always being able to turn them off when you want to. But that's why I invest in fashionable sunglasses.), but I instantly recognize the man's outline: Chadwick Morrin. After following him for so many days and watching him from a distance, it's a bit disconcerting to be this close to him. The last time I tracked and hunted a man down to his house then confronted him it didn't turn out too well...for either of us.

"Well 'ello dahling," the tall, blond man drawls out in an unexpected accent...maybe Southern or Australian? (He didn't speak much while I was following him, and the few times he did it was never with an accent.). "What 'ave we here? Ou're you?"

The combination of being hit with an unexpected accent, the light from behind him and being so close to the smell of someone I'd only hunted from a distance makes my brain stumble for just a moment.

"Cat," I breathe out. "I'm Cat."

"Well welcome to my 'umble abode," he tells me. "Won't you please step on inside. I'm glad to have such a," and he pauses to look me up and down. "Lovely young visitor," he finishes slowly with a smile.

Gently he reaches out and places his hand on my shoulder to help guide me inside the house. Although his

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fingers never close around my shoulder, the pressure they exude on me is firm and persistent. This is not a man who is often resisted or told "no". He's used to getting his way.

His presence is strong. Up close, everything about him radiates strength and confidence and charm. He never stops smiling, and the smile is warm and inviting. There is nothing creepy about it all, which is something you would expect from a man who has been accused of doing the awful things he has supposedly done. Everything about his demeanor tells me he is a harmless, gregarious and friendly guy.

And yet as I step across the door's threshold into his house, I can't help but feeling like I've just made one of the worst mistakes of my life.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Peter Parker called it a “spidey-sense”. I’m not sure I have the same level of awareness as that web-slinging superhero, but one of the more fortuitous benefits of my new abilities is that I can “feel” the thoughts and intentions of people around me. It’s not quite as cool as mind reading, but I’m usually able to pick up more from a person than they believe they are giving away. And absolutely nothing about Chadwick Morrin’s intentions feel pure or magnanimous.

Even though his words purr out of him like a happy kitten just wanting to play, there is something dark hidden under every syllable he says. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but somehow his words make my skin itch instead of soothing me like he intends.

I don't want to be in this house, and I really don't want to be near this man. Something just feels off being in here. I've never felt so dirty being in a place that looks so clean. As soon as he shuts the door behind me, I make the decision to not go any further into the house. Standing in his kitchen and watching him smile at me, my skin goes from simply itching to a full-on crawling. Our conversation will happen right here.

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"So what brings you arou-" he begins before I cut him off. I don't want to listen to his smarmy chitchat. Even if he's innocent of the crimes, he's still guilty of being off-putting and oddly creepy.

"Are you guilty?" I ask him while he's still trying to talk. I want to get straight to the point and see how he reacts when he's thrown off guard.

"What?" He asks and blinks at me. "What did you say?"

Even though I hear his words, it's his body I'm listening to. I want to see if his breathing or heartbeat betray what he says out loud. Flaring my nostrils, I inhale while he speaks and try to detect any micro-changes in his pheromones. Do my questions bring about the sour bite of fear or the cloudy taste of annoyance? Is he afraid that I know something or just bothered that his innocence is being challenged again?

Nothing. He doesn't react to my inquiries at all. His heartbeat remains steady, breathing is even and his scent never wavers. I might as well have been asking him if he noticed the flowers on his way home from work for all the reaction I get from him.

"Flat," I say under my breath for Ren (I've learned that if I don't keep him updated he tends to worry about me. He knows me well enough now to recognize what I'm trying to do, so he'll want to know what I learned. That one word is enough keep him in the loop.), and in response I hear my pocket click twice (His way of giving me a simple affirmative.).

*Time to step it up even more*, I think and step closer to Mr. Chadwick Morrin so that barely a foot of space separates us.



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Drawing on a darkness that always lies within me ready to be released (And over the past year - ever since I willfully killed that drug kingpin, Mr. Black - that wicked well of blackness in my soul has become easier and easier to pull from. The more often I tap into it, the quicker it rises when I call on it.), I funnel it into my voice and say, **"did you kill those girls?"**

Pushing every bit of my will into those words, I press into his mind how much I want him to answer them. I need him to answer me (And I want to get out of this house. A bad case of the willies is beginning to tickle my spine.).

The deepness of my startles him voice (An unexpected effect of having the ability to hypnotize some people is that my voice takes on the tone of a three-pack-a-day-smoker on the tail end of a bender. It's unpleasant for me to do and mentally taxing, but it can really save time during an interrogation.), and I watch as his eyes widen. He then scrunches them tightly closed and shakes his head back and forth like he's trying to get his bearings after being punched (Which he has. Mentally. My voice is like an uppercut to the cerebellum when I'm pushing my will. Few people can resist me when I desire a straight answer.).

"Now why would a nice-looking girl like you ask me a question like that?" He asks through a tight grin and barely moving lips. I don't think he's happy with me. Time to try again.

**"are you responsible for their disappearance?"** I ask and then pull as much of the darkness as I can up into me and repeat my previous question, **"did you kill those girls?"**

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Pulling the darkness up so quickly is a stress on my system, and I can feel my body's hunger kicking in a desire to refuel itself. I do my best to squash the hunger down in an attempt to prevent it from distracting me. I need to focus right now.

Waiting on him to answer me, I just stare into his eyes and watch his reaction (Well, it's more like staring "at" his eyes due to them being squinted shut and my wearing sunglasses, but the intent is there.).

But there is very little of one. His breathing increases dramatically, and his heart rate increases to the point that I start to imagine it's somewhere in the range of a three-legged squirrel on meth doing wind sprints down a hallway filled with cats. That can't be healthy.

Thirty seconds go by without either of us saying a word. As I listen to his vitals slowly come back down to normal levels, he smiles wickedly at me and cracks both eyes open to slits.

*He resisted me!* I think in wonderment. I came at him with nearly all my power and he just shrugged it off. That's certainly an ominous start to the encounter.

"I think the problem we have," he begins saying, and I notice the accent is completely gone. "Is that you are essentially asking me two different questions. And those two questions have opposing answers." He pauses for a moment to breathe - loudly - before continuing. "And that confusion gave me a chance to fight whatever it was you were doing to me."

He opens his eyes the rest of the way and smiles that creepily charming grin (It's an oxymoron, I know, but this guy was a walking ball of oxymoron...or irony...or something.). "By the way, what was that you were doing

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to me? It hurt." He stops talking again to roll out his shoulders and gently massage his temples. "A lot. I owe you for that."

This isn't going well, I think. Time to open the flood gates.

Taking his advice, I focus on just one of the two questions I asked previously and bring it to the front of my mind. Not holding anything back this time, I pour all of the darkness I can find into my words - knowing that I won't be able to hold back the hunger tonight because of it; I will have to feed very soon - and ask just one question, **"did you kill those girls?"**

The exertion of controlling that much raw energy is exhausting, and it leaves me spent and panting. Looking back on the day's events, I'm thinking that coming in here on a nearly empty stomach might have been a bad idea. But I didn't want to have to waste time hunting down prey while it was still partly light out, plus I didn't think I'd have to work that hard with this guy. Chadwick was supposed to be an open-and-shut case.

Hindsight reaches up its dirty, little hand and slaps me for that one. Oops.

Focusing my attention on the tall blond in front of me, I wait to see if my latest effort garners any different results.

Luckily he seems to be doing worse than I am. His hands are clenched at his sides, he's broken out in a slimy (and nauseatingly aromatic) full body sweat and his breathing is coming in short, rapid bursts.

"Wow," he says weakly after a moment. "You are certainly persistent, huh? Let's not do that again." He cracks open watery, bloodshot eyes (I guess the strain

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made him cry. I should cherish that thought a bit.) and stares at me with open malice in his expression (I really don't think I'm making a friend here.).

"To answer your question," he continues in that weak voice. "No, I did not kill those girls. To my knowledge they are still healthy and alive." He says the last few words through a partial snarl and glares at me. "Happy?"

He's telling the truth. It pains me to hear it, but nothing in his body betrays the words he just spoke. After what I just put him through, I doubt he could mount a strong enough mental veil to disguise a lie to me. On top of that, his breathing and heartbeat support what he just told me. They barely flickered while he spoke. But if he's innocent, then that means-

My thought trails off as two new ideas fight for space in my brain: his heart did hitch a beat when he said they were "healthy", but even more important than that is what he said earlier in response to my two questions. He said my two questions had opposite answers, and if he's telling the truth about not killing them, then that means he is responsible for their disappearance!

Crap! He is guilty!

"-are you anyway?" I tune back into him talking and realize he's asking me questions. "And why are you really here?"

"No," I hiss at him and reroute what little darkness is trickling through my body into my muscles. I will end this tonight!

As my adrenaline surges, I can feel time slowing down to allow me to perfectly place my punches in his abdomen (Another neat ability that I'm starting to get used to: moving so fast that the world becomes slow around

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me. I can't do it all the time, but it sure is thrilling when I *can* pull it off.).

Lashing out with my left fist, I hit him twice in his ribs and feel several of the white, finger-like bones pop beneath my knuckles (like stomping on dry tree branches after a drought). As his body instinctively leans over to that side to protect the injury, I bring my right fist around and put my full weight behind the blow that smashes into his exposed abdomen (Something squishy deep in him ruptures, and my acute hearing picks up the satisfying sound of a water balloon bursting inside of him - I believe he is now down one internal organ.).

As his body crumples forward in an attempt to protect his suddenly aching insides, I reach out with both hands and gently cup the back of his head to guide it downward. As his blond mop becomes level with my hips, I drop my body into a squat and then fire myself upwards bringing my right knee into his well-tanned face. The explosive crunch of bone shattering as the top of my patella turns his face into pulp is much more gratifying than it should be. The impact lifts him off the ground and throws him backwards across the kitchen, and he slides a few feet coming to a rest against a lilac-colored wall (The man does have some interesting interior design choices.).

"Where are they?" I growl at him without approaching any closer (I've used up just about all of my reserved energy, and the Dark Hunger is really trying to wrest control away from me. I want to feed. I need to feed, and soon. And the blood covering his face is not making controlling my dark side any easier. If I get any closer to him, then there is every chance I will pounce on him and give in to the delicious pull of that blood. And

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with how angry I am right now - no one should ever do what he did to young girls - there is a good chance I wouldn't be able to stop myself until he was dead. And if he's dead, then I'll never find out what happened to them!). "What'd you do with them?"

He doesn't answer me right away. Or even move. He just leans against the wall and breathes heavily while clutching his stomach. After almost a full minute - him breathing with short, raspy breaths and staring at me sullenly, and me just trying to fight back the overwhelming desire to make a meal out of him - he awkwardly pushes himself to a standing position and says, "I'll show you. Just don't do that again."

He appears defeated and broken, but his heartbeat is strong and relaxed. I have a feeling he's lying to me about something; I just don't know what it is, yet.

He raises both his arms above his head like a kid playing Cowboys and Indians (He winces with pain and I can hear his muscles scrape against the broken ribs.), and mutters, "Look. See. I even surrender myself."

As he turns to walk through the kitchen doorway and into the main room of the house, I tell him, "That's not necessary. I'm not going to shoot you."

He ignores me and keeps walking through the doorway with his hands held high above his head. His fingers are high enough to scrape the top of the entry way as he passes through it. They catch my attention as he drags them along the underside of the decorative mahogany wood archway that separates the two rooms. The intricate design around the doorway is much like the rest of the house that I've seen so far: immaculately clean and impressive. So I find it odd when I see his fingers

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catch on something as they pass along the wood. A brown string springs out of nowhere and goes taut against his fingers as he moves forward.

The dark string pulls away from the wood frame above him and I see that it connects to either wall through well-hidden recessed holes. Holes that make a very distinct and metallic *chink-kink* sound as the string suddenly goes slack around his fingertips.

*This can't be good*, I think as I watch the man who was so recently my punching bag fall straight forward like he'd just been shot by a sniper. Except instead of looking dead and bullet-ridden (A girl can hope, can't she?), I can see his arms coming down and his hands clamping over his ears. He's anticipating something bad, I realize.

I have no idea how much time I have until his surprise arrives to ruin our party, so my choices are limited. Try to get to where he is before the something happens, or turn and try to make it to the door? My guess is that the wooden entryway separating us will be harboring the present, so running towards him means putting myself closer to whatever's coming. Bad idea.

Instinct tells me to get away from the badness, and with that realization I turn and start moving across the small kitchen. Not knowing what the Aryan surfer has in store for us in the next few moments, I don't know if it's safer to stop and cover my eyes and ears or keep them open so they can assist me in my attempt to make it through the closed back door. Gambling, I decide to hedge my bets and try for both. I propel myself off the ground and towards the center of it while tucking myself into a protective ball. My landing will certainly be painful, but hopefully I'll survive whatever is about to happen.

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As I'm in the air flying towards the door (Like a small, female Hispanic cannon ball), everything around me bursts into sunlight and thunder. The kitchen around me becomes a brighter white than anything I've ever experienced in my life. Even through closed eyes, the power of the whiteness is nauseatingly strong. Following on the heels of the sudden supernova is a roar that can only be described as an angry pack of lions riding a subway train into the mouth of a tornado as it destroys a fireworks superstore. It is such a level of overwhelming noise that it goes over the top and becomes a lack of sound.

Feeling both blinded and deafened by whatever just happened behind me in the kitchen, my ability to hold my body tightly together dissolves as I slam into the house's back door. Instead of hitting it like a well-aimed missile, I slam into the wood-encased glass of the door's window like a carelessly thrown jellyfish being discarded on the beach. My momentum carries me through it, and I spin end over end across the back porch and come to a rest on the recently cut lawn.

*I was right, I think and try to find my way onto my wobbly legs. That wasn't good.*



## CHAPTER FIVE

The ground keeps moving underneath my feet as I try to stand, and I realize balance is not currently my friend. Then again neither is anything from the now foreign lands of vision or hearing. Falling back down onto my hands and knees, I look around what I believe is the backyard (At least that was the direction I last remember traveling. I'm not really sure what happened after I burst through the back door.) but everything is just varying shades of white. Behind me is a brighter white (I think that's the house.) and ahead of me is darker white, or at least a less strongly-illuminated white (most likely the unlit backyard.).

My ears are giving me nothing more than a constant high-pitched ring of feedback, but I attempt to speak anyway in hopes that I'll be able to hear myself.

"Ren, I'm blind," I say in my best estimation of a normal voice so that he can have some idea of what's going on. Or at least that's what I intend to say. I mean my mouth moves and I'm pretty sure words came out of it, but there isn't a single change in sound hitting my ears. Just that constant ringing. Did I really speak or can I just

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not hear anything?

"I'm blind and deaf, Ren!" I yell louder than before and do my best to listen for any hint of what I said to be picked up by my own ears. Nothing.

I'm pretty sure I yelled because I opened my mouth more and strained as I pushed the sound out through my vocal chords, but it made no difference as far as what I could hear. It's very disconcerting to not know if you're making noise or not. I don't like it. At all.

With a final attempt to check my own hearing (And a hope that maybe I can hear and the issue is just with my vocal chords - an unlikely but hopeful possibility.), I bring my hands together in front of me in a clap. Aiming my hands for each other without being able to see them is surprisingly easier than I would have guessed, and they smack against each other about a foot in front of my face. The impact of my hands connecting with each other is jarring (I put some seriously frustrated strength behind the maneuver.), but if I hadn't felt it for myself then I never would have known it had happened. I couldn't see the action, and it certainly made no more sound than two shadows chasing a feather at midnight.

No good. I'm down two senses right now. Two very important and necessary senses.

After taking a quick breath to calm myself (What did that crazy, blond surfer just do to me?), I realize I can't just stay out here on his lawn. Either he will be coming out here after me (I doubt he's just going to embrace the forgive-and-forget mentality after what just happened in his house.), or the police in the car out front will be coming to investigate (That flash of light - and horrifying rush of sound - had to have been noticeable beyond the

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house's walls!).

*I can't stay here*, I think. I may not know what's around me, but I definitely know what - or who! - is waiting back there in that house. And Ren was right about that guy; he is definitely more dangerous than I gave him credit for. He managed to resist one of my strongest pushes, and he found a way to both deafen and blind me in one move. That is a much more impressive adversary than I was prepared for.

Needing to pick a direction, I opt for the "darker" white part of my surroundings over the "brighter" white one that I assume is the house I just fled. "Away" is good for now. I'll worry about "where" away is taking me later.

"Renny, I'm running," I say as I start to jog at a slow pace. "Away from the house. I can't see. I can't hear. And I have no idea where I'm going. But I'm going to haul some butt in an attempt to get there." I pause and consider the situation for a moment before I continue speaking. "I could probably use some help here. You know it kills me to ask for it, but I might be in trouble." My hands catch the edge of the white fence about the same time I'm expecting to run into it (Thank you eidetic memory!), and I gently vault over it and aim for the neighbor's house I had remembered seeing earlier.

"Maybe you could use that nifty, tracker thingy you put on me a few weeks ago," I say in what I hope is a normal-sounding tone (I hate not knowing if I'm shouting or not. It's frustrating.) and slow as I anticipate finding the edge of the house. My fingers close on the rough bricks I remember pulling myself up not more than a half hour ago (Back when I had all five senses, and didn't realize how lucky I was.), and I turn my body to the right and jog along

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the house's broad wall looking for the front corner and a chance to finally center my internal GPS.

While I was in the yard, I didn't have enough information to pinpoint my exact location and know where I was (I could have been anywhere in the yard, or along the fence, or along the house's wall), but now that I'm at the house's corner I know exactly where I am. Pulling up my memories of the past several days of my stakeouts of Chadwick's house, I can easily retrace and count my steps. Even being limited to only three senses (and one very impressive memory), I should be able to get away from here before he can follow me.

"Ren, I'm heading out to the street," I say and push away from the corner of the house and count the fifteen steps I know it will take me to get to the sidewalk. "I'm going to walk it from here. Either you find me, or I'm going to find my way home to you."

Feeling the ground underneath my feet change from the soft give of the grass to the hard resistance of the sidewalk, I turn left (away from the house that has caused my current plight) and start walking towards my home (or abandoned warehouse. To each their own.).

"Oh," I say as I continue my blind meander. "And I used up all my energy reserves getting out of there. I'm starved...and things are about to get interesting..." I let my words trail off as I inhale deeply to get a better sense of my surroundings, and the warm scent of a late evening pedestrian hits my nose.

"Real interesting," I repeat and increase my pace so that my path will intersect with what smells like a middle-aged man on the other side of the street.

## CHAPTER SIX

Feeding has helped. Tremendously. My eyesight is back to normal and the ringing in my ears has faded away enough that I can only tell it's there if I stop and focus on it. It has helped that I no longer feel guilty about drawing blood from strangers. I take their blood, but I generally don't kill them. I figure people give blood to the Red Cross to save lives; this isn't all that much different.

At least that's what I keep telling myself.

"So what did he do again?" I ask as I turn in my padded, black leather chair and look at the man sitting a few feet away from me in front of a wall of computer monitors. "And how can I avoid *ever* having to experience it a second time?"

"Please remember to turn off your microphone next time," he says without turning to look at me. "There are things in this life I just don't need to hear." He pauses and then drops his head slightly and closes his eyes. "Ever. Please."

The glow from the monitors is pretty much the only

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light in the warehouse currently, and they illuminate his well-muscled torso and chiseled face quite well. He's impressively strong, and he's in better shape than I ever was (Well, I mean, *before* all this started. He doesn't really have me beat now, but then again, I'm not really a fair measuring stick either.). All of which is made even more impressive knowing that he's dying and his time left on this world is limited. If it had been me, and I had been diagnosed with a rare, untreatable blood cancer then the last thing I would have cared about was getting into shape. But that's also why I like the guy. He intrigues me.

"But Renny," I begin, sounding confused, "you've told me I have to leave the mic on when I'm out there so that you can hear what's going on and be able to track me. It's not my fault about that explosion. I didn't know it was coming. And even if I did, then how was I supposed to take the time to turn off my mike. You can't hold that against me. Seriously."

"Not the explosion, Cat." He turns and brings his dark, sunken eyes up to meet mine (No matter how much he works out, or how great a shape he gets in, he doesn't seem to be able to lose the "haunted" look that makes the skin around his eyes look recessed. I know it bothers him, and it's a side effect of the poisonous blood in his system, but it's still disconcerting to look at at times.). "The guy on the street. Your feeding. I don't want to hear that." He stops and breathes deeply, and I can hear the air quietly whistle through him. "I know you have to do it, but I don't need to hear it."

"Oh," I reply sheepishly. "Yeah. Sorry about that. I know you've told me. That was my fault. I was a bit..." I look him in the eyes and try to smile as prettily as I can (I

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know my awkward attempts at flirting have no effect on him - judging from the lack of a change in his pulse or breathing - but I also hope that it can at least lighten the mood when I screw up. Which is often.). "Distracted at the time," I finish.

"Uh huh," he mumbles as he turns back to the glowing screens in front of him (But at least I'm pretty sure I saw the corners of his mouth twitch into smile territory. Not a full on commitment mind you, but at least it was a start. Impending death sure can make a boy morose.). "And that's still not my name," he says without looking at me.

"Ugh," I groan at him in my best mildly-annoyed-teenaged-girl voice (Hey! Use the powers that come naturally, I always say.). "You know I can't use your real name. It's ridiculous. Come on," I say and scoot my chair a bit closer to him, so I can lower my voice. "Pater? Pater Knighton? That's not even a real name! How am I supposed to talk to you without giggling. And what kind of name is Pater anyway?"

"We've covered this before," he says with a tone of resignation smearing through his voice. "My parents combined their names to make it. And in German, "pater" means..." But I don't let him continue.

"I know what it means. You've told me before, and I don't forget things. Remember. Perfect memory? Things stuck in here forever," and I tap the side of my head for emphasis. "Plus, it was a rhetorical question. I wasn't trying to get the whole background again.

"And it's not like I can use your last name either," I continue. "As we found out last time. That was a total bust." (Apparently, I can't stop from saying his last name

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as "Kuh-niggut" and envisioning the Monty Python troupe from Holy Grail. It cracked me up every time, and my constant laughing fits made communication with me nearly impossible. I'm going to blame that one on my dad and his great taste in classic movies.)

"So until we find something better, I think 'Renfield' will just have to work. It's short. It easily breaks up into a nickname," I say, and then lower my voice as I mumble. "Plus I think it fits our current situation. It keeps me grounded."

The handsome man in the chair next to me (Can I really think of him as a "man" when he's less than ten years my senior?), who has become my one and only friend over the last several months, turns to look me in the eyes and just stares at me for several seconds. His breathing doesn't change, and his heartbeat never wavers. He's just a steady rock as his eyes bore into me. He may not have the super abilities that I have (Are they "powers" or just "abilities"?), but his own are impressive. I do my best to not wriggle under his intense gaze. His emotional steadiness has helped settle me since we've been together, and it pays off now.

"I know Cat," he finally says in his low voice. "I spend my free time reading, too. I understand the reference." He stops and just looks at me as I count the beats of his heart. I get up to six before he speaks again. "And it'll do for now, but don't forget my real name. Names are important." He finally breaks eye contact and turns back to the large monitor in front of him before speaking again in a lighter voice. "Don't think I'm going to be eating any bugs for you, Vlad." And I swear this time that the hints of a real smile actually cross his cheeks.



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"Ok, I agree," I say before shifting topics. "Now, seriously, what was that in Morrin's house? Because I don't ever want to experience that again!"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

"Well, going off of what you described when it happened, I'm going to say it was a modified stun grenade. Commonly called a 'flash bang'," Ren pauses in his explanation and brings up some pictures on one of the monitors and taps them with his finger. "These things. They are relatively cheap, easy to get your hands on if you know what you're doing, and very effective at creating impressive distractions. I'm guessing he rigged his house with some, and then set them off when he walked through the doorway."

Playing the scene back in my mind, I watch as Chadwick holds his hands above his head - even though I didn't ask him to (In fact he continued to hold them up even after I had told him to put them down.) - and walks through the doorway. His outstretched fingers brush the top of the archway, and that hidden string pulls taut followed by that discernable *click*.

"Yah, I could see that. It makes sense."

"I told you that man was up to no good," he continues while nodding his head. "He was prepared for

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somebody to find him. He's smart and he's evil. That's not a good combination..."

Ren lets his voice trail off as he reads something on one of the many screens in front of him. "Actually, let me change that assessment a bit," he says and turns to look at me. "I'm changing my answer to 'frighteningly brilliant' and truly 'arch-nemesis' evil. As much as I wanted to push you to go after this guy, I'm starting to think he may be out of our league."

"What? Why?" I ask and sit forward to try and read what he had just noticed on the screen.

"The cops that were posted outside his house finally logged a report of your 'visit'..."

"They knew I was there?" I interrupt him. "How? They couldn't have seen me!"

"Relax, Cat, I don't mean they knew about you, but they had to know something happened. I've been waiting to see how Chadwick reported what went down between the two of you."

"And?" I ask, increasing my forward lean to get a view of the many screens in front of him.

"He's good," Ren tells me. "He had a cover story all set up. Their report says they heard something like an explosion come from the house and saw a bright flash of light through the windows. They approached with weapons drawn - according to what they have in the report they were expecting a bomb of some kind had gone off - and knocked on the front door. No answer."

Ren goes back to one of the screens and reads for a moment before continuing. "They banged on the door and yelled for about a minute before deciding that they should just kick it in and chalk whatever had just happened

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up to being a solid case of 'probable cause'. But before they could act on that decision, the door opened and Chadwick stepped out. He looked disheveled and the police detected a burnt chemical scent to him. They interrogated him right there on his own front porch, and he covered it all perfectly.

"Apparently, he told them a couple of his lights exploded in the house. Claimed it could have been a power surge. He even showed them the remains of several lamps to back it up. The report states that they looked around and didn't see anything else suspicious aside from multiple exploded light fixtures and the unusual odor, which they attributed to the electricity and shattered bulbs."

"But what about the smashed back door? There's no way he could have claimed that was from a power surge."

"Good point. I'll check," Ren says and goes back to the police report he has up on the screen. After reading several lines, he speaks up. "Ah, here we go. The police noted that several windows and doors were open to air the place out. Morrin claims that was how he knew the police were out front. He was opening the front door to get some air flow when he stumbled into them. It doesn't look like they ever went around the back of his house. And if the door was open, then they probably didn't notice anything wrong."

"There's no record of you being there or any explosion from the grenade," he continues with a sigh. "He had a perfect cover story for what happened. He executed the whole thing with precision, and it was flawless."

"Fine. He's really smart," I concede. "And after

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talking to him and witnessing him shrug off my attacks, he has definitely climbed a few rungs on my Nasty-Evil-Dude ladder. But you heard what he said when I was in there. He knows about the girls, and they aren't dead. He's responsible, Renny. I don't know for exactly what, yet, but he is definitely deep into this."

Remembering Chadwick's responses to my questions in his kitchen gets my blood worked up, and I don't have enough energy in me right now to keep control if it starts to overwhelm me. I need to feed again. That quick snack earlier healed some damage and kept me sane, but it isn't going to hold me over for long.

"I want him, Renny," I say and embrace the stirring of the darkness in my gut. "I mean he may be smarter than us, and whole lot more evil than we could ever be," and for a second I get flashbacks of another man who I had once thought of as completely evil but eventually was forced to reassess. "But I'm faster, stronger, meaner and a big ol' slice of something he's never experienced before. He may be prepared for a lot of things, but he can't be prepared for me. He doesn't know me...yet." I let those words sink in before continuing. "He doesn't get to win this fight, Ren. I do."

Inhaling the calming scent of my friend (Whose blood is too poisonous for my brain to even consider sampling, let alone drinking from. Being around a person that I can't possibly feed on has helped me find a happy place in life. I almost feel normal being around him.), I smile and pat the hardened muscles of my abdomen. "Now let's find me a place for dinner."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

As Ren brings up information on the computers about our most recent suspected Den of Druggery (Bringing suspected child abusers to justice has only been a recent endeavor on our part. I'm still focusing on making the city a safer place one rotted out building at a time.), I head over to the wall to grab one of the prepared backpacks off a hook (I've learned since my first ventures out into the world. Now I come prepared.). Looking over my shoulder, I shout to him, "These are all stocked and ready to go, right? No surprises?"

Ren looks up and glances at me. "Yeah, they're good to go. You don't have to keep checking on me. It was one mistake. Learn to forget, forgive and move on."

A month ago, he forgot to return the thick, plastic bags to the backpack (The ones that I use to collect the money that I inevitably find whenever I invade one of these places.). I was forced to improvise with some nasty, stained sheets I found in a bedroom. It wasn't an experience I wanted to repeat any time soon.

I smile at his sassiness. "Perfect memory, remember. I'm incapable of forgetting," I tell him and then consider the rest of his statement. "But I'll work on the other two

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parts."

Pulling the straps of the large, black backpack over my arms, I walk back to the computers and check out the map he has brought up on the largest of his monitors. It appears to be a fairly large house in a surprisingly affluent neighborhood. It isn't the normal type of place he's been sending me lately.

"What's with this place?" I ask him and tap the house on the screen marked by the blue upside down tear shape on the map. "Am I going upscale tonight? Or are you just feeling adventurous?"

"A little bit of both," he replies without turning towards me. "As we've become more efficient at wiping out the dark denizens of the underworld over the past few months, they've responded by becoming more creative. You've no doubt noticed that our cash hauls have decreased significantly recently? There's a reason for that."

"I have," I say (I also noticed his use of the word "our" when referring to the money I take from the houses as opposed to saying "your". It makes me smile. Even though I do most of the physical work when it comes to taking down a suspected house, I keep telling him that it wouldn't be possible without his support. He does all the research and gets his hands dirty with technology in ways that I never could. I've been telling him since we began our partnership that the money is as much his as it is mine. He was reluctant at first, but he's coming around. Especially since he's learning that I can't really spend the money without him. He's my middle man when it comes to the real world. It's his name on the lease agreement for the warehouse - it was also his idea to legally acquire the place so that we couldn't be surprised by having it sold out

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from underneath us - and it's he that goes out and buys all the supplies. He truly is my Renfield.).

"They're like a virus in the human body, and we've become the white blood cells trying to destroy them. They're either going to be wiped out and the body becomes healthy." He finally turns away from the screen in front of him and looks at me. "Or they learn to mutate and hide to avoid detection. And right now these drug guys are changing how their system works in order to make it all the more difficult for us to find them."

"What do you mean 'changing their system'?" I ask him. "I thought they already tried that when they attempted to kill me those last few times."

"Well," he continues. "When they failed to kill you with that house filled with explosives or that more recent one filled with professional hitters, I think they realized they were outmatched. It appears they've accepted that just killing you isn't really in their skillset. So since they can't make *you* go away, they're trying something new: make your *motivation* go away."

I just blink at him as he tries to let that sink in. "But they are my motivation," I tell him. "Their plan doesn't make any sense."

"Well not to you and me, no," he agrees. "But that's because we know why you're doing this, and they don't. They think you just want their money and to burn their supply. They haven't quite grasped that your ultimate goal is their complete annihilation. They're just thinking that if you have less drugs and cash at each location that maybe you'll get bored of attacking them and move on."

"That'll never happen," I snort. "This is way too much fun. I mean, heck, I'd do it for free if I needed to."



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"Well, you're welcome to pass that sentiment along to them tonight when you're out, and we'll see how it affects their future plans."

"Right," I say, smiling, and point back to the house he has marked on the screen. "So how does the McMansion fit into their new schemes then?"

"Actually, I'm not completely positive," he tells me. "I have an idea about what they're trying to do, and that's where you come in. I'm pretty sure they're going a bit more mobile and attempting to keep their on hand stock as low as possible. To make that happen, they are sending around trucks to pick up and deliver the drugs and cash each night to the houses that they supply. I'm pretty sure this house is the starting point for one of the refill trucks."

"Ok," I tell him. "I'm following you so far. So what do you think we should do about it?"

"Under normal circumstances, I'd have you just follow the vehicle as it leaves and mark whatever houses it stops at so that we could come back to them later." He looks at me, and I nod my approval of the idea. "But tonight isn't 'normal' as you're wanting to make a quick trip and get back to Chadwick's to pay him a visit, right?"

"Correct," I say agreeing with him. "Tonight isn't for reconnaissance. I just need energy so that I can be a bit better prepared for my return appointment with Mr. Sparkle-Boom! He's my main priority right now. Let me quickly put him away, and then we can get back to our regularly scheduled thug-busting."

"That's what I figured, too. So we're going with Plan B instead."

"And that is?" I ask, already liking the way he's starting to smile as he thinks about the plan.

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"Simple. You just intercept the truck as it goes from house to house and decommission it. Any way you see necessary."

"I really like that particular plan," I say returning his smile. "But if it's already left the house for the night, then how am I supposed to find it in the city?"

"Easy," he says as he lets his smile consume his entire face. "They're paranoid and security-conscious criminal thugs. They wanted to protect their investment, so they put a LoJack tracking system on it. Once you're in the area I'll activate it. You just have to follow the signal back to them."

Chuckling, I turn and run towards the glint of metal hidden in one of the darker shadows of the warehouse. "Perfect," I say into the microphone on my neck. "Give me the directions once I'm out."

## CHAPTER NINE

The crushing rip of the wind tears at my clothes as the motorcycle accelerates out of the warehouse's backyard. The black, polarized visor of the helmet blocks out nearly all the light from the passing street lamps as I zip past them, and the insulated helmet protects me from any unwanted sounds or smells.

I lean into a turn and downshift to prevent the powerful bike from sliding out from underneath me. Twisting hard on the handle in my right hand, I accelerate out of the corner and rocket down the next street heading away from the warehouse.

*Renny definitely earned my respect with this one*, I think, as the mass of metal beneath me silently hums with the road vibrations. An electric motorcycle. I never would have thought of it on my own.

When Ren first suggested I use some kind of vehicle to get from house to house at night and not burn up my energy reserves by running, I thought he was crazy. There was no way I was going to drive a car (I needed the freedom to move quickly and easily in case of danger, and being encased in a car seemed the antithesis of that.), and a motorcycle was just too loud and smelly to be a viable

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option. I couldn't keep something at the warehouse that would reek of gasoline and sound like thunder when it started. I'd lose my sanity before the end of a month.

And that's when Ren showed me a website for the newer electric motorcycles. "It's silent and doesn't use gasoline so no nauseating smell of fuel to haunt the place," he told me. Plus he could get me a helmet that would protect my senses from being overwhelmed while I was on the streets. It's not like I had much else to spend the ill-gotten cash on, so I told him to go for it.

After a few weeks of practice riding at the warehouse, I was set up with a whole new way of traveling. Plus, it's fun. Really fun.

Of course I can't use it every time I'm out, as it still doesn't really work for transporting large sacks of ill-gotten cash back to the warehouse (Ren has slowly been convincing me to invest in an electric car as our next purchase. As much as I don't like the idea of being trapped in a large, metal box, I do find the idea of not caring bags of cash across a city at night highly appealing.). But for quick trips around town to scout out a new house or find a place to feed without burning up my energy reserves, it's been a life-saver.

Noticing that I still have over ten minutes before I'll be near the right neighborhood, I activate the phone that Ren wired into my helmet. "Hello phone," I say as the phone responds to my voice. "Call her." (Being severely limited in who I interact with anymore has allowed me to only have two people pre-programmed into my phone. One's a guy, and the other is a girl. For simplicity's sake, I programmed the phone to just respond to "him" or "her" depending on which I'm calling.)

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I only have to wait for the phone to ring twice before it's answered. "Hey, Cat!" shrieks a high-pitched girl's voice through the helmet's speaker (Thank goodness Ren was able to build in some sound-dampening when he wired the helmet for me or I would end up crashing my bike every time I made this call.). "It's been a few days," she continues and her voice drops more into the pouty range after starting off excited. "I was beginning to think you were going to ignore me."

Giving into one of the few genuine smiles that are so rare for me anymore, I embrace the sound of the voice that I had feared for so long I would never hear again. Every word she speaks brings back a little piece of my previous, happier life. A life I can no longer seem to hold on to unless we're speaking.

"Hey Leyna," I say through my grin. "I'm sorry, kiddo. It's been a busy few days around here. How's life?"

She giggles before answering and the previous taint of poutiness quickly dissipates from her voice. "I'm great Cat. But more importantly, how's city life treating my big sister?"

## CHAPTER TEN

The wicked whip of life's ironies has never failed to make an impression on me. A year ago before I left home, my sister and I were both teenagers and we had started bickering on a regular basis. We have completely different personalities, and we weren't hanging out together very much anymore. Most of our interactions involved me being angry at her for one thing or another. We lived in the same house, and yet we attempted to speak to each other as little as possible (She's taller, prettier and more outgoing than I'll ever be. She has the natural personality of a social butterfly, and that combined well with her upbeat attitude to make her a person everyone always wanted to be around. She's peppy, happy, friendly and the type of person that strangers are instantly attracted to. All of that made it very easy for me to not like her as she got ready to join me at the high school. She wasn't even at the school yet, and she was already more popular than I would ever be. I loved her, but I didn't really like her. And the fact that she wasn't bothered in the least by my annoyance only bothered me more. It was Leyna I was fighting with that fateful night my life changed. A fact I haven't forgotten. Nor has she.).

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But now that I've been gone from home for almost a year, her voice is one of the only things that truly brings me to a smile anymore. I miss her, and I've made a point of contacting her to talk at least once a week. I know she wants to hear from me and know that I'm ok, but the calls are more for my sanity than hers. That's why I had Ren set up an untraceable number when I dial her. I can't have her tracking me down. Being kept at a distance is something I know she doesn't like, but she has learned to accept it. It's still better than the alternative: not hearing from me at all.

"It's been good, Leyna, thanks," I answer in response to her question. "The city continues to be a big, scary place that constantly keeps me on my toes, but I think I'm winning the battle." I pause and think back over the events of the night. "At least most of the important ones."

Twisting the throttle of the bike, I push its speed and pass a car on the road as if it was standing still. One of the joys of having heightened reflexes and near immortality is that I don't really worry any more about the repercussions of reckless driving. I've come close to taking a tumble a number of times, but so far my body's self-preservation abilities have always kicked in and saved me.

"How's school going so far?" I ask her so that we can stick to one of our safer topics. We've learned there are a few areas of our lives that neither of us dredges up, but the boring neutrality of the educational world has remained a staple of our conversations. "Any news I should know about with the report coming up?"

"Ha! Nothing that wouldn't embarrass you," she tells me through a laugh. "I always thought you were supposed to be the smart one, but I'm starting to make your old

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grades look bad. I'm going to make honor roll again this term, but my history class is getting tougher. I'm hoping if I can keep it at least a B+ for the rest of the year then my math grade will help offset it. ."

"You still rocking that crazy, high math class and getting A's?" I ask as I slow for a red light and wait for it to change (I may speed at times and bumper-slide more than I should, but I try not to run lights if I can avoid it. That's just bad karma.). "I still can't believe how easily that stuff comes to you."

"It just makes sense to me," she says in a quieter voice. "I don't even have to try in Mr. Porter's class. My brain just gets math." She stops talking after that, and I can almost hear the neurons rubbing together in her brain as she considers her next statement. "I get that from mom. You know that."

I don't respond as I stare at the stoplight in front of me, and I do my best to not let what she said affect me. The moment the light becomes green I kick the gears and accelerate as hard as the bike will let me without flipping over. I know I can't run away from this conversation as easily as the bike did from that intersection, but I can wish for it to be that easy. I know I need to address what she said, but I don't want to.

"Leyna, you know I don't want to talk about them. It's too painful, and it does me no favors," I tell her as I do my best to *not* picture the two people she's talking about. "I call you to find out about *your* life, not *theirs*. I can't go down that road. Not right now. Not for a while, at least."

"I know. I'm sorry," she tells me. "They just miss you and ask about you. And I promised them I would..."

"Leyni Jay!" I growl out my pet nickname for her



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before she can continue. "Stop. Please. I don't want to have them on my mind tonight. Do me that little favor?"

"Ok, ok, Cat. I had to at least try, or I wouldn't be able to look mom in the eyes later when she asks," she says with a final dig at the topic. "Forgiven?"

My younger sister may only be in her first year of high school, but sometimes she shows the twisted genius of a young Machiavelli. She knew mentioning our parents would haunt me until I eventually break down and write them another letter. She can still find ways to manipulate me, and I have to respect her for it. But *respect* and *forgiveness* are two different things.

"Uh huh," I say non-committal. "Speaking of fun topics for us to bring up, how are Brandon and Evan?"

"Ugh," she groans into the phone, and I have to smile at her discomfort. Her constant social machinations with the boys of the school are a world that I never had to deal with, and I get no end of joy tormenting her with the topic. "They're both getting a lot more persistent, thanks. Sometimes I just think I should swear them all off completely..."

She continues to rant about the social **hierarchies** at the school, but I only half listen as I approach the neighborhood that Ren had indicated on the map to me previously. Her words become a pleasant hum in the background as I do my best to push her comments about our parents from my mind.

I know my disappearance nearly destroyed them, but I honestly don't think I could have handled it any other way. By the time I had enough of a handle on my life to start thinking about them again, it had been months since I had left. And I had disappeared after attacking our school

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nurse in the middle of the day and then fleeing the school building by jumping out of a second-story window. Then they had no contact from me for weeks. And that contact was only because I let myself be seen on a convenience store's security video so that they would know I was still alive.

Looking back at the past year, I can't imagine how they might feel towards me. Leyna says they love me, but I know that love has been tested. I won't let her talk about them or that day I left. I don't want to know what the school thinks about me or my old friends or how my being gone has destroyed my parents. I can't change it, so I've learned to accept it.

Plus, I've had Ren set up multiple savings accounts in Leyna's name using the money from the drug houses. I'll never be able to use it all, and I know my parents would be horrified to even think about taking money like this from me. So I invest it in Leyna. Someday she will be a very rich girl. I just hope I'm still alive to see it. But that's a dream I doubt a little bit more with each passing day.

"Cat, you're close," Ren's deep voice tells me over the helmet's speaker cutting into Leyna's melodic ramblings about the kids at school and her exasperation with them. "We're going live in about thirty seconds. Be ready."

"Hey Leyni, I gotta go," I say interrupting her mid-word. "Sorry. I love you, little sis." I consider saying more, but nothing comes to me.

She seems unfazed by my abruptness, though. "Love you, too. Be safe out there. Please."

"I will. I always am," I say before disconnecting the call. I've never exactly told Leyna what I do in the city, and she's too smart to ask (She knows I'd never actually

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tell her.). But somehow I have the suspicion that her guesses would be frighteningly accurate. Like I said, she's a smart kid.

"Ok, Renny. I'm ready for ya," I say into the helmet's microphone and slow the bike as I approach the street he had originally pointed to on the map. "Let's find me a way to release some pent up hostility."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Cat, you're going to first have to turn on the tracking system on the bike," Ren tells me. "It's the small box I wired in below the gauges. Give it a moment to start up, and then let me know. I'm only going to activate their LoJack in bursts so we can try to find them without also popping up on the police's radar."

"What do you mean by their 'radar'?" I ask as I hit the little green switch on the device and watch it power up. "And it's on now."

"Remember how last time we used this thing I left it pulsing and it brought the entire local police force down on you mid-battle?"

That wasn't exactly a pleasant experience, and it's definitely not one I want to try for a second time. "Yeah, I remember that," I tell him. "We can avoid that now? Ok. I was just planning on being faster this time."

"Well, I didn't really know what I was doing last time. Kinda just learning on the fly. Apparently, the LoJack sends out a constant information stream screaming, 'HEY, I'M A STOLEN VEHICLE! COME GET ME.' And that was why the cops interrupted your interrogation of those cartel boys. That LoJack was constantly waving a

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big red flag telling every cop nearby that they needed to come investigate. The only thing that slowed down their response time was the fact that it wasn't in their system as a 'missing vehicle'."

"And now?" I ask him. "What's different this time?"

"Well now," he tells me. "We're just going to do a quick on-off pulse every once in a while to let you try and find them. You'll be the only one looking and the chances of a police car being nearby and scanning will hopefully be very slim. It'll take us a bit longer, but it should also cut down on the chances of you having any unexpected visitors."

"Sounds good, Renny," I tell him as I pull back onto the street. "I'm moving now. I'll just drive the neighborhoods while you do your thing. I'll let you know as soon as I pick anything up on my end."

"Copy that. I'll pulse it every thirty seconds until you get something from them. It shouldn't take very long," he tells me, but I can hear there's more he wants to say.

I give him a moment to speak up again, but he doesn't. "What's up, Ren?" I finally ask when I realize he isn't going to say anything on his own.

"Nothing," he finally says in a quiet voice. "Just," he pauses before continuing, and I can hear him breathing over the open channel. "Be careful out there. I know you're in a hurry to get back to Chadwick, but don't make any *unnecessary* decisions."

"I won't Renny," I say and smile at his thoughtfulness. The guy may be dark and mopey at times, but he has a great heart. It's why I couldn't survive out here without him anymore. He's becoming the soul that I'm slowly losing.

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I've come to respect the irony of our situation. The fact that I can't feel *normal* unless I'm around a person whose blood is so full of toxins and poisons that my dark hunger balks at the very idea of ever drinking from him. In order for me to feel like I'm really *alive*, I have to spend time around someone who is close to *death*. Fate, you are a wicked mistress.

As I cruise the roads of the upscale neighborhood where Ren suspects tonight's targets are doing business, I let my mind drift a bit waiting for the beep of the LoJack scanner to kick on.

It isn't just Ren's inedible blood that makes him such a crucial part of my life. He also helped me kick my own inadvertent drug habit. My first taste of human blood occurred after I defended myself from a crazed homeless man in a dark alley. He had stabbed me and then stood over me as I bled out in the stacks of garbage. That was the first time my Dark Hunger had taken control of me in order to preserve my life, and it did so by relieving that man of his own.

Unfortunately, along with his blood, I also consumed the drugs that had been pumping through his veins, and his addiction was passed on to me. But I had been unaware of it at the time. As it had been my first time ever *feeding* on another human, I had thought my *addiction* had just been to blood. I hadn't realized I was going through drug withdrawal until it was too late. By then I was on the verge of getting myself killed mid-battle with some pretty horrible people.

I tried to kick my addiction to tainted blood cold turkey, but I wasn't strong enough to do it on my own. After dealing with my newly-formed need to gain

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sustenance from the life-blood of others, I just didn't have the courage or constitution to kick a drug habit on top of that. True to drug addict form, though, I managed to deny its existence for weeks before I eventually succumbed to its sweet siren call again.

Depressed and overwhelmed with guilt (at both my addiction and my acceptance of the evil nature of who I was becoming), I contemplated suicide for the first real time in my life. I didn't want to exist anymore, even if I was finding a way to do good things while I was here (if you can consider destroying drug dens a good thing). Even though I knew committing suicide would be a damnation of my soul (And this is *on top of* the knowledge that I had willingly caused the death of **two** different men. I was pretty sure no amount of good I could do would save me from the eternal fires that awaited.), at least I wouldn't be controlled by an addiction that I despised. The hypocrisy of my attacking and harming drug dealers while I was addicted to the very products I was attempting to destroy was too much for me.

And then, in the midst of my despair, I found Ren. He saved me by being the strength and guidance I needed in order to beat the drugs that flowed freely through my system (Given *his* saving of *me* only came after I prevented *him* from jumping to his own death on one of the city bridges. I noticed him on the bridge with me as I sat on the edge contemplating my own fall into blissful oblivion. Even if I had planned to end my own existence, I still couldn't just stand by and let another do it. I stopped him from completing his act, and in so doing I discovered a person who had blood I could **never** drink from. I was fascinated, and our ensuing conversation sealed a

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friendship.). He not only kept me calm when my body went into rages in its attempts to purge itself of the poison, but he also found me fresh, clean blood to drink from so that my body could have the strength to heal (I've never asked him where the blood came from, even after all these months. Ren is incredibly resourceful and brilliant, and that is enough for me. I've learned not to look a "gift bag of blood" in the mouth, as they say.). Without Ren, I wouldn't be here today making our city the better place it is. I owe him.

Speaking of being *here*, I look down at the screen of the LoJack tracker and notice that it has changed. It now has information about a vehicle listed on it. Both model and manufacturer information (Black Cadillac Escalade) as well as distance and direction (three miles East-Southeast).

"Whoops," I mumble as I realize the device never made a sound when it picked up the vehicle's LoJack pulse. I wonder how long I've had that information on the screen without noticing it.

"What's up?" I hear Ren's deep voice in my ear. "What 'whoops'? Is something wrong?"

"No, little buddy," I say using a nickname he hates even more than my usual ones as I attempt to distract him from my mistake.

"Cat," he growls into my ear. "You know I don't..." He begins before I cut him off.

"We got 'em, Ren. Black Escalade. Three miles south of here." I brake hard and turn the bike into a tight turn before cranking the throttle and shooting off down a side street to the South. "It's show time!"



## CHAPTER TWELVE

It takes another ten minutes of cruising side streets and doubling back on myself before I find the vehicle I'm looking for (I keep missing the roads they're on.). The large, dark SUV is surprisingly easy to miss even with me looking for it, and I'm pretty sure I pass it twice before I finally pick out the right one. I cruise behind it for several minutes to make sure the tracker is pointing to the correct vehicle before I feel positive I have the right one.

"Ok, Ren, I've found 'em," I say quietly into my helmet's microphone. "Nothing too suspicious yet, though. They've just been cruising the main road and sticking to the speed limit so far. Windows are deep tinted, so I can't see inside. I've no idea what's waiting for me in there." I continue riding behind the SUV for a moment and contemplate my next move. "You're sure this is the right one?" I finally ask him.

"Well, am I sure that this vehicle came from a house that is connected to the drug trade?" He asks rhetorically. "Yes, I am.

"Am I sure that the people *in* that vehicle are connected to the poison being spread throughout our city?" He continues in the same tone. "I am only *mostly*

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sure of that.

"And am I sure that you should stop this vehicle and talk to the people inside of it and question them about their activities tonight?" He pauses before finishing. "Yes, Catnip. I am relatively sure on that one."

His rare use of a nickname for me lightens my mood and makes me smile. His knowledge of his own impending doom (due to the cancerous blood that pumps through his veins) seems to keep him regularly rooted in the ol' *dark and gloomy* side of life, so his occasional glimpses of a sense of humor are a treat.

"Best case scenario, Cat," he says interrupting my thoughts. "Is that you stop a vehicle packed full of drugs, money and miscreants, and you get a chance to unleash a bit of joyous fury on them."

"And worst case?" I ask him while watching the vehicle in front of me brake for a stoplight.

"Worst case is that you've stopped a vehicle that makes regular visits to one of our city's dens of evil, and you help them see the light of their poor choices," he says. "I think that is pretty much a win-win situation."

"I'm convinced," I say as I pull my bike onto the sidewalk a dozen feet away from the stopped SUV. "And I'm going silent as I approach. Keep your ears on and your fingers ready."

I don't really have a plan in mind as I pop out the bike's kickstand and lean it over. My goal is to get them to open a window and see what happens from there. The open window will allow me to see if any of the scents inside give me probable cause for an all-out attack. All I need is a reason, and not even a very strong one at that.

Keeping an eye on the parked vehicle a few feet away

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from me, I remove my helmet and hang it on the bike's handlebar (I'd prefer to keep it on for protection during a fight, but wearing it pretty much negates most of my senses. And I'm going to need them tonight. Especially if I plan to replenish my energy by feeding. Trying to bite someone while a helmet guards my mouth would be ridiculously comical. And no one needs that in the middle of a fight.). Quickly brushing my fingers through my hair (one of the drawbacks to wearing a helmet as a girl - tangled and sweaty hair caused by helmet-head), I step around the parked bike and walk up to the passenger side window and knock.

"Hey," I shout at my own darkened reflection and mime the international sign for rolling down a window. "Would you like to buy some Girl Scout cookies? I have that new flavor that everyone loves."

I have no idea if they can even hear me inside the vehicle, but I figure I have to say something to get them to open it up. Might as well start with something confusing and just hope for the best. It's worked in the past.

While I wait for a response from whoever's inside, I inhale deeply to get a sense of the night air and see if I can pick up any hints of what to expect from my soon-to-be-new acquaintances. As the cold air rushes into my lungs, my brain filters it for anything of importance. The most powerful smell in the city always hits me first, burnt fuel and exhaust (the reason why I have to wear a helmet while I ride), and it is quickly followed by a half dozen competing food smells which tells me that we are near civilization and takeout restaurants.

As my brain removes the distractions, I become aware of two things almost simultaneously: the next most

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prevalent scent and the distinct sound that almost always follows it. I can smell the slimy odor of oil and gunpowder wafting heavily out of the car, and it is closely followed by the tell-tale *ch-clinks* of metal on metal as someone on the other side of the window racks the slide of a very large gun.

Suddenly the wind around me stops blowing and the world comes to a pause as my adrenalin accelerates and my reaction time goes from simply impressive up to *superhuman*. Acting on instinct more than skill, I dive across the hood of the car as the window that is now behind me explodes into a rainstorm of glass and metal showering the street with death.

I believe they have just ever-so-impolitely served up my "probable cause" on a big ol' platter of firearms and hatred. How kind of them to save me the trouble of having to try and find a creative way to search the car. They brought the evidence *to* me.

As I slide across the large truck's hood (Or is this thing classified as a "car"? I never know.), I look into the front windshield to get an idea of who I'm facing, but all I see is a reflection of myself as I glide across the polished, black metal.

*Dang, I think. They tinted out every window. That'll add to the challenge.*

I'm hoping that whoever was on the other side of that gun blast was so focused on shooting me that they might not have noticed my disappearance and subsequent launching across the front of their SUV. It's unlikely, but possible. A girl can dream can't she?

As I clear the far side of the hood and land on the pavement next to the front tire, I immediately jettison

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myself towards the rear of the car in a tight roll and pop up into a crouch near the back bumper. My ears are ringing with the echoes from the shotgun blast that tore open the passenger door and window (It *had* to be a shotgun with how loud it was and how much damage it did so quickly. And I **hate** shotguns. I've had a bad history with them.). It was way too loud and unexpected for me to properly protect myself from it. I'll just have to go without that particular sense for a few minutes (Although it certainly would have been helpful right now with the side of the car exposed to the elements. I bet I could hear all kinds of conversations in there...if I could only hear.). But that thought does remind of another person who *can* hear right now.

"I'm OK, Renny," I whisper just loud enough for my mic to pick it up. "They blew out the side window with a shotgun, but they didn't get close to me. I'm safe," I say and then consider my next move. "I believe they have just volunteered themselves to be tonight's quick snack, though."

Awkwardly duck-walking the few feet across the length of the back of the vehicle (I don't want them to see my head pop up through the rear window and ruin the surprise.), I peek around the passenger side of the Escalade and look towards the now blown-out window. Above the scents of the city and the guns, I can pick out definable smells for at least four different people. Four people who will provide me with enough energy to unleash some fury on one Mr. Chadwick Morrin tonight.

And even better than that? One of my future snacks is starting to lean out of the window to get a better look at the street around him. It's almost like they're gift-

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wrapping this meal for me.

Pulling on the bit of darkness I've been holding in reserve for just this moment, I use the power it gives me to slow time even more and allow myself a chance to run up to the window and surprise the poor guy before his head even fully clears the sill (I know now that I don't actually *slow down time*, but instead I accelerate my own metabolism and body functions to the point that I move at a speed that is faster than the normal human eye can register. It's not *quite* as cool as stopping time, but it's still incredibly fun and effective.).

Launching myself forward towards the opening the shotgun blast created, I sprint the length of the car in a split-second and arrive at the window just as his chin comes into view. With surprise as an advantage, I use my momentum to power a punch that I send straight into his nose with as much energy as I can muster. The force of my hit rocks his head backward into the SUV's shattered window frame with an alarming *crunch*. I watch as his eyes begin rolling back into his skull even as his head starts to ricochet back towards me. He's out cold, and he never even saw me approach.

Knowing that I'm about to replenish my dark energy with this man's lifeblood, I tap into what little I have left to elevate my strength, too. Reaching in through the open window (and avoiding the remaining glass fragments as best I can) I use both hands to grab the man's torso and pull him up and out of the window and onto the street with me (I get lucky that he isn't wearing a seatbelt, or it all would have been thwarted by a small strip of fabric. Luckily, drug thugs don't seem to embrace the Buckle Up! Laws too heavily.). Once he's on the street, I drop to my

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belly and shimmy under the car while pulling him with me.

Even though I can't see what I just did through their eyes, I can only hope it looked as cool as I imagined it. It should have been as sudden, violent and disconcerting as one of the Xenomorph attacks in those awesome *Aliens* movies. It should be enough to throw them off their game and give me a moment to enjoy my new friend.

There isn't much room to move underneath the SUV, but all I need to do is pull his neck close enough to get my teeth to it. Once I do that, it's just a matter of letting my instincts kick in and enjoy the rush.

And this time, for Ren's sake, I remember to turn off the mic just before the warmth flows into me.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The jolt of energy the man's blood gives me is a relief after the evening I've had so far. Unfortunately, the boost is quickly absorbed by my body's attempts to heal my eardrums and cure their incessant ringing after that point blank shotgun blast and the necessary restoring of my already low chemistry levels. It's tempting to take more than the three to four pints I allow myself (too much more than that, and he'll need medical assistance), as the man is incredibly healthy and toxin-free (he doesn't even smoke judging by the purity of his red blood cells). But I don't allow myself to do that. There is no need to gorge myself when I have three more volunteers just a few feet above me.

Licking the small puncture marks I created in his neck, I allow my saliva to work its magic and seal the holes as I concentrate on what my returning senses tell me. Being able to hear again is nice, but it brings with it some side effects. Namely, the vehicle is still running and I am lying almost directly underneath the engine. The motor's idling hum is nearly a *roar* to my sensitive ears, so hearing the conversations coming from *inside* the car are much more challenging than I had anticipated.



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I can pick out a heated conversation (raised voices, but not quite to the level of yelling) occurring up there, but I can't quite make out what they are saying. I do notice two things, though, that catch my attention. The first is that the emotions that are seeping through in the words are not as much of the fear variety as I had both hoped and assumed. They seem angry, cautious and excited. Not necessarily a good combination for my continued good health.

The other thing I notice is that the words they're using are all in Spanish. *All* of them. And that is unusual. Up here in the Midwest, we do have our Hispanic populations, but I have run into very few gangs that are solely comprised of the nationality. I always assumed that was more of a West Coast or Southwestern thing. Normally I just run into one or two guys speaking my native tongue per nocturnal excursion. But an entire car full of them? That is definitely unusual. I wonder what's up with it. I guess I'll just have to ask.

Wiggling back towards the passenger side of the car so that I can pop up and attempt a surprise, impromptu conversation with my new friends, my movement is interrupted by a sound on the far side of the car: the back door on the driver's side opening up. Apparently, they've opted to come *out* to me. How kind of them.

Flicking on my microphone (I've learned that forgetting to re-activate it will just get me reprimanded later.), I quietly update Ren on the situation. "First target neutralized," I whisper before adding, "And he was delicious." I know the comment isn't necessary, but sometimes it's fun just to aggravate the guy. I have to have some hobbies, right?

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The speaker clicks on and then off in my pocket as his signal that he received what I said (Even though simple electronic *clicks* can't convey a disapproving tone, I'm still pretty sure I could sense one. The guy is a bit too uptight sometimes.). "Plus the back door just opened. I think one is coming out to join me. Standby."

Scraping my belly on the ground, I shimmy my way forward until I am just beneath the open back door of the vehicle. I figure I can wait for them to step out, and then I'll just grab their feet and yank really hard. It typically works in the movies, and I don't see why the physics of it would betray me here. Now it is just a matter of being patient and waiting for the feet to actually hit the pavement.

But no feet come out. And no more talking comes from above me. I *can* hear movement, though. And quite a bit of it. Someone is right above me in the back seat of the SUV, and it sounds like they are lifting something heavy or at least shifting their weight back and forth quite a bit. The sounds of suitcases opening and closing (or at least some time of large "container", and I'm pretty sure I hear latches) are distinguishable from the other sounds of rustling and assorted movements. There is definitely something going on up there, but I can't tell what it is for the life of me. The temptation to scoot forward and peek up from beneath the open door is nearly overwhelming, but after a small struggle I manage to keep my curiosity in check. I can wait them out. I'm the bigger person here.

And then a sound from directly behind me catches my attention. It's a sound that both floods my system with adrenaline thus slowing time, and reminds me that sometimes I'm not always the smartest person in the

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battle.

It's the hard metallic *clink-tink* of grenades bouncing off the pavement and rolling towards me under the Escalade.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*They distracted me!* Is the first thought that shoots through my mind upon seeing the two black, metal cylinders roll towards me across the dark, shadowy pavement (OK, that's a lie. My *first* thoughts were a number of curses, but it wasn't really a very helpful string of thinking.). *That open door was just to absorb my attention while they used the shattered passenger window to toss me down a few surprises.* For a split second I stare at the two soda can-shaped objects behind me as a last thought comes to me before I'm jolted into action. *I'm impressed,* I think as I force my body to spin like a top so that I can maneuver myself to grab the two objects.

Continuing my rotation, I scoop up one of the warm, hissing cans and hurl it out and away from the vehicle as hard as I can. I watch as it sails into the street and careens off the tire of a parked car before my momentum takes it out of my view.

*One down and one to go,* I think as I reach for where I'm expecting the second grenade to be resting, but it's not there. Frantically looking back and forth, I locate it wedged under the rear wheel (my spinning foot must have kicked it while I was focusing on the other one). It's out

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of my reach unless I start crawling, and I have no idea how long I have before it goes off. Crawling might only put me closer to it at the exactly wrong moment.

With a hope that the occupants of the car wouldn't toss something violently explosive under themselves, I roll away from the grenade and towards the front of the vehicle. As long as everything around me doesn't go up in flames, then I should be fine. At least that's what my completely uninformed thinking tells me (Come on movie logic, don't fail me now!).

Clearing the front of the Escalade, I maneuver my body so that my feet come out beneath me and spring straight up and onto the hood. Over the creak of the vehicle's shocks settling under my weight I hear two distinct *whumps* - one from directly in front of me and beneath the undercarriage and another one farther off down the street. Immediately following the sound, an acrid, white smoke begins to pour out from underneath the truck and flood the surrounding area.

It wasn't an explosive grenade! Thanking my own luck for letting me survive what could have been a very nasty surprise, I turn my attention to the men inside the Cadillac and realize I might have been a bit premature with my thinking.

Squinting through the darkened glass of the front window all I can make out are the eerie reflections of sweatshirt-hooded heads wearing gas masks. These gentlemen were prepared for me. And even though I can't see their expressions through their masks' reflective lenses, I can certainly *sense* their smiles as they stare straight at me. They seem neither surprised nor bothered by my sudden appearance on the hood of their vehicle.

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As we stare at each other with a hissing can underneath us filling the air with a disturbingly large amount of unbreathable air (Finally figured out they were tear gas canisters. Really not good for me and my hypersenses.), the realization hits me that the drug cartels that I have been so wantonly attacking may have finally come up with a solid plan. And I wasn't prepared for it.

Bending my knees, I crouch down so that I am only a couple feet from the two guys in the front seat. Figuring it can't hurt to attempt to disarm them with wit, I say, "So about those cookies I mentioned earlier?" And then I smile at the intimidating trio of men staring back at me to show them that I'm far from scared (Although I most definitely *should* be right now.). "The price has gone up," I manage to squeeze out as I notice that all three are raising their rifles to point towards the windshield. Where I'm standing. Only a few feet away.

Not wanting to see how they react to my unorthodox cookie-haggling techniques, I straighten my legs and propel myself up and over the top of the Escalade as I hear the burning roar of the guns beneath me erupt into what sounds like a chorus of ticked off, chattering grizzly bears. The glass behind me explodes outward onto the hood where I had been standing moments before. My momentum carries me up onto the roof (now less than a foot from these men and their intended harbingers of my destruction) where I only land briefly before rolling off the back and into the middle of the smoke-filled haze.

Holding my breath and squeezing my eyes as tightly shut as possible (reacting to any of this gas now would be horrifyingly detrimental to my health), I reach under the rear wheel for where I remember seeing the grenade

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before. Hoping that its detonation didn't move it at all, my plan becomes one of necessity: grab it and toss it into the car and then step back and wait for them to exit.

I know the masks they are wearing will prevent the gas from affecting them physically, but my goal is for it be contained enough to allow me to move around and attack. Even if they aren't choking on the gas, if the vehicle is filled with that acrid, white vapor, then they won't be able to see me to shoot me. And for now, that is a consolation prize I'm willing to settle for.

On only my second attempt I manage to find the warm, hissing can and pull it out from under the wheel (like plucking an angry, hissing kitten from out of the comfort of its littermates) and sprint along the passenger side of the car (ok, let's call it an "accelerated, stumbling grope" to be honest) so that I can toss the can in through the open, shattered side window.

I would love to be able to say I startled the men on the inside of the vehicle, but my sudden reappearance on a whole new side of their car didn't even seem to faze them. Not that I could see their expressions (I opened my eyes once I got to the window - had to run my hand along the side to know where I was - but I might as well have kept them closed for all the good their masks were doing me.), but their heads didn't even turn to follow the smoking canister as it sailed between the three of them to land in the farthest back part of the car. They just brought their guns around to face towards me in the open window and fired through it as I dove across the hood and slid to safety on the ground next to the front tire.

Pausing to catch my breath (Normally physical exertion isn't an issue for me, but that whole breath-

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holding thing upped the challenge a bit.), I consider my next attack. The grenade had been going off for a few seconds already by the time I got it into the back of the car. Plus the front and side windows are now gone, so that means the smoke won't be too horrible of a hindrance to the guys inside. It'll be more of an annoyance than a hindrance, really. And that means they will feel the need to press the advantage. And I don't want that. I *can't* have that. Not if I'm planning on winning this battle. I need to take them off guard and quickly.

And then it hits me like a punch to the face. Quite literally, actually. I have an idea on how to even the playing field.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Reaching into my backpack (And this is why it pays to be prepared!), I pull out a foot-long section of a thin steel bar I had found at the warehouse a few weeks back. I wasn't sure what I could use it for at the time, but I figured necessity would help spawn creativity and invention. And these times are about as *necessary* as one is going to get.

Deciding to take advantage of the car's shattered front window, I leap up and onto the hood so that I have an easy reach to the guy in the driver's seat. Swinging the bar towards the man's face as soon as my butt hits the metal and shattered glass, I catch him unprepared for my sudden arrival. At least I am guessing that I caught them off-guard as they didn't shoot me as soon as I landed. The end of the heavy, metal rod connects with the mask's safety glass causing an instant spider web effect that completely obscures any view of the man's face. I'm not sure if I also managed to crack the glass and give the gas an entry point or if I just blinded him, but I figure either option is an improvement.

The two men in the backseats don't seem overly shocked or impressed by my attack, but at least I'm thinking the guy in the driver's seat will be out of

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commission for a bit. He can either keep the mask on and not see me, or take it off and suffer through the gas. Either way, he's now lost his advantage.

As I pull the heavy bar back, I adjust my body so that I have a better angle on the man sitting in the back passenger seat staring straight at me. His gun is already swiveling towards me and my front window perch when I transform the bar from a hand-to-hand weapon into a projectile. Snapping my arm out and towards his head I release the bar and watch it slowly spin through the air like an unbent boomerang towards the man's unprotected glass faceplate (Apparently my adrenaline kicked in once I hit the vehicle's hood as time is slowing down around me. I hadn't done it on purpose, but I'm not arguing with my body's self-preservation abilities!). The bar broadsides and demolishes the mask's faceplate before his dark, ominous gun even gets halfway around to me. As soon as I see the bar come to a rest wedged sideways into the shattered glass like a dumbbell thrown into a freshly plastered wall, I leap up and over the vehicle so that I can land on the ground behind the driver's side door.

As I somersault over the top of the car, I can hear the slow, repetitive *brap-brap-brap* of the automatic weapon going off below me in the back seat. Without being able to see through the car's roof (That's still not an ability I've developed, unfortunately.), I am guessing the man is blind firing out of surprise and rage. It's a bit disconcerting, but hardly a danger to me as I land on the far side of the vehicle. With his seatmate separating the two of us. Speaking of which...

Landing on the ground next to the passenger door, I reach out and pull up the door handle and hope at no

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point did anyone think to hit the door locks. Sighing with a bit of relief, the door pops open for me and I blindly reach in and grab the man I know is sitting inside. My fingers dig into his shirt, and I can feel the hard edges of a protective vest underneath it (I hadn't even noticed that with the first man...who's still lying unconscious underneath the car...mere inches from my feet.). Curling my fingers and gripping the fabric as tightly as I can, I flex my muscles and yank backwards pulling the startled man free of his seat.

I wasn't sure if he would have his seatbelt on or not and I didn't want to take the time to check, so I just put extra effort into the extraction and hope for the best. With how easily he pops out of the opened doorway, though, I'm guessing he either never fastened his seatbelt (so much for safety) or undid it in an attempt to get at me (poor choice). Pulling him out and over my head in an arc that gives the odd impression of a late-night rainbow made entirely out of a Mexican thug, I smash him down onto the pavement and on to his back in an attempt to knock the wind out of him. The air *whumps* out of his lungs like a sumo wrestler landing on a bagpipe, and I take a moment to smile at the success of my attack. Once I put my mind to it, I managed to disarm and almost completely incapacitate three trained thugs in less than ten seconds. That's impressive even for me.

That's good, but I still shouldn't have been caught off guard in the first place. I'll have to be more careful in the future. These guys could have very easily hurt me if I hadn't been so quick on my feet.

Speaking of which, I look down at the guy on the ground in front of me and decide it's time to return to my

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original plan: getting my energy from these guys so I can focus on Chadwick. Grabbing the top of the gas mask, I quickly yank it upwards and away from me so that it reveals the man's exposed face and throat.

A quick glance confirms what I had assumed earlier. He's definitely from my home country. And he's looking a little worse for the wear right now. I watch for a second as his lungs try desperately to bring in the air that I had so suddenly knocked from them mere moments ago, and then I decide to relieve him of the pain. Baring my teeth, I bite into his carotid artery and relish the sweet surge of energy it gives as I feel his blood flow into my mouth.

As I drink, I feel his breathing slow down and even out (as horrifying as what I do is, it does have some beneficial side effects) and the hammering of his heart, which had initially flooded my throat with the salty liquid of his life, becomes a more steady and relaxed pattern. Unconsciousness sweeps up and carries him off in its reassuring embrace. He won't be a worry for a while.

Unfortunately the handful of seconds it took me to feed was enough for the two men in the car to recover and get their wits about them. As I finish licking the sleeping man's wounds close, I look up to see the man in the driver's seat opening his car door and turning to face me. His eyes are red and swollen from the gas still inside the SUV, but I don't think it is thick enough to completely incapacitate him. It's just enough to annoy and anger him instead.

Turning his body to face me, I notice his far arm bringing that menacing rifle around to bear at me. Something tells me he isn't wishing to discuss my earlier offer of female-centric culinary treats. Or at least the

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discussion he is planning won't be using words so much as sharp, speedy bits of metal. Before the gun can clear the opening of the doorway, I push myself into action and leap straight at him. The newfound energy flowing through me from my recent meal fuels my muscles as they spring and release with strength I haven't felt in days. It's almost too much energy.

Hitting the man square in the chest, my weight and velocity hit him like a lion tackling a gazelle on the open plain. The problem comes in as I realize there is no more front windshield to stop my momentum and the both of us going flying up, out and through that empty space. Well, at least *I* go through it easily. The poor guy I hit manages to rather violently smack the back of his skull on the roof of the car as he leads me through it while being nearly folded in half (I feel like the awkward meat filling in a weird human taco, and he has become my unwilling tortilla shell).

We both land on the open street basked in the sterile glow of the Escalade's headlights. Actually, *he* lands on his back in the street like a paper cup thrown from a passing car. *I* land neatly on top of him with all of my weight compressing his chest and forcefully ejecting any air that might have been trapped there. My arrival on his chest is immediately followed by both the disturbing *wheeze* of a life-sized balloon animal being strangled of its air and then the *smank* of the back of his head bouncing off the dark pavement. Using the cushion of his landing to soften my own impact, I roll over the top of him and into a crouch.

Looking back towards the (now nearly empty) SUV, I don't notice the final man coming out, so I take a moment to ease my current target's pain. Deciding between the

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man's throat (quicker to drain but harder to see my surroundings) and his wrist (much slower but allows me to watch the car while I drink), I opt for safety over speed. I'm not sure what this last guy has planned and I'd rather see it coming than risk being surprised again. Pulling the man's exposed wrist up to my mouth, I keep my eyes on the smoke-enshrouded vehicle (Having to squint to protect my own senses is making seeing into it rather difficult.). But the last man never appears.

Finishing with my meal, I clean up the small amount of mess on the man's arm and make sure my microphone is still keyed to the "on" position.

"Hey Ren," I whisper while staring at the smoking remains of the vehicle in front of me. "Three are now down for the count, but I have one in the car I can't see. And these guys seem to be professionals. They were prepared for me, and nothing I did seemed to surprise them. I believe I have finally gotten the full attention of someone higher up the food chain. What's your advice?"

"Authorities were just contacted by someone on the street," his voice squeaks from my pocket barely above a mouse's whisper. "You still have time, though. I'd like to know who sent them. Any chance you can pull that last guy out and ask?"

"Sure Ren. I'll give it a try," I say as I stand up and stretch my legs. With all the smoke still clouding my vision of the inside of the car, I don't know what the last guy is up to. It isn't helping matters that my head is beginning to ache from all the pollutants in the air that my lungs are having to filter out and my eyes are watering from the wisps of gas that get blown into them from the wind. I need to be done with this scene and quickly.

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"I can't see him, though," I continue. "I'm not real sure what he's up to in there, to be honest. I'm hoping they don't have any more surprises for me."

As the words leave my mouth, though, my final playmate makes his move. And it's a good one. The Escalade, which had been on and running this whole time, *roars* and suddenly begins to back away from us. Apparently, the guy used the cover of the gas to sneak into the front seat and pull the gear shift from Park to Reverse. It's irritating, but nothing a little speedy sprint and leap won't fix. I figure I can land on the hood, pull him out through the open windshield and have a little talk with him before putting him to sleep.

And then he manages to really surprise me. Just before I propel myself into motion to follow the fleeing vehicle, two small objects come sailing out the front window. Whereas the previous objects thrown at me looked like cans of soda, these appear to be small, dark, lumpy apples. Even with my eyes watering and my head pounding, I can see these well enough to tell they are *not* the same things thrown at me before. And if I had a spidey-sense, I'm positive it would be tingling and telling me these are very bad news.

The shock at what I'm seeing freezes me for a split second. Grenades! Real grenades? How have I gotten to a point in my life where I have someone throwing not one, but two, explosive incendiary devices at me? I knew I was making a dent in the drug trade in the city, but I hadn't realized I had achieved a let's-throw-a-grenade-at-the-problem level of attention. The surrealism of the situation is unsettling, and it buys the man in the SUV another second as I watch the two objects arc through the air.

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Then I realize the two objects, the grenades, are about to land near me and if I don't do something about the situation immediately I might not have to worry about future run-ins with the cartels. Watching the grenades as they spin, I realize they aren't going to be landing near each other, either (whether it's through sheer bad luck on my part, or impressive, devious foresight on his I don't know). One is landing roughly where I am standing (and my most recent snack is lying blissfully unaware), and the other is spinning off towards the sidewalk and closest building. The sidewalk and building that I had been sure would be out of harm's way when I had parked my bike there.

Racing through my options, I try to go with the least damaging of them (I quickly realize that once *grenades* are involved, the idea of *not* doing damage somewhere has been eliminated.).

Before I can even approach the discussion of *which* grenade to grab first (I'm not even sure I can get to both before they go off.), I have to figure out where I'm going to put them in order to hurt the fewest number of people or things. It's tempting to just run and save myself, but I can't let these three guys lying in the street die because of my actions. I'm not ready to become that person, yet.

Do I try and get the grenades into the middle of the street? Toss them at a building? In an alley? Straight up in the air? How far will their shrapnel go before it's no longer lethal? Can I even get the grenades to go where I want them to once I've grabbed them? These questions fly through my head as I stare at the two ominous objects coming at me through the air like wingless, metal birds of death.



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Then I remember throwing chunks of concrete at the pillars of the warehouse that first week of my self-banishment, and my doubt about my abilities fades away. As long as I can get to them before they detonate, then I will succeed. And if one goes off while it's next to me, then I've lived a good life and made a difference in the world. It would be a good death.

"Grenades!" I finally shout so that Ren will know what is coming next, and leap into the air to catch the grenade that was coming towards me already. Snatching it out of mid-air, I pull my arm back and whip it forward using as much power and accuracy as I can to get it to its intended destination: the gaping hole that used to be a windshield in the fleeing black vehicle.

I wish I could change directions in the air, but that isn't an ability that I have (Super speed and senses, yes. Flying? No.). The seconds it takes me to complete my trip through the air, land, get my balance, turn around and take off running for the second grenade seem to stretch beyond sanity. My flight wasted precious time, but it was just the byproduct of immediate action. Now is not the time for lament.

Sprinting the two dozen feet from where I landed to where I can still see the frightening metallic fruit spinning lazily on the chipped sidewalk (mere paces from my new motorcycle), I push as much of my energy into my acceleration as I can. Closing the final few feet to my destination, I dive into a roll so as to not sacrifice any of my momentum and scoop up the grenade into my hands. As I come back into a standing position, I release the surprisingly weighty little rock with as much force as possible (not worrying about accuracy and just hoping to

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put as much distance between me and it as I can). I watch as it sails up and over the edge of the nearest building without losing any height before I drop down and cover my head.

The two muffled *Whum-BOOM's* come even quicker than I anticipated. One from above and behind the building (hope no locals had decided to stargaze tonight), and the other from down the street behind me. The second explosion is followed by the distinct sounds of a car losing control and slamming into something large and very immobile (I would guess a parked car, telephone pole or building.).

Peeking out from between my fingers and down the street, I see that my aim had been as true as I had hoped. The black SUV that had been the source of my troubles tonight is off to the side of the road in flames.

"That interrogation may have to wait a bit Renny," I say and smile at the fact that I was the one to survive tonight's ordeal unscathed. "Last target may not be up to speaking."

After glancing around briefly at the three unconscious men in the street near me and making sure they are alive but decommissioned, I sprint over to my bike and start it up. Luckily with all the gunfire going off, none of it hit my ride. Thank goodness for small favors. Just because I have an overflow of energy doesn't mean I want to spend it running halfway across the city.

Before slipping the helmet onto my head and safely cocooning my senses, I tell Ren, "Heading over to check the status of our last target. Then I'm going back to Chadwick's with a full charge."

My pocket buzzes twice in response, and I slip the

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helmet securely over my head cutting out the ambient sounds and smells of the street. Twisting the throttle, I accelerate into a smooth circle and shoot back up the darkened thoroughfare towards the burning vehicle to see what destruction has been wrought.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

My intention with the first grenade had been twofold: get it somewhere quickly to minimize the collateral damage and hopefully find a way to prevent the last thug from escaping. As I had leaped into the air to intercept the explosive device, the idea of combining the two thoughts came to me. The shattered front windshield of the SUV was still facing towards me, and the grenade was roughly the same size and weight as a rock. The steel exterior of the vehicle would work as well as anything else to contain the blast. I knew the guy *inside* might not fare as well, but when deciding between him and bystanders, his previous poor decisions cost him a vote.

Pulling up to the wreckage, I see the damage isn't nearly as severe as I had dreaded. The entire back half of the vehicle has been shredded and there is GM car part shrapnel scattered everywhere, but it doesn't appear the explosion hurt anything that wasn't inside the Escalade. And with the guy going in reverse instead of drive, there wasn't much momentum built up when he lost control and hit the parked Subaru and a telephone pole (Hey! I was right with two of my three guesses as to what he hit. Not too shabby.). Speaking of the guy...

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A quick peek as I roll up to the scene shows me the front seats are empty and the passenger door is open and crumpled against the parked car he hit.

*Where'd he go? How did he just disappear? Did he escape?* The thoughts hit me consecutively, and I begin to wonder if I've met a second man in the same night with powers that might be equal to mine (Chadwick Morrin has still taken a very prominent position in the forefront of my thinking this evening.). Then I notice his curled up body underneath the Subaru, and I figure out what happened.

He's not super*human*; he's just super *lucky*. He must have seen the grenade coming and managed to jump out before it exploded. I'm sure it was still painful (and it looks like it was enough to knock him unconscious), but it was also probably enough to save his life.

Popping out the bike's kickstand with my foot, I dismount and pull the man clear of the Subaru's rear fender. Looking at his face (the now-shattered gas mask no longer obscures my view of it), I see I was wrong with my previous assumption. He isn't unconscious. He's quite awake and aware of his surroundings, and judging by the rabid gleam in his eyes he isn't exactly thrilled to be seeing me again.

Staring into his eyes (Well, I stare into *his* eyes, all he can see is my reflective visor, but the intent is there.), I wait to see if he has any spunk left in him. Any last minute acts of valor that I should be prepared for. But he just stares at me and breathes heavily. He may have fury in his soul, but I'm thinking he has no more energy in his body. Surviving a nearly fatal explosion will do that to a person.

Bending down closer to the man, I unbuckle and remove my helmet to make my next actions easier.

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"How long do I have?" I ask quietly knowing Ren will understand what I am referring to. He's a smart man, and I have faith in him.

"Less than a minute," the quiet, ghostly voice whispers up from my pocket. "Probably closer to thirty seconds."

It's not enough time for me to feed or to even properly interrogate the guy, and that means he *will* remember what happened tonight unlike his friends. From past experience I know whatever venom or poison exists in my saliva will have blurred their memories and given them only a dim recollection of anything that has happened. All they'll know is that they were driving around and then woke up in the street with their vehicle in flames.

But this guy? He'll remember every single second of what happened. It will stay with him and haunt him. He'll know who they confronted tonight and how well I fought and how quickly they fell. But, more importantly, he'll also learn from it and have a better chance of hurting me next time. I hate that, but I won't choose the alternative. I won't kill a man just to silence him. I still won't be that person.

But that doesn't mean he can't be useful to me before I take off.

Covering my microphone with my hand in an attempt to muffle my voice for Ren (Even over our connection my **forced** voice carries power, and he already had to deal with it once tonight at Chadwick's.), I lean in close to the man's face and put every bit of my will into my words.

**"where should I hit next to do the most damage?"** I ask, and then follow up with, **"and give me**

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**the address of your boss's place."** I leave the location vague (Boss's house? Work? Warehouse? I don't know which would be best. I figure this guy can decide for me.) and memorize the addresses he gives me. He doesn't even put up a fight against my questions, and it's nice to catch another break.

Standing back up, I inhale deeply to get a good taste of the air around the burning Escalade. I absolutely hate the tang of burning rubber and plastic that tear through my nose and lungs, but it's the quickest way of finding out how much drugs or money were in the vehicle. Everything in the back of that truck is now on fire, and the scents permeating the air should tell a story of what was being carried.

And they do, but it isn't good news.

Straightening my legs, I click my mic button and say, "I have two addresses for you to run down that were just provided by our reluctant volunteer. I think they may make for some interesting stops this week." I pause and take one more good pull of the air and hope for a change in what I had sensed before.

No luck.

"And bad news, Renny," I say stepping back onto the bike and pulling up the kickstand. "Their car was pretty much empty of contraband. I could smell a plethora of weapons (thanks for the vocabulary bump El Guapo), but very little in the way of drugs or money."

Gunning the bike into a hard turn and rocketing off down the adjacent alley before the arriving police can catch sight of me, I finish the rest of my thought silently to myself. *Because I think they were out tonight just looking for me. And that can't be good for my continued existence.*

**PART TWO**  
**-The Decision-**



You must purchase the novel to find out what happens  
in the rest of the story.

Thank you.