

“That’s the road!” I point as Tristan drives past it.

“Too direct,” he replies, and I stare. “We can’t that the chance of leading someone following us to them.”

I stare some more, but he ignores me. “We’ve taken I don’t know how many detours to get here. You’ve pulled sharp turns that would have revealed anyone trying to stick with us often enough, I’m not sure I’m still in this car.” I cross my arms and sink back into the seat. “You’re just being paranoid.”

“I’m ensuring their safety.”

I snort. “I’d love to see someone try to make their lives difficult. They’re already putting up with my parents. They wouldn’t have any patience for anyone else trying it.”

“At which point they would question why anyone would go after them trying to reach you.”

“Just Gramp. Grams would put two and two together and end up with the whole alphabet. She’s that clever.”

“And you’re certain she isn’t sharing the information with her husband?”

“He isn’t as...strong as she is when it comes to that stuff, so she’d protecting him from it.”

“That’s what she tells you.”

“Are you calling her a liar?”

“She is, by your own admission.”

“It’s not the same thing. She’d protecting him.”

“And what would she do if she believed it would protect you?”

“She knows I can handle myself.” I point to the other road that would take us to their house, but he shakes his head. “Are you planning on having us get there in time for dinner?”

“Yes.”

What I wouldn’t do for a coffee right now. But that would mean convincing him, then stopping for it, which would put us there even later.

The road he takes had me frowning. It’s narrow, and I’m not sure where it leads. With him, it might not go anywhere near, but he also spent hours surfing the web after coming back from his errands. I can’t forget that while he isn’t as skilled as I am, he isn’t horrible as a hacker himself. He could have gotten into government survey sites with better city maps than Google.

From that small road, we turn into an alley that I know can’t be heading for my grandparents’ place since there is nothing residential around my parents’ mansion. I have no idea how much Dear Old Dad paid, but there’s a three block deep wooded park all around. That’s how much he likes his privacy. This is Phoenix, so you can imagine what it takes to keep that amount of trees healthy.

We leave the alley and turn onto a dirt road through said park. When we exit it, we’re back on the road that leads to the read gate, and my grandparents’ house.

“Now I’m kind of curious how you found out about that path.”

“The park maintenance servers. They document all routes so they can be checked to make sure they aren’t being used outside their intended purpose.”

“You mean such as using them to make sure we aren’t being followed?”

“The schedule of the checks was also stored there. It’s in three hours.”

“That’s not exactly smart of them.”

“It’s a state-run site.”

That would explain it.

When we reach the turn for the gate, I glare at him. If he even thinks of driving past, I’m going to... I don’t know... Withhold sex or something. My threat works, because he makes the turn. Then he stops at the gate and enters the code.

Emil is out of the house before I’m out of the car, running at us. Tristan is out in time to take the hug. Then I’m close enough for Emil to pull me in and I wince. Pain killers only muffle the pains and aches acquired over a week of fighting, they don’t make them vanish.

“I wanna go home,” he whispers.

“There’s no home to go back to right now,” Tristan states, and Emil tightens his hold on us.

“What if you need my help?”

“The best way you can help is by staying safe with Alex’s guardians.”

“They can’t be making your life difficult, can they?” I ask as I urge us toward the house. Gramp is there, leaning against the post.

“No, they’re great. Although I had to be alone for a couple of days because of their work.”

“They both traveled?” I ask Gramp. One of the reason I figured having Emil stay here is that my parents hardly even travel at the same time. When Dear Old Dad leaves, it to support this politician or that one. Mom’s travels it’s for one of the many charities she gives money to that allow her to feel like she’d giving back to the community. The fact that not one of them helps communities that could use it never factors into her beliefs.

“Political ball on Monday to support the police officers who were impacted by the protest after that news report on the beating.” It won’t be a police officer that was beaten; you can be sure of that. “How’s the work coming along?”

“It’s dragging on,” I whine. “I am so fed up with hotels. I want my own bed again.” I glare at Tristan. “We could have that already if you’d been willing to buy prefab, you know.”

“And have the same substandard work that led to the fire?” his tone is stubborn.

The act isn’t so much rehearsed as playing into our strength. I’m emotional, he’s firm. Gramp doesn’t know about the explosion that destroyed the garage. When we brought Emil over for him to stay while we figured things out, we told him an electrical short set the used oil barrel on fire and that got hot enough the metal weakened and caused the oil to spill, spreading that to two wall and bringing the place down before the fire department could do anything about it.

The only reason we’re all okay was that we were out on a family outing at the time.

Gramp had some choice words for Tristan about properly securing a home, and Tristan played the overconfident expert who’d been caught with his pants down. No, that doesn’t work. He’s naked most of the time. I don’t think he’d care if his pants were pulled down in public. Anyway, he took the chastising, and promised that our next home would have state-of-the-art fire prevention build in. And then we lost them to talk of the best system to employ.

I’m not worried about him learning it was our home that blew up. I didn’t buy it under my name, and it’s not like he looks through Dear old Dad’s insurance reports. That’s another

division entirely, and I have good enough control of those computers they only see what I need them to see.

I am curious as to what they think of the ‘support program to under privilege neighborhood’ that I created to justify the money I put on the garage.

“You know you two are welcome to stay here while the construction’s happening.”

Emil chokes.

“I prefer being close to supervise the crews,” Tristan says. “And for all of Alex’s complaining about the bed, I make sure he enjoys his time in it.”

“Like you two limit it to the bed,” Emil mutters, and Gramp raises an eyebrow.

“Shouldn’t you two be more...discrete?”

“You know what it’s like,” I say as I take my man’s arm. “When you’re in the throw of passion.”

“Me and Gabrielle didn’t have a kid in the house,” Gramp replied.

“And how’s school, Emil?” I ask because I really don’t feel like having my sex life pried into by someone his age.

“It’s school,” he replies with a shrug as we enter the house.

“He hasn’t been in any fights,” Grams says, stepping out of the dining room to greet us. “Other than those me and Franklin supervise.”

“You’re teaching him to fight?” I ask.

“I asked,” Emil says. “They have military training, I’d be an id—”

“Emil,” Grams warns.

“It’s smart to take advantage of it,” he finishes.

I remember those lessons from her so well. Words have power, so use good ones when referring to yourself.

“The food smells good,” Tristan says as Grams ushers us into the dining room.

“Emil helped.”

“How?” I exclaim. “His understanding of cooking is memorizing take out numbers.”

“Maybe that was because you never took the time to teach him?” she asks teasingly.

“Did you want to learn to cook?” I ask Emil, and he shrugs.

“Everyone needs a base,” she says. “I taught you that.”

But she’s from a time when if you couldn’t cook your own food, you weren’t eating well. That hasn’t been true for decades anymore.

“How is he with the training?” Tristan asks as Grams goes to the kitchen to bring the food.

“His base is eclectic,” Gramp replies. “Had to get him to learn restraint, the way he was coming at me with everything he has. He’s sneaky too. Had me worried I’d injured him a time or two. He seems to have picked up from someone that anything is about making sure you win.”

“It’s a good mindset to have,” Tristan replies and utterly ignores the reproach in Gramp’s expression.

Soup is served, cutting off Gramp’s comment. Thick cream of tomato soup, along with a blessed cup of coffee.

“How is the construction proceeding?” Grams asks.

“Well, the foundation is in place, with the under pad for the oil change bay finished. I’m waiting to receive approval on the electrical, since I’ll have high draw equipment. In the meantime, the walls are being put in place.”

As far as I can tell, Tristan has the entire construction of the new fictitious garage, that will also be our home, worked out in his head, day by day, if not hour by hour. It’s going to be interesting to work out what we’ll do once this is over and we actually need a home.

The main course is a pot roast with tender meat and vegetables, which Emil sliced, Grams says with a bride and had him blushing. If there ever was a question about if they’d accept him. Those are gone. He’s the grandson they never thought the son they never expected to have would give them.

With that, and more coffee—Tristan can’t comment, so I’m taking full advantage of it, short of smirking—the conversation turns to more details about Emil’s school life. I’m still the contact point, so if he got in trouble, I’d know. But they’re who he gets to talk with when he comes home, and I figure they are a better parental figure in that area than me or Tristan can be.

What we learn, that I think Emil would have liked kept from us, is that he hasn’t made a girlfriend yet. That they know of, I think, while Tristan gives Gramp this ‘what else did you think?’ look.

Gramp figures it’s going to happen. Tristan can’t imagine Emil wanting to be intimate with anyone after what was done to him. I’m not going to claim I know if he has a girl he’s serious about, but I know he’s had sex with some.

His grades are good, which neither of us is surprised by. They were decent in his first school, and had improved once he was in one he didn’t spend as much time having to defend people from bullies.

Emil’s smart, if not entirely in a way the school system is built to account for.

With dessert, Tristan gets details of what Grams and Gramp have been teaching Emil, and he nods in approval as they name techniques. I ‘know’ them, since they’ve taught me everything I know about fighting, but I’ve never bothered with the names of them. What I do know, is that the longer Emil stays here, the deadlier he’ll become.

I am all for that. It’s a dangerous world we live in.

And then comes the part of the meal I’m not entirely looking forward to. Clean up. Me and Grams in the kitchen, doing dishes while I have to dance around how to answer her questions. Used to be I didn’t hold anything back from her, but with Tristan in my life and taking on the trafficking ring, I don’t think she’s can deal with how dangerous my life has become. She’s strong, and I respect her, but just like she’s looking after Gramp by not telling him everything she knows I get up to. I’m doing that with her.

“Alex,” she says, standing. “Why do you and Emil help with cleaning up?”

I nearly drop from my chair in surprise, and almost miss the look she and Gramp exchange. Emil’s up and gathering dishes. Then I join in, trying to figure out what Gramp might have to talk about with Tristan, and what is the safe-distance if things heat-up in the process of that discussion.

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