

### Storyboard-10

I stop by the kitchen to fill my travel mug from the machine I dialed in to start before I arrived, then kick off my shoes on the way to the door leading to my computer room. I put on the heavy slippers at the bottom of the stairs. Concrete floors are cold even in Phoenix, especially in a repurposed wine cellar under the house. I shiver, but I have my coffee to chase that away. The heat my rig generates is pulled directly into the air duct to keep this room from warming even by one degree.

My computer makes what I use at my day job look like a ten-year-old PC. These are top-of-the-line parts, with an OS of my own design spread over three interconnected work stations, allowing me to either boost the strength of one attack or subdivide it among multiple contact points when I need a dispersed approach.

I have a fourth one, in isolation, for when there's a chance the information I'm working with will try to call home at the first chance it has. This is where I plug in the USB key while I connect my cell to the rest. I don't trust wireless for this kind of work. There's only so much security you can build into a signal broadcasting everywhere, so why risk it when a wire is simple and secure.

The files are encrypted. No surprise there. I wouldn't enjoy this so much if it was too easy. It takes me two minutes to find the USB key with the right decryption program on it. I need to clean up my physical storage system. A drawer in a desk with every program I have written stored on a different USB key might be a good way to ensure no one can easily use them against me, but it also means I can't easily find them.

I insert the key and the program starts up. Now it's all about waiting, which is a good time to realize my mug is empty.

The coffee machine down here is like my rig, except I didn't make it. It's state-of-the-art. It grinds, it measures the sizes of the grounds; it heats water to the perfect temperature, or milk, if you have no taste. The guy who made it explained that with the press of one button, and the right compartments filled, I can have any variation on coffee possible under thirty seconds.

I still don't understand why anyone in their right mind could want a variation on the perfection that is black coffee. I'll accept sugar, for the junkies out there, but anything else and just give up on coffee already, will you?

The machine is within a quick roll of my chair's reach. And because I understand perfection, it only takes ten seconds to fill my mug and I have ambrosia.

Bliss temporarily achieved, and without decrypted files, I pull Mister Hunk's cloned phone onto my rig.

Disappointment hits hard at the pictures of his wife, his kids. There are those of food, a lot of food. Really well framed and composed pictures of food. What is he, a food photographer?

I linger on the pictures of him with the wife and kid and try not to be too angry at her for stealing him from me. He glanced down; I know he did.

I find out why the pictures when I look at the information about the phone. Mister Benoit Thibault is Mister Hunk's name.

I'm sticking with Mister Hunk.

Mister Hunk is a restaurateur. Somewhat successful at that, I think. If having a hand full of them over two provinces means anything. I don't eat in restaurants unless I'm tailing someone eating there. Too many cameras, too many nosy people.

I will take advantage of those when I need dirt on someone, but I'd rather not be who they look at.

The apps are what you'd expect, and a few unexpected ones for someone who only runs a restaurant, but I already know Mister Hunk does more than that, having watched him break into a safe, by breaking the safe.

Now, this is interesting. Why would you have a hidden partition?

Did you think you could keep me out of it?

Didn't you see me get in that computer? Come on, you had to watch me a little. I know you glanced at my crotch.

Texting history.

That's what you hide? Why would you—

Oh, that's why. That is not a picture you'd want your wife to see. Neither are the dozen other IWantYouNow has sent you. A faithful man would have deleted it the instant they arrived.

So there is hope for us yet.

Come on, you're getting pictures from dozens of different women. All I'm asking for is for you to have one guy on the side. That's it. Just one and I'm going to be happy. Or maybe if the pictures you sent them in return were on the phone too, but you only kept their message.

Come on, I want to know what you're packing.

Tell you what, one nude of you, or I'm sending all of this to that lovely wife of yours. I'm out of coffee. That's why I'm so cranky. A roll and refill and I'm back.

So, he's straight. What did I expect from someone seemingly perfect? That's not a reason to make his wife pay for my disappointment.

I was so sure that smile, as he left me behind, was a promise...

On to the credit card history. Safer territory.

Mastercard, Visa, Discover; the classic, but we're looking at gold-level cards, one platinum. The RFID scanner gives me everything I need to access his account at each company, except for the password, but come on, those are credit card companies, not the Pentagon.

Unsurprisingly enough, the bulk of the transactions are in Canada. Quebec and Ontario. That explains that wonderful accent. Overseas payment here, out of province one there. Trace both to restaurant equipment companies. That one too. These are food orders in volumes needed to feed armies; or customers.

I could understand what this man was doing at Liaison if he'd stayed in the meet and greet room, but he broke into an office, took pictures of ledgers.

He's in Phoenix for a restaurant stuff convention, according to his credit cards, even staying at the Regency not far from the convention center.

Something isn't adding up here.

And here is one thread I can start pulling on. His Visa had him staying at the Regency, but only an hour later, there's a charge on his Discovery card at a different place. A seedy motel. The kind that rents room by the hour. He was billed for two hours.

I'd love to be in that room with him for two hours. More, but I'll take what I can get. I'd show him a much better time than whichever of his girlfriend met him there. Can I go through the texts and figure out which one it was? Have a conversation with her and explain she has no business touching—

More coffee, getting angry again.

Alright. I need a timeline.

Here I have the rental for the Malibu. Mister Hunk arrived yesterday late morning, landed on... there you are, walking out. Do I want to hack his office and find out which flight they booked him on? Later.

Two hours later, you're checking into your hotel. Ordering a movie. Really, Mister Hunk, a summer blockbuster? You have to have better tastes than that. Ah, there it is. You're at the motel halfway through the movie. Now you have an alibi. What does the rest of your day look like once you're back? Lunch from the hotel menu. Expensive. Another movie, just as you left the hotel. I guess you aren't aware your car is tagged each time you go through the hotel parking gate.

That was not long before we met at Liaison, so you didn't even take the time to sample the goods. Once we left, you headed directly back to the hotel and another movie. Did you need another alibi? No, you stayed in. Can I really be attracted to someone who consumes mass-market media?

I guess he can make up for that in bed.

I sigh. With a woman.

And you left before the movie finished. You did need an alibi. Maybe there's hope for you still.

A glance at the other computer and I know I have plenty of time. A refill and I consider my options. So he's straight. That just means ending up in bed is off the table. Sad, but not terminal. I still don't know why Mister Hunk broke into Liaison.

I glance at the screen with the credit card information. His hotel room is one place where I can find out more, and he isn't there right now. When will he be back? Do I have enough time?

Well, I'm certainly not going to have more time debating how much if it I have while standing here. I refill the mug, grab my phone, then fill three more travel mugs, make a stop to pick up something in my bedroom, and I'm out of here.

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The lobby is understated, but there is a lot of orange, and it is packed. The convention, I guess. Mister Hunk treated himself to a room on the top floor. That means larger room and fewer people, but also the need for a keycard to get on the floor. The options are hacking the system and giving myself a room on that floor, paying to get a room on that floor, or acquiring the key from someone who had it.

I don't have my computer with me. I could get in a place like this from any internet cafe, but I'd have to buy one of their coffee. That isn't happening. And while it would feel good to add yet one more expense on Dear Old Dad's company account, I haven't practiced sleight of hand in a while.

I had to learn that once I decided a certain group of people needed to pay for what they'd done to me. I got a professional to teach me in exchange for making his problems disappear at the same time. It's a set of skills that comes in handy every so often, and I do my best to keep up with it.

Finding a customer with a room there is impossible, but a manager with a master keycard? He's easy to find, and he's distracted talking with someone. I borrow a suitcase on wheels someone conveniently left unattended and walk in their direction. The man is right-handed, the card will be on the left side. I maneuver myself there, and when the time is right, my suitcase decides, entirely on its own, to turn into the man's legs, hard.

"I am so sorry," I say, catching him as the surprise and my simultaneous shove make him lose his balance. "That thing has a mind of its own." I steady him while the customer does his best not to chuckle, and the manager is too busy being annoyed at him to pay attention to my hand on his side, presumably keeping him from falling, but really slipping the card out of the breast pocket of the jacket, then moving away toward the elevators.

I leave the suitcase outside as I step in. I get off on the fourth floor, take the stairs to the top, and use the key to let myself in. The hallway is peaceful, a brown-gold for the wall with pictures of nature. The carpet is lush, in a darker brown.

I find his door and almost swipe the card. It took me a while to get here. He could have returned. I knock.

"House cleaning," I call, using a Spanish accent. I've heard it enough over the years I can fake a passable one. No response. I wait a little more, then swipe the card and step in, scanning the room as I close the door.

Suitcases by the bed, doors on each side. One will be a bathroom, the other a sitting room. Large bay window with sliding door giving access to the balcony. Nothing on the tables, so the suitcase is where I'll—

Motion out of the corner of my eye. I duck the fist, step sideways. The question of where it came from dies half-formed as another comes at me and I dodge. Mister Hunk comes at me, fists flying. Dodge again, parry, and fuck that hurt.

There is no anger in his face, only cold determination and I'm reminded of that instant before he closed his hand around my throat. Maybe I should let him do that again. Only he doesn't look interested in grabbing me.

Dodge again, step back and I go on the offensive with a series of kicks that connect and end with his fist on in my tibia and pain like you would not believe. I bite back the curse as I stagger back, favoring the leg. What are his fists made of, Steel?

What is he even doing here?

I move about the room, avoiding his jabs. They are precise and powerful, but I'm faster, nimbler. He clearly has military training. No, more than that. There is an economy in his motion that reminds me of the way Gramps moves in combat. He never taught me that,

but he showed me.

Did he train where Gramps did? I open my mouth to ask and he presses and I have to dodge and evade again. He has no interest in talking. I can end this, let him get his hand around my neck, cum and—die and it's over.

But fuck, I want more than that.

I duck and slam my fist in his stomach and as far as I can tell, I'm the only one who feels any pain. I back off and dodge, aim to maneuver him where—

The fist connects with my jaw and my head pulls the rest of my body along with it. I don't fall, but it's a near thing, and I barely avoid the next series of punches as my head screwed itself back on.

I can't win this. I can't take him down, run my hands over his body and have him do violent love to me. He wants me dead. There is a part of me that doesn't mind that. At his hand, death would be an amazing experience. I look him in the eyes, silently pleading for him to stop, but there's nothing there.

He isn't leaving me a choice.

*I am so sorry.*

In a smooth and quick motion, I have the Beretta out of the holster at the small of my back and the muzzle pressed against his heart. Only to find one big ass gun with its muzzle pressed against mine. Where the fuck was he keeping a Desert Eagle?

He cracks a smile. The first show of emotion since this started and my knees go weak. It doesn't reach his eyes, but that's the beauty in it. He is so controlled. He is power incarnate, domination.

Fuck, I'm hard.

Fuck, he noticed.

Is that amusement? Is that smile turning feral?

Fuck it, I have to tell him. I open my mouth, but the sound of a hammer ratcheting back keeps me from speaking.

I'm not doing it, and neither—

He grabs me and we're falling behind the couch. I land on my stomach with him partially over me, hand on the back of my head, keeping me down. I hear suppressed gunfire, smell cordite.

Feel his cock against my leg. His big, hard, cock, against my leg.

Did I just whine like a needy puppy?

"Are you okay?" he whispers.

I did it again. That deep rumble of a voice, that slight accent. I don't know it could break concrete, but it is definitely going to break me.

I nod, because I have no idea what's going to come out of my mouth if I open it.

"Do you have a suppressor for your APX?"

I stare at him. How does he know my Beretta is an APX? I can't tell the difference between any of them.

"Do you have one?" my voice shakes so much with need and adrenaline I'm not sure he understood me.

He raises an eyebrow and his gun. “No one uses one of these because they’re looking to be quiet.” He rolls off me and I swallow the whine.

I am not a needy little puppy. I am not. I look at him. No, I am a needy little man. Everyone’s small compared to him. I look at his crotch. Yeah, he is definitely bigger than I am.

He raises his hips and his cock becomes outlined against the fabric. Once his gun is back in the holster at the small of his back, he lowers them.

I think a came in that timeframe.

“There’s four of them,” he whispers. He is so close to me, I could— “We need to take them out silently. I can’t have the neighbors calling the police. Understood?”

I nod.

I try to focus on what’s happening. Why would anyone interrupt our attempt to kill each other? All that goes through my head is the faint hope that when this is over, before he ends me, I will feel him pressed against me again.

“Put the APX away. Use your hands unless you can get one of their guns, don’t shoot if they’re in front of the window. You know how to fight. Have you killed before?” There is no judgment in the question. He’s a man needing to know what he can expect from me.

I nod. It is something I’ve had to do, and sometimes it is something I want to do.

He nods and moves to a crouch. My eyes follow his cock until I can’t see it anymore. He’s looking at me. That gaze is back to being empty, but then he smiles and nods to himself.

“Good luck,” he says, then jumps over the couch.