

Chapter 2 – The invisible road to death

Hughie took a moment to put all the events of the last few months in order. All those horrible experiences seem to blend together at some point, and now he has to relive them all. But it will all be worth it if he could at least still have Annie as a friend in the end. With that thought in mind he let out a breath, closed his eyes and spoke *“I guess it all began with Robin. We were together for a few years, and yes, we loved each other, we walked after I had a shift in the store. She wanted to talk to me about moving in together, but I was too afraid. I will never forget the last thing I said to her was not to disrespect Billy Joel, right before A-train killed her.”*

He heard Annie's gasp, but he kept his eyes closed and ignored it as he said, *“He ran right through her. I looked at all her part flew in the direction he was running, I was covered in her blood and left there holding just her wrists, and all A-train did was glance over before running away. All I could do scream her name until I curled into a ball on the sidewalk. But like that wasn't enough Vaught decided to cover it all up, saying she was standing in the middle of the road and A-train was chasing bank rubbers. SHE WAS STANDING A STEP AWAY OF THE FUCKING CURVE!”* Hughie screamed, always letting anger consume him when he thinks about those lies told on the news.

Annie jumped in her seat hearing Hughie scream like that all of the sudden. The look on his face broke her heart. He was so angry, hot tears were streaming down his cheeks. She began to understand now. What happened was horrible, and that A-train should pay for what he did, but there has to be other ways than breaking the law. And how killing Translucent fit into this? She looked back at Hughie with a concern look, the thought to come close and offer him some comfort flew past her mind, but she resisted. They weren't there yet, he still had too much to explain. But she did use a soft voice and called to him *“Hughie?”*

Hughie once again ignored her call, and after centering his emotion back he kept talking as if he never stopped *“And then they came for me. Sent a lawyer and offered me 40K to sign an NDA and keep my mouth shut. I refused to sign the first time, and that was how I got the attention of Billy Bucher.”*

Annie was confused, the name was familiar. Then she remembered that was the man from last night in the bar. *“The one who kept dropping hints about Translucent last night?”* She couldn't help but ask.

Hughie sighed but nodded before speaking *“I still went back to work after all that fucking mess, and in strode Bucher, asking for a private world. When we spoke he introduced himself as an FBI agent monitoring the supes. You see I was a big fan of the seven, I still have all the collectables and cards I bought over the years.”* Hughie let out a humorless laugh at that.

And as sad as it was Annie did see the irony at that. A huge fan of the seven got his girlfriend killed by one of them, while killing another one, and making a friend with the newest one when hearing how the fourth of them mouth raped her. All in the span of the same year. If this not enough to disillusion anyone she wasn't sure anything will.

When Hughie stopped that terrible laugh he talked again *“So Bucher told me about how supes celebrating in the illegal while protected by their brands so Vaught could keep making money off them. He took me to a secret club where the supes could do anything they want without paparazzi around to catch them in the act. That's when we saw Ezekiel having a foursome with two guys, but even worse we saw A-train laughing about killing Robin! Comparing her to a bug on a windshield!”*

Annie felt sick. She wished she could say it was because of what A-train said, but the truth was that while it was horrible and disgusting, the Ezekiel revelation hit her much harder. She knew that man since childhood, believed in what he said, helped him teach it to others for some time. To hear Hughie so casually confirming Ezekiel was bull-shiting everything for his brand, broke a part of her heart that wanted to believe him.

Hughie seemed to sense the change in the atmosphere of the room and noticed Annie's confliction. It took him a moment to realize it wasn't the A-train thing that upset her so much, his eyes widened, and he rushed to say *“Shit. Sorry, forget you knew him when you were a kid, right?”*

Annie signed heavily, nodded and spoke firmly *“Yhea, but that's not the issue now, I will deal with that later.”*

Hughie seemed to consider her for a moment before nodding slowly. *“So anyway, after all of this Bucher explained his plan to me. He wanted me to demand an apology from A-train if they wanted me to sign so they will invite me into the tower, and I will be able to plant a bug there. I told him I will think about that and left.”* That's where he turned to her and gave her a small smile *“The next day I went to the park to think about Bucher's offer, and that where we I found you. You see at that point the plan was to plant a bug in the tower not on you, and*

all I knew was that I met this awesome girl named Annie, I never knew you were Starlight of the seven.”

And Annie believed him this time, because now with clear mind it made a lot more sense than what she pictured before.

Hughie gave a small chuckle *“You are not the only one inspired by our conversation you know. After all the taking heads clean off thing, I felt empowered enough to find Bucher and tell him I am in with his plan. The next thing I knew I was on the phone with Vaught, and then in the tower.”* His soft little grin turned into a scowl before he said *“Of course A-train refused to apologies, giving excuses instead. After he left, but before I sign, I asked to go to the bathroom so I could prepare the bug to plant under the table. A fun fact I saw you go in to wash your hands while I was there and dropped the bug because of that. Well, I didn’t know it was you, I knew it was Starlight because I saw the boots, but if I knew it was Annie too, well actually I’m not sure what I would have done.”*

For the first time since he blurted the truth, he saw Annie smiling. It encourages him to continue *“I planted the bug, and Bucher drove me back to work. I guess Translucent was in the bathroom too, because he followed me to the store and began attacking me while demanding to know who I am. Bucher drove his car inside the store and hit Translucent. After a short battle I electrocuted him, because you know carbon skin. We both thought he’s dead, and Bucher told me to help him get the body in the trunk. I was confused and asked him why he isn’t calling the Feds, that was when he told me he was an agent.”* Hughie gave a long sigh *“At that point I was too deep, and in too much shit to walk away without consequences. To cut to the main parts, Translucent was alive so Bucher took us to an old friend of his called Frenchie. All three of us build a electricity powered cage with tinfoil around to stop him from escaping. One thing led to another, and Frenchie figured that while we can’t break Translucent’s skin, his inside was vulnerable. So, we...”* Hughie cleared his throat awkwardly before saying lowly *“Put a bomb up his ass.”*

Annie chocked for a moment and looked at him shocked *“I’m sorry.. You what?!”*

Hughie gave another awkward nod *“Yhea, I didn’t like it much either. But then Bucher and Frenchie had to deal with Homelander finding us, so they gave me the trigger to the bomb. Translucent managed to escape from his cage, he tried sweet talking me into letting him go. But as he was walking away, I thought about Frenchie and his friend, Bucher, my dad, everyone who will get hurt if Translucent will tell Homelander everything. Before I knew what I was doing I pushed the trigger, and a second later was covered in blood for the*

second time in my life. I went into shock barley comprehending what I just did.” Hughie let out a deep breath, look deep into the brown eyes of Annie and said lamely “And that’s that story.”

Annie shook her head sadly “Oh Hughie. I am sorry you had such a hard time, and I can see how this situation was forced and you. But all your choices after that, and even some of the things you did while in the situation... I just not sure how to feel about it.”

Hughie gave her a sad nod before responding “I can understand it. Maybe if you knew the rest of the story and had the whole picture it will make more sense, but I have to warn you some of the things I will say you won’t want to hear.” He saw Annie was about to protest, he looked at her sharply and said “Look you already know enough not to arrest me, it’s enough for me if it’s mean you won’t be hurt, I don’t ever want to hurt you again. If I will tell you everything some of these things will break your heart, and the knowing it will put you in danger of Vaught if they figure out you know. So, please consider carefully.”

Annie took a long moment to consider Hughie’s words. But when she looked into his blue eyes her heart clenched. She wanted to forgive Hughie, to move past all the things he did and the feelings of betrayal she had. The only way that could happen will be if she knew everything. Was Hughie worth the danger and hurt? Yhea, for her he does, because even after months in this damn city he was still the best thing that happened to her, and she wants to keep it. With determined look and firm tone, she demanded “Tell me Hughie. Everything.”