

## Chapter 13

I'm pain

It's not the pain of my back being lacerated as I'm pounded to orgasm, but one so pervasive it becomes the entirety of who I am. I don't have breath, I don't have a heartbeat, I don't even have thoughts.

I certainly don't have a cock at the moment.

With the pain taking away the other distraction there is clarity in what's left.

I came here ready for a fight with Tristan because he left me. I told myself I'd kick his ass, but really, I was looking to have mine handed to me, with his cock shoved deep in it.

I was filled with indignant fury.

It's gone.

What I'm left with is knowing that I came all this way to be with him. I didn't care about the consequences. I crossed two thousand miles, crashed a car, had to deal with a cop and a sleazy car

salesman, and endured this cold.

All that, do be with Tristan.

And I'd do it again.

So I'm left with one question.

Is this pain what love feels like?

A shadow falls over me. Reminds me I'm not actually pain, I'm Bart. I force an eye open.

The kid. Emil, Tristan called him, Kneels next to me. He had a white shirt on, way too big. Not to say anything of the jeans he's wearing. If gets up too fast, he'll just jump out of them. His green eyes give me pause.

They are hollow. I watched him kill a man. Hit him over the head with a two-by-four over and over until there was nothing left, and now, there's no emotion there other than a hint of fear.

But I'm the cause of that.

The music was steering me to kill him.

"Tristan said to take this." He offers me a gray pill and a water bottle. His voice trembles and he sounds so much younger than the fifteen he has to be.

"What is it?"

"Oxycodone," Tristan answers, out of sight. "Take it." There is no mistaking the order, and I fight through my pain to reach for them.

I laugh, then groan in pain.

Two weeks and I'm already conditioned to obey him.

Emil hands me the pill, then opens the bottle. Before I put it to my lips, and drown myself, he's

helping me sit. He's a good kid, so I only moan a little at the pain. He then stands, holding the jeans up, looking pitiful, drowning in Tristan's clothes.

I frown.

Where did they come from? Not to say the pill I just swallowed and this bottle?

I look at Tristan, seated and leaning against a wall. "Did you have those on you?"

"In my car." He sounds fine. He moves his left arm in a circle while his right is in a compression cast. How long does Oxycodone need to take effect? Better yet, how many hours have I been unconscious for him to no longer feel the pain.

"That's a few blocks away." He can't have gone there before taking painkillers.

"Emil just returned from getting them."

"Bare-assed?"

"It's fine," Emil whispers.

"I need you to drive my car here, Emil. I need things from it you won't be able to carry."

"Tristan, he's fifteen," I protest for the kid. "He probably can't even—"

"I'm nineteen," Emil snaps at me. The steel in his voice surprises me, but it's gone when he continues. "I'm just small."

"Back it to the door. What I need is in the trunk." He points to the jacket on the floor. "Put that on too."

Emil does, but as he exits, I notice he's barefoot.

"He's going to get sick," I tell Tristan once the door closes.

"We can buy him clothes on the way back." He grunts as he pushes himself to his knees. I'm

still staring in amazement as he gets to his feet with another grunt. Didn't he say Emil had just returned with the painkillers?

"How can you stand? I can barely keep myself from falling back."

"I've had ample practice at ignoring pain. I had to start young."

"This isn't pain, it's the mother of all pains."

"The Oxycodone helps."

"Bullshit. There's no way it's working yet."

"It will." He stands there, looking at the bodies. "Until then, I have work to do."

Fuck it. If he can, then so can I. I push myself to my feet.

He catches me before I fall back on my face.

"What are you doing?" I notice the lack of concern in the tone through my pain. Instead, there is annoyance.

"Helping."

"By falling and giving yourself a concussion?" he pauses. "By ensuring you have one? That isn't the kind of help I need."

I try to push away, but he's strong. So fucking strong. Or maybe I'm weak because of the pain, and I don't need his strength.

"I can help."

"Not right now. You have to give the Oxycodone time to work."

"Like you are?"

"You aren't me," he replies, tone hardening, "so don't try to be." It softens. "It's going to kill

you.”

I try to break from his grip and fail again. “I’m not some weakling who—”

“You are hurt,” he cuts me off sternly.

“So are you,” I snap back. “You took a fucking bigger beating than I did. Your arm’s in a cast.

All I have are cuts and bruises.” Okay, probably just once bruise that going through my entire body.

And— “didn’t one of them break your leg? How did you reach me before I hit the floor?”

He points down, and I start at the two by fours duct-taped on each side of his leg. How did I miss that?”

“It isn’t broken, just fractured.”

“You say that like it’s any better.” And how the fuck can he tell the difference?

“We survived. Everything can be dealt with. Can you stand on your own?”

“Of course, I can.” I wrench my arm out of his grip, realize he let me go, and prepare myself to hit the floor. Only I don’t. I don’t even tip over. The pain’s receding. Does Oxy work this fast? “You got me angry, got my adrenaline up to help the pain killer kick in. You planned it that way, didn’t you?”

“No. You’re just stubborn and didn’t do what I told you to.” He looks at me. Evaluate me.

“Since you can move. Help me gather the bodies. I didn’t get enough magnesium to cover the entire building, so we need to bring the bodies together.”

“You have magnesium in your car? What are you doing driving around with that stuff?” I have to be careful as I move. I can feel the pain pushing against the growing numbness.

“I knew rescuing Emil would involve killing people. So I grabbed what I needed from my locker to cover my tracks.”

“Didn’t that get destroyed?”

“The one here. I’m going to have to come back and restock it when this is over. See to the others and make sure everything is still usable. The wardrobe I kept here rotted away over the last decade.”

I stare at him. “You have a locker here? Like the one in Phoenix? You have others?”

“I’ve set one up in every city I had to operate in.”

I open my mouth to ask what the point was, but a car backs to the door, then Emil is inside, shivering.

Tristan studies him like he did me. “Help Bart gather the bodies. I’ll get those in we left behind in the basement.” He leaves before I or Emil can protest. Well, I. Emil is already pulling a body to the pile.

I stare at him, working when he should be making sure he wasn’t going to be sick.

“You should start working too,” he whispers.

We work in silence, which gives this the feel of being in the depth of a mine, chipping away at stone, or adding to stone in this case. Tristan returns with bodies over his shoulders, then goes back for more. He barely limps.

We still have bodies here by the time he’s done, and he helps with those.

The trunk of his car is filled with boxes. Survival equipment, Pemican, C-4, clips, each box marked with the caliber, clothing, as well as two ten-pound containers of magnesium and two of lye. He had all that in his locker? Then I remember the size of the one in Phoenix and it no longer sounds unlikely.

“You blowing up the building?” I ask, indicating the C-4 as he pulls a canister of magnesium out.

“That isn’t enough explosive, and there’s no time to get more.” He looks over his shoulder. Emil is adjusting the bodies to make the pile smaller. He lowers his voice. “Gregory wasn’t here, so we need to be gone before he comes with reinforcement.”

“Aren’t you worried he’ll try again?” I whisper back.

He shakes his head. “Once I’m better, I’ll come back—” he stops at my narrowing of the eyes.

The confusion in his is real, so I give him a hint. “Do I need to punch you again?”

I see him think, then he doesn’t look happy. “Once we are healed. We’ll return and finish Gregory.” There is no hesitation, no questioning in the tone. Just annoyance I’m putting myself in his plans.

“Was that so hard?” my smile falters as his glare is replaced with confusion again and I realize he’s searching for a way to explain himself.

“It’s unnatural.” Before I can press, he motions outside. “Can you tell me where the cameras are? I don’t want anyone tracking us.”

I consider pressing anyway but decide just him admitting that is progress. “I can lead you around them.”

“No. Leave your car. Erase any trace it’s yours. We’re going back in the Chevelle.”

“It’s not in my name, so that’s not a problem.” And any other I can deal with over the net. “The suits. The guy didn’t outright say it, but that’s linked to last week, isn’t it? It confirms there’s someone else involved. The Mexico information you sent me?”

“Had sent to you,” he corrects. He’s thinking again. “It must be.”

“That was a very loud ‘but’ you didn’t say.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t have enough information, and it’s possible what he said was a personal figure of speech. Where are you parked?”

Again I consider pushing, but this time, it’s that if he doesn’t have enough information, no pushing will help that stops me. “Not far from where you were parked.”

“Get your things.”

My things consist of my laptop and crate of travel mugs. All of which are empty. Fighting for our lives kept me from missing it, but now, I want a long, hot, drink of black ambrosia.

I mean, how else am I going to fight this fucking cold?

When I put my things in the back of the car, Tristan is waiting by the door, a flare in hand and a line of magnesium powder vanishing inside. He motions for me to get in as he lights the flare. It’s falling as I get in the back. He lets go of the door as the burning crosses the threshold and in the car by the time the door is closed. I watch the fire dance inside until we’ve driven around a corner and I can’t anymore.

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We leave the city following my directions and heading West; I keep us from crossing any camera fields. We stop at the first Walmart we come across. Tristan takes a fiberglass cast from the trunk and replaces the two by fours with it. Then, with instructions for us to stay in the car, goes in, returning with two cases of water and clothing for Emil. He changes without getting out from behind the wheel. Or seeming to care we’re there.

You’d think that after what was done to him, he’d be more body shy.

I grab the crate and start to exit. “I’m going to the Starbuck for coffee, you guys want



anything?”

Tristan pulls the crate out of my hand. “You need water, not coffee.”

“You have met me, right? I run on the stuff. I can drive us all the way home with enough of it.”

“You’re hurt and you need to stay hydrated. Once the Oxycodone wears off you are going to be weak and exhausted.”

“Then I’ll take more.”

“No. I’m not risking you getting addicted.” He takes a bottle of Tylenol from the glove box and hands it to me. “This is all we’re getting. We’re driving on shifts of no more than eight hours and we all sleep at least eight hours. We only stop for gas, and only at out-of-the-way places.”

“What about food?”

“I have that in the trunk.”

“You can’t be serious. That’s stuff’s horrible.”

“It keeps you alive.”

“Alive should mean that I’ll enjoy it.”

I see Tristan smile for the first time since finding him again. “I’ll have something for you to enjoy when we’re better.”

And that thought gets my cock twitching and that’s enough for me to agree. “Fine, I’ll deal with the food.” Partially. “But I need coffee.”

“No. You—”

“That’s not negotiable,” I cut him off. I have my limits. “You don’t want to see me without coffee. That massacre I committed is nothing compared to what I’m capable of if I get decaffeinated.” I

glare at him.

“I could use a coffee too,” Emil says and I grin in victory.

Tristan takes two from the crate and hands them to me. I reach for the crate instead and he twacks my hand with one.

“One each, no more. You can get a refill when we refuel.”

I look at Emil for support, but he shrugs. Oh great, he’s just an amateur drinker.

“I won’t—”

“Alex, you don’t need that much coffee,” he cuts me off firmly. “One of those will keep the headache at bay if you pace yourself, and I will do it for you if needed. What you need is hydration.”

“I can hydrate with coffee fine,” I reply.

“Not as efficiently. This is not a negotiation. If you want coffee, this is what you get. And you are not to buy more travel mugs while you’re in there. You come back with more than these two, and Emil is the only one drinking one.”

“Fine.” I grab them out of his hands. “How do you take yours?” Traitor.

“One sugar, two milk.”

I grumble the entire way there, and it’s not all about how unreasonable Tristan is. It’s fucking cold. I’m inside when what he called me sinks in, but I’m busy planning how to get more than I’m allowed, so I set that aside.

I pay my way to the front, get the mugs filled, and get back in line. They’re empty by the time I’m at the counter again. Those I take with me back to the car.

Emil is in the back when I hand him his. Tristan is behind the wheel.

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Four hours later we refuel at a gas station in the middle of nowhere. I go for a refill and drink two cups of the passable stuff they have at the coffee station. Tristan catches me as he exits the restroom. He doesn't say anything, but the look he gives promises I will pay for disobeying him.

Well, since he's already caught me, I grab a third as I fill a bag with food for Emil.

I hand it to him, along with his mug, and he looks at Tristan, who nods, before taking the bag. Twenty minutes after we're on the road again, he's curled up on the seat, snoring.

"I want you to go to sleep in four hours," Tristan whispers.

"Why?"

He glances in the rearview mirror. "You and he need to get to know each other. You can do that while I'm sleeping."

I stare at him, the implication hitting hard. "You're keeping him?" He glares at me and I look to make sure my raised voice didn't wake Emil. It's not hurt that caused it, it's surprise, nothing more.

"I can't simply drop him off somewhere."

His glare stops me from commenting. "Fine." I am not pouting.

The silence lasts a full minute.

"He couldn't stay with the family I left him with when there was a chance he'd get over what was done to him then. Now, there isn't anyone who'd know how to deal with him. Who'd have a chance to help him cope."

"Except you." And no, that wasn't bitterness in my tone.

"And you."

Oh, nice try buddy. Trying to make me feel better by including me this time. Like I have any idea what it's like to be raped over and over. Having no control over who's going to use me. Not being able to scream because all that does is cause me pain.

I am not someone's fucking support group.

Five minutes of silence later enough of my anger as dissipated my curiosity resurfaces.

"How did it happen?"

The reply isn't immediate. "His father tried to kill him when he was—"

"Not that," I hiss, and my anger flares until I realize he didn't understand my question. "You and him. You drove across the country to save him. Are you saying you'd do that for anyone? I thought I was the only one that special."

Fuck, I didn't mean for my voice to catch there.

"I didn't think you cared about people. You're certainly cold and calculating at the best of times. You told Jacoby to blow up your house if you don't call him by a specific date. How cold-blooded do you have to be to get someone to blow up your home?"

"It's just a thing. If I don't contact him by the date I give him, it's because I'm dead."

"And that's what I mean. People usually have some emotion in their voice when they say something like 'I'm going to be dead.' You sound like you're reading it off a card."

He frowns at me. "I'm going to be dead, why should I care?" Understanding dawns. "I'm not saying I'm going to lay down and let it happen. The day I die, I am going to take a lot of people with me. But I'm still going to be dead."

The pain that statement causes keeps me from saying anything. He doesn't see us growing old

together. He just said I am going to lose him. Well, fuck that. He better expect me to die at his side with him, because I am not ending up alone again.

“You are special.” The admission seems difficult. He glances at me. Then his eyes are on the road again. “No one’s ever gotten stuck in my head like you have. I’ve always used them and moved on. You are proving to be... persistent.” He glances in the rearview mirror.

“He’s stuck there too now, isn’t he?”

He looks at Emil’s reflection again. “Yes, but not the way you are.”

I look out at the passing trees and snow. So much snow. And I try not to think about the implication of that statement.

“I couldn’t protect my brother,” Tristan said. “Our father nearly killed us in his insane attempts at making us in his image.”

“How old were you?” I’m careful about sounding too curious. This is the first time he’s mentioned his brother.

“I was eighteen when he was taken from me. He was eight.” Another glance in the mirror. “The same age Emil was when I first met him. Saving him from the thugs his father sent to kill him felt like an absolution for not being able to protect Justin. I did protect Emil. I killed the men, killed his father. I left him with a family that would love him the way a boy should be loved. Then I forgot about him.”

I let him be silent. He barely spoke about himself in the two weeks I’ve known him. I know more about him from my research in his past than what he told me. I have the sense that if I push now, he’ll just shut me down.

“I told myself that Emil was proof that if I’d gotten the chance, I could have protected Justin,

made sure he had a good life. I wasn't going to keep him with me. The one thing my father taught me is that a monster is not someone who can have a child around him."

He falls silent again.

"When Gregory called to tell me he had Emil, it was like the world unraveled around me. I hadn't protected Justin after all, I wouldn't have been able to. I wouldn't have understood what he needed to be safe, and that would have put him in danger. Now, Emil's in my head too. He built a box there and its tendrils are slipping everywhere." He hesitates. "Just like yours."

Is he saying he can't get rid of me? I want to ask, to be certain. But what if that isn't what he means? He said Emil is different. What if that difference is that yes, he can drop me off on the side of the road and not look back?

"Do you understand what I want out of this?" I ask instead.

"You want to be involved in situations I caused, even if you had no part in causing them." There is no doubt in his voice.

"I want to be your partner," I say, fighting the exasperation. "I want to help you do this."

He frowns and I indicate Emil, still snoring.

"When I have to rescue Emil?"

"When you rescue other people."

He stares at me for a second before looking at the road again. "I don't rescue people."

I roll my eyes. "What were you doing when we met?"

"Looking for a girl."

"There you go."

“You think I was there to rescue her?”

“Why else go through all that?”

“I was looking for her body. To give her father closure before I went after the people who did that to her.” He looks at me. “I don’t rescue people, Bart. I make those who hurt them pay.”

“Then I want to do that with you. I already do it on my own, so together will be better. I was looking into who supplied boys to a senator when we met.”

He doesn’t say anything, and I want him to. I want him to tell me that he too wants more than just that. Fuck, I know he does. He told me. Only it was after sex, so maybe it was just the orgasm?

I’ll take that over nothing at all, but do I want to know? No. I’d rather be able to make believe we have more.

I look outside, and there’s still snow. Fuck how can there still be snow? I can’t wait for it to be gone from my life forever.

“Alright,” he finally says. “You don’t know what you’re asking for, but we can work together. We still have the Mexico connection to deal with. Once we’re both healed, and we’re dealt with Gregory, we can work on that and you can decide if this partnership is something you actually want.

I’m about to tell him I already know it’s what I want, but metal hitting metal rings over me, then I’m thrown against the back of the seat, then forward toward the dash.

The sun spins out of control, Emil whimpers, and I try to grab onto something to keep the world from throwing me around again.

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