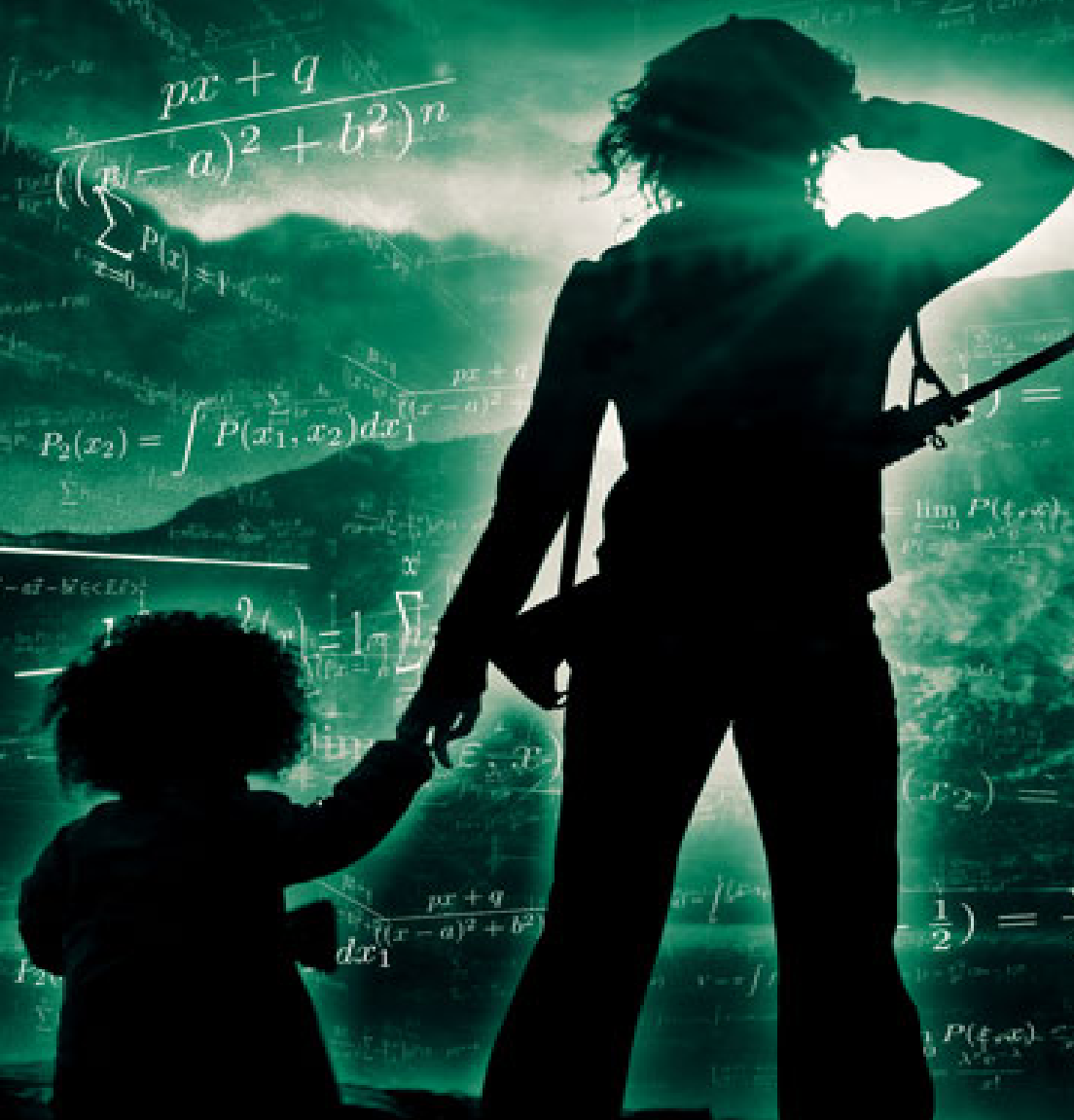


HALF LIFE



SL HUANG

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by SL Huang

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CHAPTER 1

“WHAT ARE you doing in here?”

I looked up. A flashlight beam shone directly in my eyes, blindingly bright.

“I’m the janitor,” I said. I was wearing a coverall and everything. I waved my mop vaguely. “I’m janit-ing.”

Behind the bright bulb of the heavy flashlight, the outline of a security guard loomed over me. His shadow was thick and beefy, and he didn’t seem inclined to take the light out of my eyes. “Let me see your ID,” he barked at me.

Well, that was a problem—I didn’t have one. Not yet, at least. I stood my ground and made a show of fishing around in my pockets. I could take this guy, but I needed to bait him toward me just a little bit more first. “Uh. I forgot it.”

“You’re going to have to come with me.” He took one more step forward, right out of range of the nearest security camera.

“Perfect,” I said, and spun the mop handle to bring it smack across the side of his head.

Mathematics spiraled through my brain as I moved, non-uniform circular motion blossoming in my senses. A burst of angular speed in an instantaneous blur, and the linear velocity at the far end of my mop-radius maxed out and decelerated with a *thunk* against the security guard’s temple. He thudded to the floor, his flashlight rolling to the side.

Newton’s Second Law of How to Knock a Grown Man Unconscious.

I picked the flashlight up and turned it off. I'd planned to pickpocket an ID card—it was a bit more subtle—but, hey, six of one, half a dozen of the other. I pulled the security guard's card off his pocket, duct-taped his mouth, wrists, and ankles, and left him locked in a utility closet.

The angry-looking photo on my purloined ID was of a middle-aged white man, and I was none of those things. But though Swainson Pharmaceuticals might require swiping a card to so much as access the toilet, the state-of-the-art security system didn't care what I looked like. I made it to the laboratory on the twelfth floor without setting off any alarms. The cameras were a joke to avoid; I estimated for the widest angle possible and stepped blithely around their lines of sight as they turned back and forth to survey the hallways.

"Ghost in the machine," I whispered, slipping up to the door of the lab and swiping my stolen ID card one more time.

The door slid open.

Someone inside squealed in surprise.

I had my Colt in my hand before I registered the chubby Indian guy in a white coat standing at the counter, his gloved hands thrust as high in the air as he could get them.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded. It was two in the morning, for Chrissakes.

"I'm an intern!" he stammered. "I'm cleaning the glassware. Please don't shoot me!"

"Oh, relax," I said. "I'm not going to kill you. I'm in a program."

"You're in a *what?*"

I ignored the question. My idiotic promises to friends were my business. "I'm just here for that new-fangled drug you guys are making."

He paled. "No—that's—you can't—"

"Shut up." I waved my gun at him. "I'm only not supposed to kill people. I'll still shoot you in the leg if you annoy me too much."

I was lying a little bit. The kid wasn't a threat, and I wasn't about to shoot some poor low-paid intern who wasn't in my way anyway. But he didn't know that. He buttoned his mouth in the terrified kind of quiet and sank down onto a lab stool.

I moved to the back of the lab. The intel I had was correct: the industrial-strength lab freezers stood against the wall, heavy and solid and very securely locked.

I stepped over to the third one from the left. My usual MO when committing high-end theft was a judicious application of C-4, but lab freezers were built to be explosion-proof, and a blast big enough to get in risked damaging the samples anyway. Besides, blowing holes in things was a good way to set off a security alert.

“Hey,” I said to the intern, examining the keypad. “You know the code for this?”

“I—uh—no—I’m just an intern—”

I fired without looking. The bullet zipped down its velocity vector and pinged right where I’d aimed, taking a chunk out of one of the legs of the kid’s lab stool. He shrieked.

“You sure you don’t know the code?” I asked.

“I swear! I swear! They don’t tell me anything!”

“Okay,” I said. Back to Plan A. My employer had told me the code was only four digits long. I started with 0000.

I was on 2491 when the intern, who must have had a death wish, burst out, “You’re seriously brute-forcing it? Won’t that take forever?”

My fingers didn’t stop twitching through the combinations. “‘Forever’ is a gross exaggeration,” I said. “My upper bound is less than eighty-seven minutes.”

Which could result in an unexpected problem, I reflected, if someone noticed my friend the security guard was missing. Oh, well. I’d deal with that eventuality if it happened.

A touch before the hour mark, the keypad light flashed green on 6720, and the lock clunked. I heaved open the freezer. The shelves were filled with neat phalanxes of vials, the liquid inside each a pale yellowish color. I slid a small insulated metal case out of the bag I had snugged across my shoulder, unscrewed the top, and transferred a rack of the vials to the padded interior. Then I twisted the case shut and pushed the freezer closed again.

“I swear I won’t say a word about you,” said the intern, his words coming out so fast they tumbled over each other.

“Well, not right away, you won’t,” I answered, re-stowing the case in my bag and zipping it secure. “You’ll be unconscious.”

He squeaked and tried to back away from me. Not that it would do him much good. I’m very fast.

The alarms went off.

Sirens wailed through the corridors, with red lights flashing on all sides and an automated voice repeating “security lockdown” in three languages. This was Mr. Intern’s lucky day—no need to deal with him now; I was already blown. Someone must have found my trussed-up guard buddy. I skidded to the door and tried my stolen ID, but nothing happened.

“It’s a lockdown,” stuttered the intern from behind me. “Nobody in or out; that’s how it works—”

Good for them, but this lab had outside windows. I turned, picked up the nearest piece of ridiculously expensive lab equipment, and sent it smashing through the nearest one. The intern squealed again.

I pulled a coil of Tech line out of a pocket of my pack. Almost as thin as wire, it was more compact than rope and just as sturdy. I threw the coils into the air as I sprinted for the window. The mathematics coalesced in my senses without effort: the line bloomed out from my hand, wave equations propagating down its length, the parametric function dropping a wide loop neatly around one of the huge industrial freezers just as I hit the window.

I pulled my jacket sleeve over my hand, gripped the line, and jumped.

I slid down the line into the night at breakneck speed, the floors flashing past. Tech line is slicker than most rope, but the strength of my grip created normal force sufficient to slow me—just enough. I stuck out a foot, leveraging the sole of my boot against the side of the building as it flew by, giving myself a touch more friction. A long skid of black spiked in my wake as the brick took off the rubber.

The asphalt rushed up, swallowing my vision. I looped my other arm into the line and the friction surged as my flesh got tourniqueted through my jacket.

I hit.

My boots made contact first, my knees crumpling to absorb the deceleration as I tucked into a roll. Even so, the impact jarred through me, a thunderclap in every joint. I sprang back to my feet and shook it off.

Sirens rose in the distance, headed my way, but I flipped the sound waves through a quick Doppler calculation—they wouldn't come close to catching me.

Less than a minute later, I roared away over the ridge behind the lab on the dirt bike I'd stashed there, shrouded by the night as the police wailed into Swainson Pharmaceuticals behind me. I kept my eyes wide in the darkness as I whipped around the gray outlines of trees and rocks, neat four-dimensional matrices of velocity and position vectors flickering through new values every split-second and making the ride easy. With my right hand, I anchored the throttle open while I fished into my pocket with my left for my cell phone.

Harrington's voice when he answered was entirely unruffled, despite the late hour. Just once I would have liked to hear the man off-balance.

"Hi," I said, swerving one-handed to avoid a tangle of brush. "It's Cas Russell. I have your merchandise. I understand it's environmentally sensitive; when would you like it delivered?"

CHAPTER 2

“TRADE YOU,” I said four hours later, putting my insulated case on the table in front of me.

The man sitting across the table slid the case toward himself and twisted it open carefully. At six and a half feet tall, with the frame to match, Emmett Paul Harrington III was the sort who dominated a room—especially with his perfectly groomed white hair and three-piece suit. I, on the other hand, barely inched over five feet, and my idea of dressing up tended to involve Kevlar. Harrington had given up early on trying to meet me in his fancy clubs, and we were on his yacht in Marina del Rey, which was both a pleasant and private place for a business transaction.

Harrington surveyed the contents of the case and smiled. “Miss Russell. You always come through.”

“That’s what they tell me,” I said.

He retrieved a metal briefcase from under his chair and laid it on the table, pushing it across to me. “As agreed. You’re sure I couldn’t persuade you to take a cashier’s check next time?”

“Aw, Harrington, you know me,” I said, flipping open the briefcase to reveal satisfying stacks of hundreds. I measured the bills with a glance and did some quick multiplication; the amount was exactly as agreed. “Cash is king.”

Harrington shook his craggy head fondly. “You’re the only person I know who still insists upon it.”

“Not in my world,” I said. “You just live in corporate America.”

He waved a hand. "Ah, well. Somewhere in the budget is a line item labeled 'acquisitions' that is going to drive a poor accountant up the wall."

I laughed. "Acquisitions. I like that."

"Yes, my clients will be quite pleased with this. Quite pleased."

I vaguely remembered Harrington telling me something about the situation when I first took the job; apparently his clients and Swainson were locked in a massive industrial espionage war, with nobody sure anymore who had stolen what from whom. I didn't care. "Anything else I can do for you?"

"I will certainly call if there is," said Harrington. "Can I offer you a drink before you depart?"

"Not while I'm working, thanks." I nodded at him and stood. "Good doing business with you, as always."

"Miss Russell. Before you leave...may I ask you something?" The avuncular lightness had gone from his tone, replaced with something I could only call gravitas. Hmm, serious. His hands, each the size of a small ham and with perfectly manicured nails, were folded on the table in front of him, and he was studying them intently. "I...apologize in advance if you consider this a breach of etiquette, but I must know."

I was suddenly wary. "Know what?"

"You are quite well-known, at least by those of us who make it our business to know such things, as being...a person who can attain things."

"Uh, good," I said. "That is, you know, what I do."

"Has anyone come to you of late with a request for something... dangerous?"

"You know I can't reveal what my clients—" I started.

"I am not speaking of ordinary danger. I've heard..." He raised his eyes to meet mine. "I have heard rumors. Someone out there is seeking to build something."

I wondered if he really expected me to get anything from that. "Your vagueness does you credit, good sir."

He heaved a great sigh. "The word is," he said, "that some unknown party is seeking plutonium."

I stared at him. He stared at me. The only sound was the cry of seagulls and the creaking of the boats in the dock.

Oh-kay.

Wow.

“You think someone’s building a nuclear bomb,” I said.

“In the current climate, the terrorist threat—”

I barked a laugh.

His mouth turned downward. “I assure you, this is not a joke.”

“No, no, sorry. It’s the whole terrorism thing,” I explained. “Terrorism is a statistical anomaly. You have a greater chance of being crushed under your own furniture than of dying in a terrorist attack. Terrorism is—well, it’s just not mathematically viable enough for me to take seriously.”

Harrington’s eyebrows had drawn down into a bushy white V, and he was regarding me as if I had declared playing with pure nitroglycerin to be perfectly safe. I huffed out a breath.

“Look, I wouldn’t worry about it too much,” I assured him. “I don’t think anyone in LA is building a nuclear bomb. Even if someone’s getting grabby for plutonium, there are plenty of other uses for it. Maybe they just like shiny things.” He was still looking at me like I had boarded the train to Crazytown. “I promise, if I hear of anyone building a bomb, I’ll jump in and stop them. Pro bono. Okay?”

He sighed again. “I cannot help but feel you are not taking me seriously.”

I wasn’t, but I should have been trying harder to be nice to a client. Especially one who had just paid me a vast sum of money. “I’ll keep my ear to the ground,” I soothed him. “Full alert. Promise.”

His mouth still had a distinct downturn to it, but he nodded.

Before I lost my last veneer of professionalism, I bid Harrington good day and extricated myself with my briefcase full of money. Dawn was breaking as I disembarked down the yacht’s ramp. The harbor smelled like wet socks, but the rising sun’s rays stabbed upward over the city and cast the sky above the water in tinctures of gold and pink, and the docks were pleasantly cool and empty this early in the morning. I started back along the water on foot, reflecting that my day wasn’t going too badly so far.

My cell phone buzzed in my pocket. I fished it out and answered.
“Arthur. You’re up early.”

“Mornin’,” said Arthur Tresting’s voice. Arthur had the distinction of being the only person in the entire world who called me on the phone just to talk. He sounded cheerful today, though his breath kept hitching quickly. “Hope I didn’t wake you. Figured, hours you keep, I’d be as like to catch you now as at high noon.”

He wasn’t wrong. “You sound funny,” I said. “Are you all right?”

“Just on a run, thought I’d check in. How’s it going?”

“Sixty-three and two-thirds days and counting,” I said.

“Hey, good girl,” said Arthur. “Don’t it feel great?”

Well, me not killing people made him happy, and for some reason I couldn’t figure out, making Arthur happy was important to me. Besides, being nonlethal was turning out to be an interesting mathematical challenge in an existence that got boring too quickly. An experiment.

“Sure,” I said. “If you say so.”

He breathed out a sigh that was half a chuckle. “All right, Russell. So, what you been up to?”

“I’m just finishing a job,” I said.

“Anything good?”

“Oh, the usual. You know. Getting stuff for people.”

“Hope you mean getting stuff *back* for people.”

“Right,” I said. “That.” It was possible I occasionally stretched the job description of “retrieval expert” to be more along the lines of “procurement expert.” I thought of Harrington’s “acquisitions” label and smiled to myself. “You can’t ask me to give up more than one of the Seven Deadly Sins all at once, you know.”

“Think you’re thinking of the Ten Commandments.”

“Those, then. Hey, I didn’t know you were religious.”

“Episcopalian. Don’t change subjects.”

I wasn’t going to let Arthur’s moralism spoil my good mood. “They paid me a lot of money,” I explained pleasantly. “A *lot* of money.”

He paused in that way I recognized as disapproving-but-not-going-to-push-it. He was lucky I’d decided I liked him. “Okay,” he said.

“Damn right it’s okay.”

“So, you got something lined up after this?”

I heard what he wasn’t saying. Arthur’s one of the few people who knows how I get when I’m not working. It isn’t pretty. “Not yet. I have client meetings all day.”

“I know you gotta take the work. But if you got some options, just give it some thought, all right? For me?”

Yeah, yeah. Unfortunately, I wasn’t sure I had any choice. In associating with Arthur over the past year, I’d somehow let his ethics worm their way into being some goddamned miniature angel on my shoulder, chirping in my head in place of the conscience I’d never had. Not that I listened most of the time, but still, it was irritating.

“I promise I won’t steal some little elderly grandparents’ heirlooms as my next job,” I recited. “Happy?”

“Gonna start singing, girl.”

“You are so bizarre.”

He huffed a laugh. “Check in with you later?”

“Hey, wait,” I said, the thought almost slipping my mind. “Quick question. Have you heard of anyone scrounging around for plutonium lately? Or any other nuclear material?”

This time the pause was weighty. Arthur’s breath had ceased its steady rhythm, as if he had stopped running. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I said hastily. “At least, I think it’s nothing. I just heard something, is all.”

“If you think someone is building a—”

Really? Arthur, too? “Nobody is building a nuclear bomb. Forget I said anything.”

“If you heard something—”

“The likelihood of terrorism is so remote that it’s downright idiocy even to include it on a risk assessment,” I said. “Be worried about driving on the 101, if you want something genuinely dangerous.”

“But if you heard something about plutonium...” objected Arthur. “Ain’t there something—I dunno, if you’ve heard of something happening already, don’t that make it more likely?”

“You’re really trying to use Bayesian reasoning on me?”

“I’m using what?”

“Jesus Christ. All I heard was that someone might be looking for plutonium. It could be for anything. Or it could be a rumor.”

“You want me to ask around?” Arthur was a private investigator, and a damn good one.

“I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“Can at least make some calls, see if anything pops.”

I *had* promised Harrington I’d look into it. “Only if you feel like it. My source is in the corporate world, if that helps at all.”

“I’ll give you a buzz later today.”

“Sounds good. I’d better get to my client meetings.”

“Should get yourself an office for that.”

“Why?”

Arthur let out a long-suffering sigh that told me exactly what he thought about my propensity for exchanging large sums of money in coffee shops and dive bars. “Later, Russell.”

“Bye, Arthur.”

I always got the feeling he didn’t know quite what to do with me.

Of course, I didn’t know what to do with him, either. By early afternoon, I was sitting in a Starbucks sorely regretting having talked to Arthur that morning.

CHAPTER 3

“I’M SORRY,” I said to the determinedly stoic man across from me. “I don’t think I can take your case.”

I winced as I said it. He was my last meeting of the day, and I’d turned everyone else down.

It was Arthur’s fault, really, because wouldn’t you know it, but the first potential client turned out to be a woman who literally was trying to steal her grandparents’ heirlooms, and I almost took it, except I wouldn’t have been able to look Arthur in the face for a month. After that I had a no-show and a person who was trying to con *me*—seriously, you don’t pitch a variation on a pyramid scheme to someone who eats exponentiation for breakfast—and that brought me to Noah Warren, my fourth and last potential client scheduled. I had hoped he would be an arms dealer looking to score a case of illegal weapons or something. Those always paid well.

Instead, he was crazy.

Warren sat across from me unnaturally straight, as if he had a steel rod rammed up his spine. He was a very dark African-American man who was entering middle age, but in a way that suited him, with a close-trimmed silver beard and a thick build he wore well. He’d ordered a muffin but it sat on a saucer in front of him, untouched.

“Why not?” he asked in an overly measured tone, his hands rigid on his knees. “Why won’t you help me?”

Because you either made this up or are insane didn’t sound like a polite answer. “Have you tried going to the police?” I said instead.

“They think I’ve gone mad,” he answered, in that same measured tone.

I sat back in my chair. “Mr. Warren, I don’t know how to say this, but have you considered...”

“That they’re right?” His voice was very deep, and didn’t sound unsure even when asking a question. “They’re not. But even if they were, I don’t care. You hear? She’s my daughter. If she’s not real, life has no more meaning.”

Bizarrely, and despite my better judgment, something in me wanted to help him. I have a weakness for children in trouble. Even ones who were probably hallucinations. I tried one more time. “You’re talking about spending a lot of money to hire me for...well, potentially for nothing. Is there any chance that—”

“Please,” he said. He dug into a pocket of his jeans and pulled out a creased printout. “Please. Your ad.”

Mystified, I took the piece of paper from him and unfolded it. It was a printed-out listing from an online classifieds site. “Retrieval Expert,” it read. “Will retrieve valuables, information, people. Investigator is a mutant with superpowers. Will not let you down.” My current mobile number was underneath.

“Oh,” I said. “That. I was drunk. And someone else thought it would be funny. What about it?”

“I thought maybe you’re like her. Special. Can you get her back for me?”

Jesus Christ. The probability his daughter was anything like me was so low as to be trivial. Chances were, she was a figment of his imagination.

Another possibility poked nauseating tendrils at me, a dark shadow hanging over my consciousness, reminding me I’d encountered the impossible before, during the very case I’d met Arthur on. People who were special. Events that didn’t line up with reality.

No. We’d stayed well away from Pithica, all of us—we’d had to—and they’d been forced to stay well away from us. It didn’t make sense for them to pop up here in such a roundabout and messy way. Besides, this didn’t sound like them at all. They wouldn’t leave a loose end like Warren wandering around where he could hire a seedy retrieval specialist, especially one they’d tangled with before.

Occam's razor: Warren was a crazy man, and this disappeared daughter he kept insisting was "special" was either dead or invented.

But Warren was also my last potential client today. If I didn't take his commission, I was out of work, and that was not a thought I liked to entertain. Besides, the version of Arthur in my head couldn't complain about me trying to rescue a man's daughter...unless, of course, I was only doing it to get his money when I knew he had gone off the deep end.

I sighed. "How about this. For now, you pay me for expenses. I'll look into it. If I find out I can get her back, then you pay my fee. Deal?"

He nodded, the movement tightly-held enough for it to seem like a salute. "Thank you."

"No promises," I said grumpily. I shoved back my chair and left him rigidly overseeing his uneaten muffin.

Well, at least I was on the job again.

I stood on the sidewalk for a minute, but I didn't need to think about where my first stop on my impossible case was going to be: Checker's Hole. I'd swapped my dirt bike for a car that morning, and since the coffee shop I'd chosen this time was already in the Valley, I decided on hitting him up in person instead of calling.

Besides, I wasn't ever going to admit it, but I sort of liked seeing him.

Checker was Arthur's business partner and the king of investigative fact-finding. A hacker and information broker, he was masterful at ferreting out any piece of data that had ever been encoded in digital form, which was impressive or frightening depending on what he chose to focus on. Fortunately for me, he had also become...well, something of a friend, though not in the same always-checking-up-on-me way Arthur was, which was confusing. I wasn't used to having friends, so I wasn't sure if that's what Checker and I were or if he just found it horrendously amusing to have someone he could drink tequila with and force-feed bad science fiction television to.

The Hole was Checker's name for his hacker cave, and was a converted garage behind his house in Van Nuys. Not that his house didn't have a computer on almost every surface, but the Hole was something different.

I pulled into the driveway behind Checker's car, a black two-door sedan with a wheelchair license plate and a blue bumper sticker that read, "I'm

only in it for the parking.” When I’d gotten nosy about Checker’s paraplegia one drunken night, he’d claimed it had been a raptor attack. When I didn’t get it, he’d insisted on showing me *Jurassic Park* at that very moment—complete with a mind-boggling amount of trivia commentary—and then emailed me a dozen comic strips filled with stick figures I still wasn’t sure I fully understood the humor of.

I bypassed the house and went to the back door of the Hole, knocking as I opened it. As expected, Checker was sitting like a magpie in a nest in the middle of at least thirty different computer monitors. Machines and wires surrounded him on all sides, some screens racked far above his head, a jumble I was certain only he could make sense of. Most of the monitors showed screensavers, but some were scrolling code, at least one was logged into some video game, and he was ignoring all of those to type madly into another one with images flashing by that looked suspiciously like security camera footage.

“Cas Russell,” he scolded, without looking up. “Way to barge in. I might not have been wearing pants.”

I looked at him pointedly. His skinny frame was fully clothed in jeans and a T-shirt that had a picture of a sheep plugged into an outlet on it. Besides, both of us knew his absurd security system had told him I was here long before I came in.

Checker grinned. “It’s like Schrödinger’s pants. You didn’t know for sure till you opened the door.” He hit a key and then pushed his wheelchair back from the keyboard, the monitor continuing to flash through footage faster than the human eye could detect. “What’s up?”

“You put an ad on Craigslist about me,” I accused, tossing the offending piece of paper at him.

He cackled. “I told you I was going to! Did it get you work?”

“If you count a crazy man as work.”

“Hey, don’t hate on crazy people; sometimes they need badass retrieval specialists, too. And besides, you didn’t tell me not to do it.”

“Because I was drunk.”

“Really? I’d bet fifty bucks you still could’ve walked a straight line.”

I scowled. “Not fair. I can always walk a straight line.”

“Ah, but then the ‘superpower’ moniker isn’t inaccurate, is it?” He waggled his eyebrows at me.

Arthur and Checker had both been prying about my slightly abnormal set of abilities since I’d known them, though Arthur was way more subtle about it, and also—admittedly—more concerned with my moral compass than with my skill at instantaneous vector calculus.

“So I can do math,” I said. “Just because I can do it really fast doesn’t mean I’m some sort of superhero.”

“I didn’t say *superhero*,” Checker argued. “You’d have to be heroic for that.”

“Thanks.”

“Superpowers do not imply superhero. The converse isn’t true either, y’know. That would preclude Batman.”

“Batman is fictional.”

Checker threw his arms wide. “And yet he still saves Gotham City every week! Think how much more you could do being real!”

I leaned a hip against the nearest rack of computers. “You know what?”

“What?”

“The way you chatter reminds me of a squirrel.”

“Such persecution! What have I ever done to deserve this?”

“You made me watch that horrible movie where the Wookies growl at each other for twenty minutes.”

He winced. “Er, yes. Sorry about that. I don’t suppose you’d buy ‘rite of passage,’ would you?”

“Not in a thousand years. Hey, I’m here on business.”

“Your crazy man?”

“Yeah. He says his daughter’s missing. I told him I’d look into it.” I was already regretting accepting the case, but I grabbed a pad of paper and scribbled Noah Warren’s name and contact information on it. “I need as much as you can give me on him. And I need to know whether he actually has a daughter.” I added the address for the Southern California headquarters of Arkacite Technologies that Warren had given me. “And anything suspicious about his wife’s colleagues. According to him, they’re the ones who have his kid.”

Checker crossed his arms. “How rude. What am I, your trained monkey?”

I stopped writing, puzzled. He had never given me the runaround before. “That’s why I’m paying you.”

“And I’m not selling today. Not even to good friends with superpowers.” He shrugged apologetically. “Sorry. Um, seriously, I’ve got this—*thing* I have to deal with today; I’m not—” He cocked his head at me, cutting himself off. “Unless...”

“You want more than your usual rate?”

“You’re so mercenary-minded! No, I said I’m not *selling*. But now that I’m thinking about it, I might be open to a trade. A, uh, a barter, if you will. It’s remotely possible you might be able to do me a wee little favor—”

“What kind of a favor?” I asked.

“Just a small one.” He picked up a pencil from the detritus among his keyboards and started fiddling with it. “I, ah...well, I may have...angered some people.”

“You? Really?”

His jaw dropped open in mock offense. “What’s that supposed to mean? I’m a very genial person!”

“Wookies. Growling. For twenty minutes,” I reminded him. “So who else did you piss off?”

He fidgeted in his chair. “It’s possible...the Mob.”

“*What?*”

“By accident!” he squawked.

“I hope so!”

“I didn’t mean to! But I thought, well, maybe you could do that thing where you, you know, threaten people, and they go away—”

“You want me to be your *goon squad*?” I cried.

“Uh—maybe? I hear you’re very good at it.”

“Goddammit, Checker. I work for the Mob.”

“You do?” His eyebrows shot up. “*Definitely* not heroic.”

“Well, it’s not like they have me on retainer or anything, but I’ve done the odd job for the odd Mafia member,” I said. “And let me tell you something. Unlike some of my other clients, they always paid me on time.”

“Did I say, ‘not heroic?’ I think I meant ‘anti-hero,’ bordering on ‘villainous’—”

“You’re asking me to piss where I work,” I told him severely. Not to mention that I didn’t want to make enemies of a very, very powerful organization with whom I currently had a good working relationship.

Checker raised his hands placatingly. “Okay, okay. Geez. We all know how important your money is to you. Forget I said anything.” He levered one of the wheels on his chair to spin himself toward his monitors, saying forlornly, “What did you say you need? Hopefully I can find it for you before the Hole burns to a crisp with me inside. Probably even odds there, so you only need to give me half up front.”

I groaned. Very loudly. “Fine. Stop whining; I’ll help you. Under duress.” That last was a little bit of a lie. I still wasn’t sure how this whole “friends” thing was supposed to work, but I was pretty sure I wasn’t supposed to let a friend get a hit put out on him. It didn’t mean I couldn’t be annoyed about it, though. “Give me the details, then. Who’d you cross?”

“Gabrielle Lorenzo,” he answered, cringing a little.

“Wait, seriously? Mama Lorenzo?” The Los Angeles Family had been fading into impotence before Gabrielle Lorenzo had married in and dragged the whole operation up by its bootstraps. She had reorganized organized crime until it reached a might that steamrolled any police effort to make the slightest dent. She ran a tight, clean operation, inspired devout loyalty, and came down with the wrath of God on anyone who put a toe on her turf.

You did not cross the Lorenzo family. Not if you valued your physical well-being. Checker hadn’t just poked the Mob, he’d pissed off the Mob’s supreme deity.

“What on earth did you do?” I demanded.

Checker twitched. “I, uh, may have, uh...she may have a favored niece, who, I hasten to point out, I did not know was her niece at the time, and the young lady and I may have...enjoyed a night of pleasurable activities together,” he finished very fast, mumbling to the side.

Of course. If there was one thing Checker could be counted on to do, it was flirt with any attractive young woman who crossed his path. The man was a menace. But I didn’t see why that would mean he was in hot water with the Lorenzos.

“But why would—I mean, it was consensual, right?”

Checker choked. “Cas! Honestly! What do you *think* of me?”

“But then why’s Mama Lorenzo so bent out of shape?”

“Uh, you may not have noticed, being the complete social recluse that you are, but the world is not always entirely logical when it comes to sex.”

“Hey! This isn’t about me.” I snapped my fingers at him. “Back to your screw-up, Romeo.”

“Well, her aunt objected to our, uh, liaison, and things may have escalated. Badly,” Checker admitted. “I was just contemplating the dilemma when fortune brought you to my humble abode. You see, it turns out that Gabrielle Lorenzo has people.”

Saying Mama Lorenzo had “people” was like saying the Dirichlet function had a few discontinuities. The Lorenzo family had access to an army if they chose to use it. Great. “Fine, I’ll see if I can resolve this. Where is she right now?”

He punched a key and one of his many screens unblanked itself to show a program running. “Their estate in the Hollywood Hills. The address is hitting your phone.”

I stared at the screen over his shoulder. “You are downright creepy.”

“Thank you.”

“Okay, I’ll take care of this. In the meantime, you shouldn’t be alone, just in case. I’ll ring Arthur.”

“No! I mean, please don’t.”

“Why not?” In addition to being business partners, Arthur and Checker were solid. They went back. And Arthur was a dab hand with a gun when he wasn’t trying to be all moral. “If Mama Lorenzo sends someone—”

“I’ll go somewhere else and lie low,” he promised. “I’d rather not—uh—Arthur doesn’t have to know about this, okay?”

I looked at his earnest expression. To be honest, I could understand wanting to keep Arthur out of it. Arthur might not be the type to think less of you for screwing up, but you still didn’t want him to see when you stepped in it. “Okay,” I said. “You need a place to go? I can give you one.” Like a truly paranoid person, I maintained at least five safe houses around LA at any given time, apartments I kept paid up just in case.

“You have an accessible one?”

Shit. I ran through the list of places in my head—they were all of the hole-in-the-wall variety, and I was pretty sure they all involved stairs at least somewhere, even if it was just to get up the walk. Dammit, I hadn’t even thought about that.

“No worries,” said Checker. “I can find someone to crash with. I have full confidence you’ll have this completely cleared up by tomorrow.”

I wished I had the same confidence. This was why I didn’t have friends. They made life complicated.

“I’ll take some laptops and work on your case,” Checker offered. “What was it you wanted me to look up?”

I dropped the notepad in his hands. “Here. Noah Warren’s daughter, supposedly named Liliana, and five or six years old—oddly, he wasn’t clear on which. His wife worked at Arkacite before she died, and he claims they kidnapped his kid.”

“Arkacite? As in, *Arkacite* Arkacite?”

“Just because they make a bunch of tech you like doesn’t mean—”

“Oh, trust me, I don’t buy their shiny corporate image; they data mine half the Internet, have no concern for privacy, and wouldn’t know a good mobile UI if it bit them in the ass. But why on earth would they kidnap someone’s daughter? And what’s with all the ‘supposedly’?”

“Well, it turns out not only is she missing, but there’s no record of her existence, and nobody else knows anything about him having a daughter. He freely admits all this. Oh, yeah, and according to him, she also has superpowers,” I told him helpfully. “Have fun.”

I might have been a little vindictively gleeful about leaving him with a lap full of crazy. Served him right for getting himself on the Mafia’s hit list.

CHAPTER 4

AS SOON as I left the Hole, I called Benito Lorenzo. He was a sleazy, sycophantic, used-car-salesman kind of guy, but he was also both a recurring client and a made man. I was pretty sure he was Mama Lorenzo's...cousin by marriage? Or something? It had never seemed important to keep track.

He picked up against extremely loud club music. I frowned at my watch—it was just before two in the afternoon. “Benito, hi, it’s Cas Russell,” I shouted into the phone.

“Cas! My favorite! This is not so much the best time—”

“I’ll be quick,” I said. “I need a favor. I have urgent business with Mama Lorenzo. I’m headed there now.”

Only the techno thumping through the line told me he hadn’t hung up.

“Hello?” I said.

“You want to speak to the Madre? Why?”

“It’s important,” I dodged. “Can you give her a call, give me an intro?”

“Right now?”

“Yes, right now.”

More techno, the bass vibrating my eardrum.

“I’ll owe you one,” I promised. It wasn’t something I liked to say lightly, especially not to a member of the American Mafia, but I was getting impatient. “Come on, Benito, it’ll take you five minutes. Just tell her I’m coming.”

“What you are asking me,” he said, an unhappy frown in his voice, “this is a very large favor.”

Yeah, yeah, cry me a river. “I won’t forget it,” I said, as solemnly as I could while still shouting over a dance beat.

“You owe me one. A big one.”

“Sure.”

“Introduction only.”

“Just let her know I’m coming,” I said again.

“All right. But you owe me.” My ears rang in the sudden silence as he hung up. Great. I was already pissing people off. To be fair, I did tend to be good at it.

I got in my car and headed into the Hollywood Hills.

The Hollywood Hills are a strange phenomenon. The sprawl of Los Angeles allows them to be right in the middle of the city, with the few canyon roads that wind all the way across becoming clogged to a standstill every rush hour. But the untamed elevation lifts them out of the urban mire enough that they’ve become an oasis of wealthy, private mountain estates. The rich get to have the best of both worlds: a secluded mountain hideaway that’s still smack in central Los Angeles, right next to Hollywood and fifteen minutes from downtown.

Los Angeles is such a culture of entitlement. It just figured that all the movie stars—and mob bosses—were able to have their cake and eat it, too, even when it came to real estate.

The address Checker had given me was up a twisting road that seemed graded far too steeply to be a good idea, especially considering the skill level of the average LA driver. I parked precariously around a blind curve and wondered how people who couldn’t do snap calculations of gravity versus static frictional force managed.

Since this was—at least for now—a civilized visit, I went up to the iron gates and rang at the intercom. I heard a click and a buzz, and then an impersonal voice said, “Yes?”

“My name is Cas Russell,” I said, hoping Benito hadn’t copped out on me. “I’m here to see Madame Lorenzo.”

After a brief silence—during which I automatically did all the calculations I’d need to vault the gate and be inside the estate before anyone

could react—the intercom buzzed and the gate swung open on creakingly slow automated mechanics. I headed toward the house and tried to figure out which part of the grandiose architecture was supposed to be the front door.

Once I found it, a housekeeper let me into a polished foyer with a high, vaulted ceiling. Everything was spotless—the crystalline lighting fixtures, the ornate side tables, even the gleaming vases of fresh lilies that adorned them. The housekeeper took me through a maze of rooms (seriously, what did they do with so many rooms?) to the back of the house. I glimpsed panoramic vistas of the city through some of the windows, where the mountain dropped away to reveal spectacular views.

The housekeeper knocked lightly on a door, then opened it slightly and gestured for me to enter. Surprised at not being asked to wait, I pushed the door open and found myself in an opulent but tasteful study that was rich in dark wood and leather furnishings. It was a large room for a study, and all the way at the other end, seated behind a long, sleek desk like a woman on a throne and attending to a neat stack of paperwork on her blotter, was Mama Lorenzo herself.

She stood as I entered. I guessed her age at somewhere near fifty, and she was a very tall woman, with a figure that suggested she dieted aggressively and kept a personal trainer on retainer. She was sheathed in an ivory cocktail dress with lines severe enough to make it seem like it should be called a business suit instead, and which had definitely cost more than every item of clothing I owned combined. Her dark hair was pinned up in elegant perfection without a single strand out of place, and her makeup was exquisite and dramatic, all contrasts of shadow and scarlet.

“Miss Russell,” she greeted me. “Please, sit down. I only have a moment, but my son speaks quite highly of you, and he told me you wished to speak with some urgency.”

Her son? Oh. Oops. “Thanks,” I said, dropping into one of the leather chairs across from her desk. She reseated herself in a way that made me feel entirely ungraceful. I took a deep breath. “I won’t waste your time. I’m here because I believe you’ve made threats against a friend of mine for sleeping with your niece.”

Her well-shaped eyebrows rose. “Ah—I see. Your friend is the computer specialist, then?”

“Yes.”

Mama Lorenzo lifted a white china teacup that was so thin it was almost transparent from a saucer at her elbow and took a thoughtful sip. Then she said, “I’m afraid I cannot help you in this matter. I have no quarrel with you, but your friend’s offense must be dealt with.”

“What offense?” I cried. “Come on, this isn’t the nineteenth century. Your niece wanted to have some fun; they had some fun. From what I understand, that sort of thing takes two people.”

Mama Lorenzo studied me over her tea. “It’s possible your friend did not apprise you of all particulars of this situation.”

Oh, crap. *Checker, I am going to kill you.* “What do you mean?”

“Miss Russell, my son tells me you have been of excellent help to him in the past, so as a courtesy I shall explain to you our position.” She replaced her teacup in the saucer and folded her hands on the desk in front of her. “As much as I may not entirely approve of my niece’s choices, the issue at hand is that your friend took advantage of a position of authority. Isabella is currently enrolled in her university studies, and your friend was engaged as her private tutor for a programming class she was having some difficulty with. That he abused the trust placed in him for such a role is unacceptable, and cannot go unanswered.”

Jesus Christ, Checker, what the hell did you do? Not that I was able to make sense of the labyrinthine world of social contracts myself, but if one went around sleeping with as many women as Checker did, it seemed like common fucking sense to have a handle on these things.

“I’m sure he didn’t mean it,” I tried lamely.

“Intention does not go far with our family. I’m sure you understand.” Her voice was calm. Matter-of-fact. If A, then B. A conditional statement true in every case, with no exceptions. “I apologize that I cannot accommodate you on this matter.”

The study was deeply quiet.

The world felt wobbly, off-kilter. I had come here with some vague notion that this would turn out to be a laughable mistake—it had seemed too ludicrous not to be; Checker was the type of person who might believably get sued for pirating trashy action movies or end up on FBI lists for hacking into too many secure databases, but become tangled up with the

Mob for sleeping with the wrong girl? It was madness. And yet here was Mama Lorenzo, with her perfect dress and her perfectly manicured nails, sitting here in perfect calm and telling me he had committed an unpardonable crime.

A crime that had to be dealt with in the way the Mafia dealt with such things.

My tongue felt thick in a suddenly dry mouth. “Are you going to kill him?”

“Oh, no, nothing so barbaric,” said Mama Lorenzo. “I believe my niece may still harbor some fondness for the boy, and I would not be so heartless to her. No. Your friend—I believe he works as a private investigator, yes?” I made a noncommittal gesture; it was Arthur’s license, but she was close enough. She nodded and continued. “It will be sufficient to bankrupt his business and drive him from Los Angeles. Ensuring he can never again find employment above that of a fry cook is payment enough.”

The business was Arthur’s, too—she was planning to ruin the only two friends I had. “You’re not serious,” I croaked.

Mama Lorenzo took another calm sip from her thin china teacup. “I most certainly am.”

“You would put all that effort into destroying someone’s life—”

“Oh, it will not take much effort. A few well-placed threats, a few visits from...one of our people, these are sufficient for most of our enemies to commit to their exiles themselves. And if it became too much effort, we would still have other, more distasteful options. But I would prefer to avoid those.”

I swallowed against a throat that wanted to fold in on itself. I’d never faced having a friend threatened before—after all, I’d never had friends to threaten before. “You’ve talked to Benito, right?” I said, trying to sound like I was on even ground with her. “You know how good I am. There’s got to be something I can do for you that will make this go away.”

She was already shaking her head. “You do not understand our sense of honor in this matter, Miss Russell. It is not a debt that can be repaid. Honor was sullied, and there must be consequences.”

My grip dug into the arms of the chair, my fingers pressing deep dents into the soft leather.

I could kill her. It would be easy. Ducking her security on the way out would be laughable, and Arthur would disapprove, but that was a small price to pay for saving both him and Checker.

Except that if I killed the woman of power in the Los Angeles Mafia, I'd be starting a timer on my own life. The Mob didn't forgive, didn't forget, and couldn't be bought off. If I killed Mama Lorenzo, I'd have to disappear, and even halfway around the world I'd keep looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life. And they might still come after Checker.

Come to that—even if I managed to kill Mama Lorenzo in a way no one was able to trace back to me, the private army that was the American Mafia was vast and organized. No matter how many powerful people I took out, even I might not be able to stop this from happening.

Mama Lorenzo rose. "I believe we are finished here, Miss Russell. As I said, Benito speaks highly of you, so I hope this incident will not disrupt your professional relationship with my family. I trust you have seen my points. It would be a shame if you decided to interfere."

I stayed seated. "I can do a lot more than retrieval." The words came out of my mouth before I had decided to say them.

Mama Lorenzo looked down at me quizzically, as though wondering why I was still talking.

"I could launder money for you so effectively the IRS would never find it." I stared straight ahead, focusing on the smooth, varnished grain of her desk. "I could break people out of jail for you. I could, uh, take care of people for you in ways they'd never see coming. Please." The "What Would Arthur Think?" voice was screaming inside my head, because offering any of those things to this woman, offering to be an *assassin* for her, this was definitely Not Okay and I had officially crossed into the dark side. I didn't care.

Mama Lorenzo hesitated. "That is good to know," she said finally. "I shall keep that in mind in case we need such...services...in the future. But I'm afraid it can have no impact on the present situation." She stepped around to the side of her desk, clearly showing me out.

Shit. I couldn't kill her, and I couldn't bargain with her—my mind scrambled—

I needed time. Time to think, time to plan, time to come up with some way of fighting. Time to find more options, before Mama Lorenzo's men

went and broke all of Checker's fingers and smashed his face in with a baseball bat.

I stood up. Mama Lorenzo's stilettos put her flawlessly made-up face almost a foot above mine, but I stood very still and very quiet and met her eyes, staring that superlative composure down. "Okay," I said. "Fine. Your honor might dictate you go after a friend of mine. But I've got honor, too." Or something like it, something that might better be called the desperate selfishness of someone who was too fundamentally lonely to give up her only two friends to the leader of a crime syndicate. *Time. Just get some time.* "If you touch Checker, his business, or any of their clients, then I will declare war on your entire family and all of your operations. Personally. And you will be the first one on my list."

Mama Lorenzo's expression twitched. I knew why: what I was saying didn't make sense. She had too obvious a solution. All I was doing was throwing myself in between Checker and the Mob as a target that needed to be taken out. My threat was a pointless act.

Except that it would keep her away from Checker until I could come up with an actual plan. And all I would have to do would be dodge Mafia hitmen for a few days while I figured out that plan.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, railed a voice in my head. I ignored it. Fucking Checker.

"I could have you killed right now," Mama Lorenzo said.

"Try," I answered, baring my teeth.

We stood, gazes locked, every passing second heavy with what might happen next. The moment stretched, suffocating, a struggle for dominance that felt almost physical.

She wouldn't try to kill me here. Not where she might be caught in a crossfire.

Would she?

"You do not wish to incur our anger," Mama Lorenzo said finally.

"Too late."

"I am sorry to hear that."

"Good," I said, deliberately misinterpreting her.

"You would force us to remove you as a threat, as well."

“First.” I bit out the word, grating and loud. She had to take this seriously. She had to be afraid enough. “You have to remove me *first*. Because if I catch the slightest hint that any one of your people gets within shouting distance of Checker, I’m going to come back here, and you’re going to be the one who pays. So you’ll have to take me out first.”

“I see. And when my people do come after you?”

“They’ll fail,” I said. “But as long as you leave Checker alone, you’re welcome to keep sending them.”

Mama Lorenzo’s face could have been a marble carving.

She held my gaze for another three seconds—three very long seconds. Then she broke eye contact and stepped quickly and crisply back behind her desk. “Remove yourself from my house.”

I did. My shoulder blades itched the whole way out, my heart thumping faster than normal against my ribs. As big as I had talked to Mama Lorenzo, I wasn’t faster than a bullet—the right sniper in the right place could take down anyone, including me.

And once she did get me, Checker and Arthur would be on the chopping block next.

CHAPTER 5

I CALLED Checker as soon as I was on the road and sufficiently away from the Lorenzos' creepily perfect estate. "Hey," I said. "I think I bought us some time with Mama Lorenzo." I didn't tell him how I'd done it. Or what deep shit he'd gotten himself into—I doubted he knew exactly how bad it was. "Keep clear of the Hole for now, though, till I can get things sorted completely."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks. A lot. I owe you one."

"Damn right you do." He owed me a lot more than just one. "Speaking of which, do you have anything on my head case yet?"

"Just the basics. Noah Warren, forty-eight years old, former party clown and magician—"

"Former *what?*" I slammed on the brakes to keep from rear-ending a blue BMW.

"Magician," said Checker. "And clown. You know, entertaining at kids' parties, that sort of thing."

"Seriously?"

"Party clowns exist, so some people have to be them, Cas. Shall I go on?"

Clowns. Sheesh. "Yeah."

"He did that pretty steadily for years after graduating from college, but then he dropped off—I don't know if the gigs dried up or he just didn't want to anymore. For the past decade or so he's bounced around, mostly odd jobs—carpentry, custodial work, event security, that sort of thing."

“What about the wife?”

“This is where it gets interesting. Constance Denise Rayal—I guess she kept her maiden name—is a bona fide genius. I mean, most of her recent work is behind trade secrecy, but I was just reading her graduate thesis and it’s nothing short of brilliant. She got headhunted by Arkacite decades back, right when they first started making waves in tech, and worked there until five months ago—”

“Is that when she died?”

“Her stated reason for resigning was medical leave.”

Whatever illness it was must have killed her shortly after she left work, then. “What did she have?”

“I haven’t gotten there yet. Is it important?”

“Doubt it. Just curious. What about the daughter?”

“Geez, a little patience. I haven’t finished on Warren and Arkacite. He tried to bring criminal kidnapping charges against them. When that didn’t work, he filed suit *pro se*—”

“Pro se?”

“It means he did it himself instead of hiring a lawyer. He’s suing for ownership of all his wife’s work.”

“Shouldn’t he own it anyway if she’s dead?”

“No. Work product—the company owns it. He doesn’t even have a case.”

Why would Warren care about her work? “He thinks they’re hiding something,” I guessed. “He thinks they’ve got his daughter and his wife’s files will tell him where.”

“Or he’s trying to get a foot in the door somehow. Or maybe he’s just trying to annoy them until they cave in on a deal to make him go away,” suggested Checker. “Who knows? You should ask him.”

“I will.” I readjusted the phone on my shoulder as traffic started to pick up again. “So what did you find on the daughter? Any evidence of a Liliana?”

“No, you were right—not a whiff. No birth certificate or adoption papers. No school records. No doctor’s visits. They had a son about fifteen years ago, but he died when he was only a few years old, and they never

had any other children. The wife's mother's name was Liliana, so a kid named after her would make sense, but I can't find a single shred of evidence for a daughter."

"Maybe she was a homeless kid they took in or something?"

"Then why wouldn't he tell you that?"

"Because he's not right in the head?"

"If she exists, I should be able to find something," muttered Checker. "I don't like this."

"He's probably just crazy and it's a dead-end case," I said. Checker didn't say anything. "What's the matter?"

"The last time I couldn't find someone's family in the system was Courtney Polk."

Right.

The ominous shadow of possibility I'd shrugged off in the coffee shop settled blackly over me as I inched toward the next traffic light. The Pithica case had started out with similar small inconsistencies. Courtney Polk had been convinced she had a sister named Dawna, but it turned out Dawna was literally a psychic who had planted the relationship in Courtney's head—and then used it to manipulate the girl into drug trafficking and murder. And that had been the least of what she'd been up to. We'd eventually put a serious dent in Dawna's world-dominating plans—and in the plans of the vast organization known as Pithica—but the worst part was, I still wasn't sure we'd done the right thing by making that decision. After all, us stopping them was probably the primary reason violent crime had spiked in the city lately.

I wasn't proud of the outcome. I didn't think Checker was either. We tended not to talk about it.

I shook myself, hitting the accelerator with more force than necessary as the light turned green. The car gunned and jolted. "I don't think this is the same thing," I said into the phone. "What possible motive would anyone have for convincing Noah Warren he has a five-year-old daughter? Did you find any connection to Pithica?"

"No, but that doesn't mean anything. And who can ever tell what their motives might be anyway? Plus the whole 'superpowers' thing you say he

was on about—if Pithica didn't qualify for that, then I don't know who would. I don't—”

“Warren didn't say ‘superpowers,’ exactly,” I admitted. “He just kept saying she was ‘special’ and that’s why the company wants her.”

“Special *how?*”

“Hell if I know. But it can't be the same thing, can it? You found who Dawna was as a kid, and she wasn't a psychic then. At least, not a real one.”

“Do we know that for sure?” he asked uncomfortably. “Maybe she was born with her powers. Maybe that’s why she got so famous as a kid in the first place.”

I turned toward the 10 freeway, flooring the car through a gas station to avoid another stoplight and inserting myself rudely back into the flow of traffic. “This isn't Pithica's MO anyway,” I said to Checker, more loudly than I meant to. “Come on. If someone like Dawna was trying to delete a little girl, the work would be seamless. Pithica wouldn't leave an angry father running around making a mess all over everything. This can't be them.” I had to keep believing that. Dawna had gotten to me, too, in the end—if this had to do with Pithica, my own brain wasn't going to let me pursue it.

I yanked the wheel over to get around a slow-moving bus, cutting off a white Jeep in the process. The driver leaned on his horn. I leaned on mine back, harder.

“What's going on?” demanded Checker. “Cas, are you driving?”

“No.”

“And it would take the laws of physics bending to make you crash anyway,” he conceded with a sigh.

I didn't feel like talking anymore. “I'm going to Arkacite's HQ,” I said. “Text me if you find anything else.”

“Will do.”

“Who's their top dog?”

“The current CEO is Imogene Grant, and it looks like she does base herself mostly out of the LA facility. But you'll probably want Constance Rayal's boss, Albert Lau. The address you gave me, seventh floor.”

“Thanks.” I ended the call, pulled onto the freeway, and drove west.

Arkacite was enough of a household name that I'd vaguely known they had a headquarters in Venice, but I'd never had reason to seek it out. After zigzagging through the streets, I turned onto a broad boulevard lined with soaring skyscrapers mixed in with smaller shops and cheerful green parks. Arkacite's offices were easy to spot—they were one of the largest buildings, an enormous edifice of white and glass that spiked upward against the clear blue Southern California sky as if it wanted to pierce it.

After rounding the block twice, I found parking on a side street overseen by majestic old elms. I headed back on foot and walked straight in the front door of Arkacite like I was a perfectly normal citizen.

And stopped.

Metal detectors stood sentinel in an impenetrable barrier across the other end of the lobby, security guards manning each one. Gaggles of employees were heading through at the moment, probably returning from lunch on the beach, and each one swiped an ID card across a sensor as he or she swept through. I slipped to the right and lurked by the drinking fountains, watching.

I wasn't observant like Arthur, but one thing I kick ass at is seeing patterns. I didn't want to break in today—that would require too much planning, and I still didn't know what I was looking for. I'd gone around and around with Warren in our interview about who, exactly, was supposed to be holding his daughter, and where, and the only thing he could tell me was that it was the company: the company, the company, the company. I wasn't in a good mood about this—my jobs usually required minimal investigation, and knocking on doors wasn't something I enjoyed. That was what the world had people like Arthur for. But in the absence of other intel, I wanted to poke the beehive and see what happened, and that meant I had to get in.

The people streaming in and out of the lobby became faceless data points flashing color-coded through my senses—who had keycards, who didn't, who swiped them and when. Within seconds I'd sussed out the logic of the lobby. People without cards went to the desk, where they signed in, showed IDs, and received guest passes. People with cards swiped at the turnstiles before the metal detectors and again at the elevator bank, though only one card was needed to call an elevator and the rest of the folks got a free ride. The turnstiles were the only challenge.

But there was an accessibility gate next to the turnstiles, and people crowded through that as well, individual employees and visitors but also tour groups and school groups—apparently helping build the backbone of modern society made your headquarters a tourist attraction. Mostly the visitors swiped their guest passes as they went by, but a fair number just tailgated through, and nobody seemed to notice. Their data points popped up in my vision, highlighted. That was my way in.

I mapped out the movements. Where the tailgaters were in relation to the group so the gate would still be open, so it would seem natural that they wouldn't reach for their cards.

Perfect.

I went back out onto the plaza in front of the building and lounged against a pillar by one of the raised banks of hedges, out of range of any security cameras peering through from the lobby. I watched the crowd flowing in and out from the street for a few minutes, the smiling lunchgoers and some Japanese tourists taking pictures. As soon as nobody was looking my way, I dropped my gun into the hedge, and the spare magazines and knives followed a moment later. I thought about dumping my phone and keys too, but figured it might make me stand out if I *didn't* have those.

De-metaled—at least mostly—I walked back into the lobby and let the mathematics of human motion play out in front of me. As a tour group milled by in a disorganized jumble, I attached myself exactly at the middle back of the group and walked straight in through the accessibility gate, no card-swipe needed. Then I followed them through the metal detector, dumping and retrieving my phone and keys along with everyone else. The security guards manning the trays didn't even look up. One of the sleek steel elevators slid to a stop as the crowd flowed through, and I joined the mass of people jostling inside, as anonymous as everyone else.

I was in.

On the elevator, I bumped up against someone with an employee ID card who'd pushed the button for floor sixteen. Mathematics gives me very nimble fingers, since the numbers tell me exactly which moves will disturb a person's clothing or skin—I'd make a fortune as a pickpocket if I ever felt like switching careers. The employee wouldn't realize her ID was missing until she was nine floors above me.

The elevator dinged at seven, and I stepped out. I had to swipe out of the elevator bay, but that wasn't a problem anymore.

The seventh floor was just as sleek and sure of itself as the lobby. The decor was all bright modern colors and patterned carpets. Glass-walled offices were abuzz with activity, and employees crossed briskly back and forth to deliver important pieces of paper from one cubicle to another. I never understood how people lived in offices; they always reminded me of tiny human-shaped pets running on an enormous hamster wheel, going and going and never getting anywhere new.

"May I help you?"

I turned. A short, dark-skinned woman behind a reception desk was smiling at me. She was in her early twenties and was somewhere between curvy and plump, with ruffles on her aubergine blouse and bright eyes that reminded me of Checker's usual expression. She looked far too chipper to be working in an office building.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm looking for Albert Lau."

The woman—the nameplate on her desk identified her as one Pilar Velasquez—picked up her phone. "Do you have an appointment?"

"No," I said.

"I'll see if he's in. Who should I say is here to see him?"

"I'm a friend of Constance Rayal's," I said.

Pilar's expression went from pleasantness to delicious amusement. She put the phone back in the cradle and leaned over her desk conspiratorially. "Two bits of advice," she said. "First, she pronounced it 'Rayal'—rhymes with 'dial'—and second, she went by her middle name, Denise. Want to try again?" She grinned at me.

Well, at least she wasn't kicking me out. Damn, I sucked at undercover. "I'm here on behalf of her husband," I said. "Noah Warren."

"Oh." Pilar pursed her lips, thinking. "I'm pretty sure you have to talk to the lawyers, then. He's suing the company, you know."

"Uh, yeah, I know."

"I don't think I'm supposed to let you through."

"You don't think?"

She shrugged. “I’m just a temp. Well, I’ve been here almost two years now, but still, technically a temp. What did you say your name is?”

“I didn’t,” I said.

“And what did you want with Mr. Lau?”

“To ask him about Warren’s daughter.”

“Oh,” she said.

“You aren’t going to tell me he doesn’t have a daughter?”

She looked surprised. “He doesn’t? Then why are you asking about her?”

Right. Why would the receptionist know anything one way or another about the nonexistent daughter? “Can I see Lau, or not?”

The answer was yes whether or not Pilar said so, but I preferred to do this the easy way. The way that didn’t involve Arkacite’s far-too-dedicated security forces coming in here and bothering me.

Pilar scrunched up her face as if she were doing a cartoon version of thinking really, really hard. I had no idea what to make of her. “Here’s what I’ll do,” she said, dropping her voice back to that conspiratorial tone as if she lived to troll her employers. “Why don’t you wait over there—” She nodded to a bright fuchsia couch against the wall. “—and I’ll give you a signal when he comes by. Sound good to you?”

“Oh,” I said. “Uh, sure.”

She made a shooping noise at me and gestured to the couch, turning back to her work.

I sank down under a flyer warning me that “INFORMATION LEAKS ARE SERIOUS BUSINESS” and listing all the things employees were not to do or talk about outside the company. A mandate at the bottom read, “If you notice any of these behaviors in a co-worker, notify a superior immediately.”

Sounded like someone had rat problems. All the metal detectors in the world weren’t going to help them with *that*.

I sat waiting and fidgeting, and eventually texted Checker. *Got anything new?*

U R MOST IMPATIENT PRSN I KNO, he replied.

How is that possibly faster? I typed back. I happen to know you're texting on a keyboard.

TEXTING W PROPR STYLE IS A LOST ART

I was interrupted in a suitably caustic reply by a snap against the wall next to me. I was on full alert before I saw the rubber band falling to the carpet and Pilar jerking her head in an extremely obvious way at a thin Asian man in a suit who was hurrying out of the back offices with his head in an open folder. He had brown skin and shaggy black hair that didn't quite seem to fit with his scalp correctly, and he was several sizes too small for his suit—he reminded me of a husk of something that had been dried out in the sun, all the warmth and moisture sucked away.

I shot up from the couch and stepped into his path so that he almost collided with me before looking up from his folder. “Mr. Lau?” I asked.

He recoiled. “Can I help you with something?”

“I’m here on behalf of Noah Warren,” I said. “He wants his daughter back.”

A muscle in his cheek twitched. “The official statement of Arkacite Technologies is that all work product created by Denise Rayal as an employee is the property of the company, as per her contractual agreement when she was hired. Beyond that, you will need to speak to our lawyers. Now, I’m afraid I’m late for a—”

“Did you even listen to what I said?” I demanded. “I’m not here about the damn work product. I doubt Warren cares about it, either. He just wants his daughter back.”

Albert Lau blinked seven times in rapid succession. “I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He tried to push past me.

I’m not great at figuring out what other people are thinking, but Lau was an even worse liar than I was. “Yes, you do,” I said. I grabbed his arm and spun him around and off balance, so that he staggered against Pilar’s desk. She squealed and pushed backward. “Where is she?”

Lau squirmed away from me. “Call the police,” he gasped at Pilar.

I took a deep breath, lifted my hands, and stepped away from him. “It’s okay. It’s okay. I’m leaving.” The last thing I needed to do was get mixed up with the police again. This was one reason I hated jobs that intersected

with corporate America—most people I intimidated wouldn't even think of calling the cops, which made it a lot easier to, well...intimidate them.

It had been overly optimistic to think I'd find much here. At least I had more information than when I'd arrived, and I'd gotten a feel for the company and its security. I could track down Lau again later, somewhere more isolated.

I backed away and then angled back toward the elevators, disengaging as quickly as I could without spooking the Arkacite people. "I'll make sure she leaves," I heard Pilar soothe her boss as I left.

I didn't realize that meant the perky receptionist had been intending to follow me down until she scurried out of the elevator next to mine the instant I hit the lobby. She came right up to me, letting the milling employees and tour groups filter around us like we were rocks in a stream.

"Excuse me, ma'am? You forgot this." She held out a folded sheet of yellow paper.

"Uh, no, I didn't," I said.

"Yes, you *did*." She thrust the folded paper at me again, squishing her face into an expression that made her look like an over-the-top mime and jerking her head at the people passing by and the security guards back at the metal detectors.

"Oh," I said, my voice brittle. "Uh, so I did." I took the piece of paper from her. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, ma'am. Have a nice day." She flashed her bright smile at me and tripped back into one of the elevators.

I walked out of the building and into the sunny plaza in front of it and sat down on the low wall containing the hedge that hid my weapons. While I waited for a break in foot traffic wide enough for me to retrieve them, I unfolded Pilar's note.

Venice Skate Park, 5:30PM, it read.

Huh.

I ditched the stolen ID card in the hedge once I took my hardware back and walked briskly to my car. I was just reflecting that this trip might have been more fruitful than expected when someone looped a wire around my neck and yanked it tight.

CHAPTER 6

REFLEXES SWALLOWED conscious thought. Before the garrote could close against my throat, I back-stepped, twisted, and dropped like a dead weight. As I slipped out of my attacker's snare, I grabbed his arm and wrenched it down after me. The numbers sang to me, each motion in perfect harmony as I yanked the guy into an uncontrolled somersault and slammed him onto his back in front of me.

In one practiced motion, I had my 1911 out of my belt and the muzzle pressed up against his chin. "Hi," I said.

My attacker made a squeaking sound.

I cut my eyes around the street. A breeze rustled the trees marching down the sides of the pavement, and parked cars gleamed in the sun. This neighborhood was residential and wealthy; most of the houses were set back from the road behind fences or hedges, too hidden for watchful neighbors to notice us easily.

Fuck. I should have been more careful leaving Mama Lorenzo's place. If she'd sent someone with any competence, I'd be dead.

I set aside my own stupidity to deal with later and gave my would-be murderer the once-over. He was scrawny, with dark Italian coloring, and young—probably eighteen or so. Young enough to make me feel some repugnant pity for him. Kids shouldn't be assassins.

"Let me guess," I said. "Contract killing for your initiation. Someone at the Lorenzo estate must have been tracking my car—not you; that's too

smart for you—and you thought you’d make your name this way. One little girl, should be easy, right?”

He whimpered.

“Jesus, Sicily doesn’t make ’em like they used to,” I said. “What’s your name, kid?”

He made a strangled sort of noise and tried not to answer. I pushed the muzzle of the gun against him harder, and he yelped. “D-D-Dino,” he stammered.

Straight out of a mobster movie. “Dino what?”

“P-Palermo.”

“I’m right, aren’t I? You’re an inductee with the Lorenzos?”

The poor kid was starting to cry a little. I didn’t have the heart to mock him for it.

“Oh, stop it. I’m not going to kill you.” He was too pathetic, and besides, it would mess up my streak. I took the gun out of his face, my adrenaline fading. “Look, kid. You could do worse than the Lorenzo family, if you’ve got no options.” Arthur would have had a conniption over me giving that kind of guidance, but it was true. “They’ve got a code, and in their own way, they clean up some of the scummiest crime in this city. But here’s some free advice—know who it is you’re killing, okay?”

“Uh-huh,” he mumbled from the pavement, eyes still tracking my gun.

“And if you come after me again, I will kill you. Watch this.” I picked up a leaf off the ground that was about half the size of my hand, stuffed it into his nerveless fingers, and backed up ten paces. “Hold it out.”

He stumbled to his feet and lifted his hand; it was shaking a little. He had only brought the leaf halfway up when I fired. He shrieked and dropped it. Then he stared down at it, rubbing his fingers unconsciously. I didn’t need to look to know that it had a perfect .45-inch diameter hole in the middle.

“Seriously,” I said. “Don’t come after me again. You can make your bones on someone easier. And tell Mama Lorenzo to send the pros after me. I’ll feel less bad about offing them.”

He nodded very fast, his head bouncing up and down like a bobblehead doll’s.

“Scram,” I told him.

He scrambled.

My senses stayed fired up, scanning for any other movement, but it appeared Dino had been alone. That didn't mean I was safe, however. And I knew my car was compromised, which made my brain extrapolate to bombs wired up to the ignition and nice vehicular fireballs.

My mouth tasted sour. Round one, and Mama Lorenzo had already gotten the drop on me. *Get with it, Cas.*

First things first: I made tracks off the street before any of the wealthy residents here could stop being complacent and get curious about the gunshot. At the end of the block, I cut through a commercial alleyway and slipped into an underground garage beneath a medical center. It was the work of a moment to jack a minivan with tinted windows. I had to swing by my meet up with the Arkacite receptionist, and then I was going to figure out this Mafia crap.

I texted Checker as I pulled out. *Where's Venice Skate Park?*

BEACH, he replied after a few seconds. *TURN R AHEAD.*

Son of a bitch had a lock on my phone. I turned it off and yanked the battery just to be spiteful.

Pilar wouldn't be off work yet anyway, though. I sighed and thought for a minute. Noah Warren's address wasn't far from here. While I had a few minutes in Venice, I should really try some of that knocking-on-doors I hated and see if anyone had witnessed a hint of Liliana, try to figure out what the heck was going on with this case and whether I should drop Warren so fast he'd get whiplash. After all, didn't Checker's ridiculous Mob problem count as a job? Maybe I didn't even need Warren anymore.

Unless I did. It was hard to tell sometimes how my whacked-out brain would interpret things, especially whatever screwiness made me such a mess when I wasn't focused on work. If I took myself off Warren's case, there was a chance I'd become worse than useless right when I needed to be dealing with Mama Lorenzo.

Jesus, I was fucked in the head.

I reached Warren's street and double-parked the minivan. The unit was one in a fourplex. I stayed wary as I got out of the car and approached, still on edge from Dino's attack, but the grassy patch of yard I crossed stayed mercifully assassin-free.

When I knocked on the door next to Warren's, a tall, bony Hispanic woman in a tank top yanked it open almost immediately. "Are you the one interested in the unit?" she said, her tone as accusing as if she'd just seen my dog make a mess on her lawn. "I'm Marta. I need a credit check and a ____"

"I'm not here about renting," I said. "Are you the landlord?"

"Damn right I am. But if any of my tenants are bugging you, that's not my problem. Call the cops if you want to."

Wow, she was more confrontational than I was, and that was saying something. I forced my tone down to be as pleasant as I knew how, and felt lucky my frayed nerves managed not to snap at her. "Your tenants Noah Warren and Denise Rayal. Did you ever see them with a little girl?"

"Those good-for-nothing felons? First he tells me his wife's sick, oh, boo-hoo, but then she's gone and he can't pay his rent—it's like he thinks I'm running a charity here! I got a mortgage to pay; if they want to freeload, they picked the wrong lady to—"

"I really don't care if he's having trouble paying his rent," I cut in. Well, I only cared insofar as it might be an indicator of his ability to pay my rather hefty fee—that might be a problem. "Did you. Ever. See. A girl?"

"Having trouble paying his rent? Ha!" cried Marta, ignoring the second half of what I'd said. "Not anymore! Why do you think I got a unit to show?"

"Wait, are you saying Warren doesn't live here anymore?"

"Evicted 'im, didn't I? And good riddance, too."

"He gave me this as his address," I protested.

"I oughta have his ass for that," said Marta. "Look, lady, if you don't want to see the unit, I got a lot to do today."

I took a deep breath and reminded myself that knocking her block off wasn't my best solution here. Or rather, the Arthur-conscience in the corner of my brain smacked me and reminded me, and I stropily conceded.

"Marta. All I want to know is whether you ever saw a little girl with either Warren or his wife."

She looked down her nose at me, face pinching suspiciously. "Why?"

"Because they're trying to scam the welfare system," I said, inventing rapidly. "Ma'am. They, uh, they may have kidnapped a foster child. I'm

with, uh, the Federal Bureau of—Social Services.”

She sniffed. “Stole a kid, did they? Wouldn’t put it past them. They didn’t bring the brat here, though.”

“You wouldn’t be in trouble, ma’am,” I tried, in my best professional Agent of an Imaginary Federal Bureau voice. “In fact, it would be a big help to us if—”

She held up a hand to forestall me. “Trust me, lady, I am not protecting ’em. I’d love to see those slackers in jail. If they stole a kid, they didn’t do it here. And I would know, wouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Would you?”

“Well, of course I would! I’m only the goddamn owner here!”

Jesus. “All right,” I said. “I get it.”

Marta sniffed again and shut the door in my face.

I tried the other two units in the fourplex. One tenant wasn’t home; the other was a timid woman who’d thought Noah was very nice and it was such a shame he’d been evicted, but it wasn’t Marta’s fault because she was nice, too, only she had to because of paying the mortgage, you see, and no, no little girls, but she’d always thought Noah and Denise would have been such nice parents—

I walked off while she was in midstream.

I tried some of the neighbors in the adjacent houses; the only person home was a hipster filmmaker wearing plastic-framed glasses and a suit vest over a T-shirt. He didn’t even know who Noah Warren was and admitted he couldn’t have put a face to a single one of the neighbors in the next building. I gave up and headed back to the minivan.

Shit, I’d barely learned anything. Warren’s address wasn’t his address anymore, and nobody had seen any sign of a girl named Liliana. It was beginning to look confirmed that Warren had invented her, maybe as the result of some nervous breakdown after his wife’s death. The only contradiction to that theory was Albert Lau’s strange reaction to my questions, but I wasn’t great at reading people, so maybe I’d gotten it wrong. Having one’s company sued would make anyone act weird.

I clenched my teeth and yanked my stolen van around to point back at the Pacific.

Rush hour had begun packing the streets. I fought the inching traffic back to Venice Beach, where, predictably, not a sliver of parking was available. I left the minivan in a red zone—the owner could pick it up out of impound or whatever—and pushed my way through the busy boardwalk scene. Even on a weekday the stalls and shops were crowded with cheerful activity, tourists in shorts and bikini tops shouting and laughing as they bought cheesy souvenirs or gathered around buskers and street artists.

My mouth pinched as I squeezed through the crowds. This wasn't the type of place I would have chosen for a meeting, especially not while I was a target for some very dangerous people. I tried to keep my eyes everywhere at once.

After some hiking through the paths and shops I found the skate park. Boarders rolled and skidded up and down the cement slopes, and a good number of spectators packed the rails watching them. I found my way to an empty bench behind the rows of people and sat down to wait, scanning the milling pedestrians with hooded eyes.

I caught sight of Pilar tripping down from the direction of the street a little after five-thirty, munching some dinner out of a fast food bag. She proffered it as she came up.

"Fries?"

"No, thanks," I said.

She made a move to sit down, but I got up instead. "Let's walk." The crowds were making me nervous. Too many people to watch.

We headed down the paths of the beach recreation area until we found a bench that was more secluded, the beach on one side and the buzz of the tourists and shops a distant murmur from the other. Pilar sat down next to me and drew her feet up to sit cross-legged, fast food bag in her lap.

"So. Who are you, really?" she asked. "And what do you want with Denise's daughter?"

"I really do work for Noah Warren," I said. "What do you know about their daughter?"

She cocked her head at me, screwing up her face in the slightly over-the-top manner she applied to all of her expressions. "I believe you," she declared after a few seconds. "You pretty much suck at lying, anyhow."

"Thanks," I said. "Now, what do you know about the daughter?"

She took the time to munch a few more French fries. “Not much. I didn’t even know it was her daughter at the time.”

“Who was?” Could it be that someone was admitting to having glimpsed Liliana? Only a few minutes ago I’d been resigning myself to her nonexistence.

“Denise brought her in.” Pilar licked her fingers, sucking the salt from the fries off them. “I was working late. I don’t think they knew I was going to be there.”

“They?”

“Denise and Ms. Grant.”

Grant, Grant, where had I heard that name? “Imogene Grant? The CEO?”

“Yup. I’d never even seen her up close before. They were real surprised to see me, too. Ms. Grant asked what I was doing there, and I said, well, I work here, and she asked why I was there that late, and I said I was finishing the phone accounts, because Mr. Lau would yell at me if I didn’t—only I didn’t tell her that last part—and she got all snappy and told me to go home.”

“And did you?”

She did her squished-in-face expression again. “The CEO told me to leave. What do you think I did?” The *come on, duh*, was unspoken.

“Tell me about the girl,” I said.

“She was real cute. Like, five years old, maybe? With ringlets—I was so jealous; I always wanted ringlets when I was little—it’s hair that boings! Anyway, she was all dressed up, like she’d just come from a party, but she looked awful scared for some reason. And she asked me what my name was.”

“She did?”

“Yeah, it was so cute. She was the kind of adorable that makes me want to have kids, like, right now. Anyway, she kind of pulled away from Denise and came up and said, ‘Hi, what’s your name?’ formal as you like. And I said, ‘My name’s Pilar, what’s your name?’ and she said, ‘My name is Liliana’—so cute it killed me—and then Denise pulled her back and kind of herded her away from me.”

Liliana. Noah Warren's daughter. *Well, I'll be damned.* She did exist. "Did you notice where they took her?"

"I was busy packing up and leaving, but it looked like they were going back to Denise's office. And the next day was when Denise was gone and they were cleaning out her things."

The next day? I didn't believe in coincidences. "And they said it was medical leave?"

"They?" No, uh-uh, there was a resignation letter from Denise. I filed it. It had her signature."

Which could have been faked. "Did you know her well?"

Pilar wrinkled her nose thoughtfully. "Uh, not real well. I mean, we didn't go out for drinks together or anything, if that's what you mean. But we were friendly and stuff at work. She was just nice, you know? More than anyone else in the department, anyway; most of 'em are these frigid engineer types."

How Checker would have squawked if he'd heard her stereotype his people that way. "Wasn't Denise an engineer, too?"

"Oh, yeah, of course. But a lot friendlier of one. She would actually stop and talk to me at the office, that kind of thing. I really liked having her around."

"What did you talk about? Did she confide in you?"

"No, you know, it was more like, 'the weather's hot today isn't it' and 'did you see the Kings game last night' and 'thank goodness the weather's cooled down this week.' Small talk sort of stuff."

"Did she ever mention her daughter?"

"Not that I remember. Or her husband—I didn't even know she was married until everything went down at Arkacite, with the lawsuit and everything. I mean, I guess she probably had a ring, I didn't really look, but she didn't talk about her family."

"How did she die?"

Pilar's eyes popped wide, making her look startlingly like a character from one of Checker's animes. "She's dead?"

"You didn't know?"

“No, I—her letter said she left for health reasons, but...” She slumped, letting her head hang, her hands lying still in her lap. “I’m real sorry to hear that. I liked her.”

I never knew what to say in this sort of situation. “Was she sick before she left the company?” I asked, for lack of a better question.

“No, not at all,” answered Pilar, subdued. “At least, not that I ever saw, but I guess she might’ve been and I didn’t know...she’s really dead? I wish I’d known. I would have gone to the funeral.”

We sat in awkward silence. An ocean breeze stirred the air, and shouts and laughter of the beachgoing crowds reached us faintly from the boardwalk.

“Nobody at work talks about her,” murmured Pilar. “I assumed it was ’cause of the lawsuit, you know, like she’s frowned on there now because she’s suing them—I mean, it’s her husband’s name on the suit, but I had figured he was doing it on her behalf or something if she was sick, and...I don’t know. It makes more sense now, I guess.” She hugged her arms around herself. “What does the company have to do with their daughter? I mean, if Denise...passed, shouldn’t her husband already...I mean...”

Apparently Pilar had somehow missed Warren’s very loud, very public, and very insistent allegations. “Warren insists Arkacite kidnapped her.”

Pilar’s eyes got huge again. “What! Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“I mean, they’re a soul-crushing company to work for, but *kidnapping*? Besides, why would they *want* to?”

“I don’t know,” I said again.

“I don’t even want to go back tomorrow now,” said Pilar. “If I didn’t have student loans and my car payment and rent and credit card bills, I wouldn’t.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, either.

“You know,” said Pilar, “I could look around for you, if you like. I mean, not a whole lot—they’re always nosing after us for people leaking tech secrets, so I can’t poke around too much—but I can at least check the computer system, see if any files seem funny. I mean, if you want me to? Is there a number I can reach you at?”

“Uh, yeah, sure.” I fished around for a pen but didn’t have one; Pilar pulled one out of her purse and offered me a leftover napkin from her fast food dinner to write on.

“And here’s mine,” she said, scribbling her name and number on another napkin in wide, round lettering. “Just, you know. In case.”

I regarded the phone number with growing suspicion. “I don’t get it. Why offer to help me?”

She looked scandalized. “You just told me the company I work for kidnapped a little girl!”

“You pointed out Lau to me from the beginning, though,” I said. “Why get involved?” And why take the extra step to come talk to me?

Pilar’s lips pursed self-consciously. “I don’t know. Maybe ’cause I get so bored there. Or maybe ’cause I always felt bad for Mr. Warren. I really liked Denise, you know. Or maybe ’cause Mr. Lau grabbed my bottom at the copier once and now I want to get back at him. Sometimes I—”

“Wait, what? Did Lau really do that? Aren’t there laws against that or something?”

Pilar blinked at me. “Come on. You’re a woman.”

“So?”

“So, you know how it is.”

“No,” I said. “I really, really don’t.”

“Oh.” She scrunched up her face, her voice getting smaller. “I think I want to live in your world, then.”

I wasn’t sure she was right about that, but I let it pass. I thought of Mama Lorenzo again, and her fierce protection of her niece, and had a brief urge to go live on a deserted island somewhere where I didn’t have to interact with people or deal with any of the resultant complications.

CHAPTER 7

I'D FORGOTTEN I'd turned my phone off. As I trudged back up the beach I reinserted the battery and hit the power button; it came on to show eight missed calls—two from numbers I didn't recognize and six from Checker.

Shit.

I dialed Checker back right away, not bothering to check my voicemail, visions of Mama Lorenzo and her enforcers flitting through my brain.

"There you are," said Checker. I hadn't even heard the phone ring once. "I was getting worried."

He was worried? "I turned my phone off," I said. He didn't sound like he was dead or being tortured. "Everything all right?"

"What? Yeah, fine." He sneezed. "Except that I'm allergic to cats. I don't suppose I can go back to the Hole yet?"

Not a chance. "It's still not quite sorted, but I'm on it. I'll let you know."

"Okay, well, get on it. By which I mean thank you, you know. What did you find out at Arkacite?"

"Well, I finally found someone who's seen Liliana." Which meant I had a case. I wasn't sure whether to be happy about that or not.

"You did! Who?" cried Checker.

"Pilar Velasquez. She works as a receptionist at the company."

Checker's voice took on the absent quality he had when he was simultaneously concentrating on his computer. "Administrative assistant, it

looks like, as a temp, but she's permanent enough that she has her own company email address. Oh, she's a hottie," he added, apparently having just found a picture.

"Move along, hot shot."

"Oh, all right. Let's see, she started at Arkacite about a year and a half before Constance Rayal left. Did you get my voicemail about Rayal, by the way?"

"It's 'Rayal,'" I said, correcting his pronunciation. "And no. Tell me."

"She's not dead."

"What?" Why did Noah Warren keep talking like she was, then? "She's not?"

"Nope. She's renting a house out in Altadena."

"Wait, then why did she leave Arkacite? Was she even sick?"

"Uh, yeah, but probably not the way you think. Right after resigning she signed herself into an inpatient psychiatric ward."

Holy crap. "How long was she there for?"

"Only a few days. They moved her to outpatient treatment pretty fast."

This had to be connected. "I need her psych file. Can you get it for me?"

"I can," said Checker slowly. "I won't."

"Uh—why not?"

He was a moment in answering. "Because I'm not going to hack someone's personal psychiatric records."

"You decide to respect boundaries *now*? You?"

"Some things are private," he said. "I've got lines."

"So cross them," I snapped. "This could be important."

"No."

"What the hell—why *not*?"

"Cas, you aren't going to sway me on this."

"Stop being stupid!" My hand tightened on the phone. "You've got no problem breaking into arrest records, and financials, and medical information—Jesus, you get me private emails all the time. And what, a psychiatric stay is off limits?"

"Yes," he said.

“That’s the most idiotic thing I’ve ever heard.”

“I’m not changing my mind.”

“I’m doing you a huge goddamn favor on this Lorenzo thing, you know,” I said.

Checker sighed. “Are you really trying to guilt me into giving you someone’s private psychiatric history?”

“Yes! If that’s what it takes. I need that information!”

“Then go talk to Rayal yourself,” he said. “I’ll text you her address. Do you need anything else?” The change of subject was very loud in his voice.

“Send me Lau’s address, too. He knows something.”

“Done. Wait, he’s not going to end up a smear on the sidewalk, is he?”

“What, you’re telling me how to do my job now?” I asked snidely.

He took a deep breath. “For God’s sake, it’s *one thing* I refuse to look up for you—”

I hung up on him. He tried to ring me back, but I let it go to voicemail. I deleted the new message and the other six he’d left without listening to them.

I checked the other two voicemails. The first was Benito Lorenzo, who sounded somewhere on the border between nervous and terrified. He said he was sure my “disagreement” with Mama Lorenzo was all a misunderstanding and pleaded with me to come in and talk about it with them. I deleted it. The final message, for once, was unrelated to the rest of the mess my life had become; what sounded like a male voice said he would like to meet as soon as possible to discuss a job. He said he’d been referred by Ari Tegan, a recurring client of mine—not to mention the best forger I knew.

My thumb hovered over the callback button. I now knew Warren’s daughter existed, but it was looking less and less likely he would be able to pay me. It wouldn’t hurt to have another job pending on the off chance this one fizzled. Just in case I needed it.

Of course, this guy might be working for Mama Lorenzo and planning a setup. Benito had my number, so—

I stopped in my tracks. *Benito had my number*. Little Dino Palermo hadn’t followed a signal on my *car*; Mama Lorenzo’s people had tracked

my *phone*. Checker wasn't the only one who could trace a cell location once he had the number.

What was I, a fucking amateur? I should be dead.

Fuck.

I'd have to pick up a new phone as soon as possible. Before disabling this one, I tried calling Tegan to see if he'd referred someone to me, but the phone rang out to a generic voicemail recording. I told him to call me the instant he checked it and hung up.

Well, if this was an ambush...I tapped the phone against my palm, thinking.

I dialed back the man who'd asked to hire me and left a message suggesting a meeting at eleven that night at Grealy's, an oyster bar—emphasis on *bar*—famous in the LA underground for...I suppose the kind term would be *discretion*. It was a dim, smoky hole-in-the-wall where they had terrible food and worse drinks, mopped the floors every month or so, and made sure everyone minded his own business or got kicked out. I loved the place.

More importantly for tonight, it was well-known enough as a locus for shady dealings not to arouse suspicion in my new potential client—or fake potential client—and I knew the surroundings well enough already to have a few ideas for how to set up my own counter-ambush there.

I called Warren and left a message for him, too, telling him I'd confirmed he probably had a case and we therefore needed to discuss my fee. He was lucky I had principles about children, otherwise I would've been dropping his investigation like it was diseased until that good ol' cash-in-hand moment—but Liliana deserved someone figuring out exactly what was going on here. Then I turned off the damn cell phone, pulled the battery again, and hoofed it away from Venice Beach while I churned through the options on my Mafia problem.

Maybe Dino had hared off on his own, or maybe Mama Lorenzo had been testing me, but one thing was certain: the people after me from now on wouldn't be inexperienced kids. I'd be dealing with Lorenzo family hitmen.

Well, what did you expect when you deliberately made yourself a target? I'd bought myself little bit of time and had my one lucky break—I needed to come up with a better way out *now*.

What I needed was some sort of leverage. Mama Lorenzo hadn't gone for bribery, which left blackmail, threats, or maybe my own plan of outright violence.

I could flip onto the offense and just start killing members of her family until she gave in. But that would mean I'd have to tell Arthur I'd broken my streak and restart my count, and something about that felt twitchy and unsatisfying, even though I didn't have a moral problem with capping Lorenzos. Besides, there were an awful lot of them, and starting to take out their ranks might lead to the same problem I'd have if I assassinated Gabrielle Lorenzo herself—escalating this into a war with me as the sole target, with no way out and no going back. Right now, I still had the option of finding a better solution, but that wouldn't be the case if the Family went mad with blood and vengeance.

Violence might not be such a good idea after all. Who knew Arthur had a point about these things?

I filed “Lorenzo assassination spree” under Plan B. Threats were hard to make work if I wasn't planning to back them up, which left blackmail.

I would have put money on Mama Lorenzo herself having a spotless record—she was the type who demanded just as much out of her own leadership as she did from her family. But were all the people around her so squeaky clean? If I could gather enough dirt on the Lorenzos' activities... find a handful of good tidbits valuable enough to trade silence for our lives...

Checker usually would have been my first resource on such fact-finding, but I was still pissed at him, and more importantly, I didn't want him knowing how far I was from finishing off his Mob problem. I'd gather some intel on my own, hopefully starting with tonight. And if the meet happened to be a legitimate client, well, I'd just have to put “break into Lorenzo estate” on my to-do list for afterward. In fact, I'd do that anyway.

Blackmail it was, then. Damn, having a plan in place was a relief.

And since I couldn't do anything on that plan till dark, I'd use the remaining daylight to conduct a civilized visit. Swearing colorful curses at Checker and his refusal to violate Denise Rayal's privacy, I boosted another car and started for her house in Altadena.

Going west to east across LA during rush hour is the seventh circle of hell. It took me over two hours to traverse the city, and I might have left

more than a few pissed-off drivers in my wake.

I pulled up outside the address Checker had given me just as the sun was setting. Denise Rayal was renting a pleasant-looking, ivy-covered clapboard cottage on a little spot of land nestled at the foot of the mountains. I parked in the driveway, climbed the steps onto the porch, and rang the bell.

No one answered.

Well, hell, I'd fought rush hour traffic to get here; there was no reason to waste the trip. I thought about kicking the door in, decided that was slightly rude, and went around to the back, wishing I'd brought something to pick the locks with.

A window air conditioner sticking out of the side of the house caught my eye. Perfect. I took a running start and vaulted on top of it. My feet balanced on the fulcrum as I slid the window up, and I slipped inside, equalizing my mass so the unit barely wobbled before I let the pane slam back down.

Rayal's home was simple but comfortable. I wandered from room to room, wondering what I was looking for.

She had a number of photographs around, on end tables and hanging on walls and a few on the mantle. I figured out who she was from the pictures: a woman who looked her age but did it gracefully, her features a shade too wide to be beautiful but a broad smile that might get her categorized as handsome. Her skin tone was lighter than her husband's—I wasn't sure if she was light-skinned African-American or mixed—and in all the photographs her eyes were her best feature: large, bright, and lively. I saw pictures with a group of people who were obviously her family; with someone who looked like a sister, both of them bundled up in front of a ski slope; of her shaking hands with someone on a dais, everyone in business suits.

And there were quite a few pictures of a younger Denise with a small boy, a boy with a darker skin tone than she had and unruly black hair. In all of them, Rayal was laughing or smiling as she played with him or embraced him. There were also pictures of the boy alone, portraits they'd probably had taken, and one of him on Santa's knee at a mall, and one of him playing with a large orange plastic truck.

I picked up a picture of Rayal tackling him while he appeared to be trying to run out of frame, squealing in glee. This was clearly her son, the one she and Warren had lost years before.

There were no pictures of a daughter.

What the hell was going on here?

The house wasn't big. I found a neat but lived-in bedroom that showed me nothing but another picture of her son on a nightstand. The bathroom was unremarkable save for the prescription bottles of what I could only assume were psychiatric medication. I'd burned my phone, but Rayal had a fancy camera sitting on a tripod in her bedroom, and I swiped it to take pictures of the pill labels. Screw Checker, I could do a search on the drugs and find out what had happened to her myself.

The other bedroom had been turned into a study. Books overflowed the shelves and were stacked haphazardly on the chairs and desk, the towers threatening to tumble into her desktop computer. I scanned the titles; they all appeared to be related to her work—software engineering, machine learning, control theory, natural language processing. Books on programming languages I'd never heard of. She had lots of academic papers heaped around as well, loose or in large binders.

Whatever Rayal's reason for leaving Arkacite, she hadn't given up her work.

I tried turning on the computer—I knew how to get by rudimentary OS passwords—but Rayal had a touch more security and the machine stymied my elementary cracking. So instead I used a paperclip to pick the locks on the file cabinet. Aside from a plethora of paperwork connected to medical insurance claims—I gathered they related to her hospital stay and continued psychotherapy—I found a library's worth of contracts and nondisclosure agreements from Arkacite, folders and folders of them, each inches thick.

I skimmed the pages. It looked like all the work she had done for the company had stayed with them, and that she was not permitted to work in the same line of research upon the termination of her employment or even discuss that research outside of the company. The convoluted legal language was downright frightening, if I was reading it correctly.

Jesus. What had she been working on?

Or was Arkacite just so worried about corporate leaks that they were desperate to cover themselves?

Scraps of paper and spiral notebooks around the office showed some electrical engineering sketches, but they didn't seem complete, and after looking at her contracts I doubted they were related to her work for Arkacite. I snapped a few pictures of her notes anyway, on the off chance Checker could give me more insight once I decided to speak to him again.

Then, after a moment's internal debate, I unscrewed and slid out her hard drive. With enough time to work at it I'd be able to get in without Checker's help, and if I came back to talk to Rayal, she wouldn't know I was the thief, so no harm done. Given what I'd seen in her file cabinet, she'd probably assume it was cat burglars in ski masks hired by Arkacite.

I turned to let myself out—it was getting late, and I had a meeting with a man who would probably try to kill me—but one more picture caught my eye. The photo was in a printout of an email tacked to Rayal's bulletin board, and showed a posed group of eight people on the plaza in front of Arkacite's headquarters, with Denise on one end. Next to her, a wiry Indian guy sporting a cheeky grin held up a device behind the head of the pudgy Asian man on his other side, and whatever it was he held had flashed two clever little forks of lightning at the camera as it went off—electronic bunny ears.

The email below it started with Rayal and then threaded through several responses:

Vikash, if you don't stop trolling the team photos I'll give the Bulgaria conference to Adrian.

Come on, you think it's just as funny as I do!!! And Adrian is a tool.

It must kill you that he's beating you on bug fixes right now, then. Chop chop.

Of everything I had seen in this house, the psychiatric meds and the dead son and the files full of claustrophobic NDAs, Rayal's decision to tack up this printout on her bulletin board somehow felt the most profoundly sad. This woman had loved her work and loved the people in it. And in the last six months, she'd lost everything.

Including, quite possibly, a daughter.

I tucked the hard drive and the camera's memory card in my pocket and slipped out the back door into the darkening evening, locking up behind me like the considerate little thief I was.

CHAPTER 8

AFTER A quick stop by one of my storage units, I reached Grealy's about twenty minutes after nine and parked down the street. Normally I was late for appointments, but not when I had an ambush to set up.

I cruised into the dive of a restaurant, ordered a drink at the bar, and took it to a corner booth. The bar was in its usual state of smoke-filled semi-darkness; California's anti-nicotine laws were flagrantly violated here, probably because most patrons were conducting business far more illegal than lighting up inside an eating establishment. I sat observing the few other customers over my untouched tumbler of whiskey, my senses drawing out their fields of view in overlapping angles, the mathematics bouncing off the mirrored wall behind the bar and the chrome edges of the greasy oyster buffet under the heat lamps. Binocular vision, monocular vision, reflections, blind spots—the instant everything aligned to make me invisible to everyone in the room, I stood up and stuck a small convex mirror on top of the decorative molding above my head.

Mathematics. The poor man's invisibility cloak.

Then I dumped my whiskey out onto the floor under my chair—this place was not exactly resplendent in its cleanliness; no one would notice—abandoned the empty glass on the table, and left.

I stopped back at my car to retrieve a bag of gear and then ambled to the building across the street. Directly opposite Grealy's was a first-floor club shaking the street with terrible, bass-heavy music under a few stories of rundown apartments. I'd already evaluated the lines of sight to know where

I needed to be. I trekked into the alley at the side of the building, shouldered my gear, and vaulted into the dumpster.

The noisome odor of decomposition and filth clogged my nostrils, and my boots slipped on splitting, oozing bags of garbage. I made a face and attempted to take small sips of air through my mouth as I lifted a Steyr SSG 08 sniper rifle out of my gear bag, snapped open the stock, and screwed a high-end suppressor onto the barrel that would take my decibel contribution down almost to the same level as the horribly loud club music. Then I balanced the stock against my shoulder and the barrel on the lip of the dumpster and pulled out a large piece of dark burlap to throw over myself and the gun. It was full dark by this time; no one would notice the muzzle peeking out or the edge of the scope tented underneath. Best of all, when I settled my eye down behind the scope, my tiny convex mirror leapt larger than life in my vision—the mirror I had positioned to give me a perfect view of the entire inside of the bar.

Of course, that didn't help with the stifling heat under the burlap, or the foul smell—instead of growing accustomed to it, I only became more suffocated, the noxious air pressing thickly against me. Sweat soaked my neck and back and stuck my short hair to my scalp in damp curls. The awful club music gave me a headache within minutes, but even though it crowded out almost all other sound, I could still hear flies buzzing around my feet.

About an hour after I had begun my vigil, I wiped the sweat out of my eyes for what felt like the twentieth time to watch three men—who all had dark Italian coloring, and who all wore coats despite the warm night—enter Grealy's together. They conferred briefly by the door before one of them split off to the bar and the other two went to sit at a table near the front, next to the window. The man at the bar stayed there with his drink, completely ignoring the companions he'd come in with.

Well, hell. They were definitely here to kill me.

I'd intended to wait until eleven to start the party, but by a quarter till, a gunfight sounded a thousand times better than staying in my stifling, fetid sniper's nest for another minute. I snaked a Bluetooth out of my gear bag and looped it onto my ear; I'd already synced the earpiece with one of the new burner phones I'd grabbed from storage.

The man at the bar looked down at his phone as soon as it started ringing, but he took a long, deliberate drink before picking it up to answer

it. "Hello," I heard over the headset, at the same time my eye on the scope saw him mouth the word in the mirror.

"It's Cas Russell," I said. I stifled a cough as I accidentally inhaled the foul air. "I'm running a few minutes late." The words sounded far too facetious to my ears, but he probably wouldn't know me well enough to tell.

"No problem," he said.

"I've had some...business problems lately," I said. "Are you alone? You understand why I ask."

"Yeah," he said. "And yeah, it's just me. Tegan says you're the best."

I already knew he was there to ambush me, but the lying cemented it. It occurred to me that I'd have to make a point of reaching Tegan and making sure he hadn't purposely sent me a murderous client.

I exhaled gently and concentrated on the scope. The optics of my convex mirror blasted through my brain, incident rays and reflected rays and virtual images, all converging at the focus and then shooting back out into the bar in an instantaneous tableau of every person and movement and drink. I was about to shift the rifle slightly and fire blind, but mathematics let me see through walls.

"Tegan's right," I said, "I am the best." And I twitched my aim to pull the trigger in perfect time with the dance music's next thump.

The man's liquor glass shattered.

"Don't move," I said in the half second before he could react, as I swung the scope back to the reflection in my spy mirror and worked the bolt on the rifle in one smooth motion. "Don't you fucking move or the next one is in your skull."

He didn't move.

"Now, let's try this again. Are you alone?"

He sat still as the bartender came and cleaned up the shards of glass, frowning at him as she did so. He didn't offer her an explanation, and she didn't ask. Fortunately, she also didn't see the hole in the bar a little farther down where a .308 rifle round had buried itself.

"No," my contact said slowly when she'd moved away, a good deal of loathing in the word. His companions had looked up when the glass went,

but now they'd gone back to conversing between themselves, unconcerned. Good.

"Who do you work for?" I said.

The man's left hand had started twitching. "You know the answer to that."

"Yeah, but I want to hear you say it, and since I have a high-powered sniper rifle pointed in your direction, I think you should answer me."

"You've made a powerful enemy in the Madre." Venom crawled through his voice. "You won't get out of this alive."

"Maybe, maybe not," I said. "What remains to be seen is whether you and your friends get out of *tonight* alive. Right now I just want to talk, but I might change my mind very fast. Now go and collect your buddies and sit in the booth in the back right corner. Face away from the door and put your hands palm down on the table, all of you. If you move before I get there, or you do anything else, I will shoot you. Understood?"

"Yes," he said after a moment's pause.

"Good. Go. I'm watching. Keep your hands visible at all times."

He hung up and cast a malevolent look around the bar, so baldly hateful I could feel it through the distorted image in the mirror. Then, after he didn't see me, he got up and did as he was told. I couldn't hear what he said to his people, but they shot to their feet and one of them put a hand under his coat.

I fired again and grazed the tip of the guy's earlobe. He jumped and smacked a hand to the side of his head, his eyes roving wildly.

Then he very slowly lifted his hands in the air, one of them now damp with blood, and all three of them went to the back table I had specified and sat with their palms on the table.

It was a mark of how disreputable this particular bar was that everybody was too hunched over a drink to give them a second glance.

I waited another seven minutes, until I was pretty sure the men weren't going to try moving. Then I threw off the burlap with a grateful gulp of fresh, cool air, slung the sniper rifle on my back, and swung down out of the dumpster, drawing my Colt as I did so.

I marched across the street and into the oyster bar. A patron near the door saw the weapons and stumbled back, her hand going to the small of

her back, but I saw her in my peripheral vision and in one motion grabbed a full beer bottle off a nearby table and whipped it across at her. She crashed against the bar, knocked silly.

Even at this place that got people's attention. In the few seconds it took for me to stride to the table in the corner, everyone had turned toward me, half of them reaching for weapons.

Fortunately, that was what I wanted.

I launched off a chair with one foot and spun to land on my would-be assassins' table, facing them and the rest of the bar Colt first. The same man whose ear I'd shot tried to use that opportunity to move. I made sure my boot landed on his hand, hard.

"Hi," I said to the silent bar. "I have business with these three gentlemen. Everyone else, leave. Don't come back in tonight unless you want to be shot. You—lock the door behind them and turn off the 'open' sign," I added to the bartender. "Now go."

True to form, nobody in the bar wanted to get involved in someone else's business, especially when that someone else had a gun pointed at them. They filed out in short order, including a few people in stained white aprons from the back, and the bartender switched off the neon red "open" light and locked the door behind her.

So far, so good. The riskiest part of this plan had been when I was hiding in the dumpster—it would have been too easy for me to lose control of my targets. Now I could relax a little.

I crouched on the table and patted down each of the Lorenzo guys one-handed, pulling out their pieces—and their wallets and phones—to dump on the table. I popped the batteries and SIM cards out of their phones by feel, pocketing the latter, and added my own burner to the pile. Then I dropped into an empty seat that put my back to the wall, keeping my eyes and my gun on the three men.

"Hi," I said.

They were silent. I took this moment to examine them more closely. The guy on the left, the one with blood trickling down his neck from his nicked ear, was slightly overweight, with greasy chin-length hair surrounding a shiny bald spot. The guy in the middle was the one who had called me. He had thinning hair too, but covered with a severe comb over above a pointed, weaselly face. The third man was a lot younger, probably

in his late twenties or early thirties, with a gold chain, a popped collar, and too much gel in his hair. He reminded me a bit of Benito.

I flipped open their wallets with my left hand and managed to extract all their driver's licenses to stick in my pocket without looking down. "There," I said. "I know who you are. Now tell me something valuable enough that I decide not to kill you."

Weaselly Man licked his lips. "What do you want to know?"

"You know what I want to know." Only certain types of information were valuable.

"I'm not sayin' nothin'," said the young guy, sticking his nose in the air.

I shot him in the arm. At this range, the boom and the flame bursting out of the .45 felt enormous, a thunderclap close enough to set them on fire. The young guy screeched and started hyperventilating, hunching over the injury.

"Wuss," I said. "It's only a graze. Now talk."

The arrogance had faded from his posture, and he glanced toward his elders. When I decided they'd waited a second longer than I wanted, I pulled the trigger again and shot Weaselly Man in the side of his neck.

He jumped a mile in his seat and slapped a hand to the wound, blood running through his fingers. His eyes were wide and unnerved. I'd only just broken the skin—okay, and some powder burns—but I was willing to bet he didn't know that. People were precious about their necks.

"Remember," I said, "there's a reason Mama Lorenzo sent you to kill me."

The guy whose ear I'd hit broke right then. He began babbling about a protection racket with the city sanitation workers, and from that moment on I had won.

It was cute, really, how all three of them started pouring out information once they got started. I was kicking myself for not bringing a digital voice recorder so I could remember all the trivia they tripped over themselves to tell me. I'd have to verify it all and put some sort of coherent extortion plan in place, but things were looking up.

Blackmail, here I come.

Someone rapped on the front window.

The lights from surrounding buildings were bright enough for me to recognize the woman standing outside. Cheryl Maddox was an extremely tanned, extremely buxom woman with extremely bleached hair and two full sleeves of tattoos. She was also the owner of Grealy's, and something of a legend. I'd only met her a time or two, but she had my respect, in no small part for running the bar the way she did.

She kept her hands raised up where I could see them. I nodded to her and gestured with the Colt.

She unlocked the door and came in, still keeping her hands up, but her posture was locked in anger. "Cas Russell, right?" she called as she crossed the room.

"Yeah," I said.

"Sister, you can't *do* this shit in here," she said. "You want to get me shut down? Take it out in the desert or something. Fuck."

"Hands on your head and split," I directed the three Mob guys. I'd learned more than I could remember already; I'd have my hands full sorting out which of the info was good. With baleful glares, the three men put stiff hands on the backs of their heads and shoved their way out the front door, their various small wounds crusting with dried blood.

I lowered the gun. "Sorry," I said to Cheryl. "I didn't know for sure they were out to kill me till they showed up."

"I got the story from my girl," said Cheryl. "Sounds to me like you sussed it, then came in anyway. Bitch, please. You could've walked away, 'stead of hijacking my bar." She said the word "bitch" the same way she said the word "sister," like it was a term of endearment—though still a pissed-off one.

"Sorry," I said again. To be fair, I *had* been pretty sure it was an ambush. "Let me know how much money you lost. I'll cover it."

"Ain't the point. I can't get a bad name." She let her hands drop to her sides. "You're banned, hon. I can't have people pulling weapons in here."

I nodded. "I get it." Too bad, though. "I'll still get you the mon—"

I'd been keeping half an eye on the outside as the mobsters climbed into a black Mercedes. Instead of driving out and away, however, the car swung into a screeching U-turn—

“Get down!” I shouted, bodyslamming Cheryl at the same time I brought the 1911 back up and fired as we both crashed to the floor.

There were pedestrians milling on the sidewalk, and between them, the tinted windows of the Benz, and the club goers behind them, I didn’t have a clear shot at the occupants, so I took out a tire instead. Metal crashed and splintered outside as Cheryl and I hit the ground. Several people screamed. And my new Mob friends opened fire with three fully automatic weapons.

Full auto isn’t great for accuracy, but it’s *fantastic* for suppression fire. The front window of the bar shattered in a glorious crash, and the building sounded like it was splintering around us. I might have been able to mathematically isolate the arc of fire for a single weapon enough to dodge and attack back, but not for three at once—I was going to have my hands full just keeping Cheryl from getting hit.

The two of us belly-crawled toward the swinging door to the kitchen. I listened hard to track the trajectories and predicted as well as I could, teasing apart the earsplitting bursts of gunfire and the overlapping explosions of glass and wood that told me where the rounds were hitting. Twice I yanked Cheryl back before a bullet slammed into the floor in front of us.

“There’s a shotgun behind the bar!” she shouted in my ear.

“Won’t help!” I yelled back. After all, I still had a goddamn sniper rifle if I had a split second to aim. “Get out!”

We dove through the door into the kitchen, hitting the tile floor hard in a heap. My brain had been keeping instantaneous track of the count, and the gunfire hit a lull just as I thought it should. I hauled Cheryl to her feet in the sudden silence. “They’re reloading. Go!”

We exploded out the back door into the night. The kitchens let out into an alley; I skidded across it and kicked open the door to the next building, the frame splintering where the deadbolt had held it. I hustled Cheryl with me into the darkness, wishing I had a flashlight on the rifle. Behind us, the Mafia guys opened up again, the tattoo of automatic fire muffled through the intervening walls.

The back room we had entered opened up into a darkened laundromat. The front door had been secured for the night, but Cheryl dashed over and yanked the security bar off, and we pushed out onto the next street over.

As per usual for LA, cars were parked bumper to bumper all along the curb, and I practically leapt over the hood of the nearest one to slam the butt of my rifle into the driver's side window. The glass rained down. Cheryl and I yanked at the doors, scrambling to get inside—me in the front and her in the back—and I tore open the console, crossing the right wires to bring the engine to a coughing thrum. My foot jammed the accelerator into the floor, and inertia slammed us to the side as I peeled out.

I didn't slow down until we were miles away from the bar.

Idiot, I castigated myself as I drove. I'd known all three men were out to kill me and I'd let them go. I'd let my guard down because I'd taken their weapons and thought I had intimidated them. I'd been reluctant to kill them in the first place because of Arthur, and I'd let them walk out freely partly to mitigate the fact that I'd disrupted the peace at Grealy's and partly so I wouldn't leave Cheryl with three pissed-off gangsters on her hands. A year ago I never would've been so sloppy.

It just went to show, I should never care about what other people thought. It only led to mobsters firing automatic weapons at me.

"Those motherfuckers wrecked my bar!" railed Cheryl from the back seat. She looked ready to tear someone's face off with her bare hands. "Who the *fuck* were those guys? They fucking wrecked my bar!"

"They're with the Lorenzos," I answered.

"Mama Lorenzo's letting that shit go down at my place? No fucking way! No way in motherfucking hell!"

I winced. "It's my fault. They faked a job meet; I suggested you."

"Well, fuck you, too, then!"

That was fair.

"Where should I drop you?" I asked eventually.

"Anywhere. I'll call a fucking taxi."

I stopped the car. "Listen," I said. "I owe you." I would have liked to say I didn't mean for it to happen, but I'd set up the meet knowing it would almost certainly involve some level of violence. I'd picked Cheryl's bar for the scene of a probable gunfight—because it was familiar, and unsuspecting, and convenient. "You've got a marker. If you ever need a favor, call me."

"Lady, I've got more than a marker. I own your fucking ass."

Brave of her to say that to someone who had taken over her entire oyster bar tonight and was still toting two firearms, but Cheryl Maddox was nothing if not blunt. “I’ll pay you for the damages,” I said. “And I do owe you, if you end up needing it. Call around. I’m very good.”

“Yeah, I know,” she grunted. “Ain’t all that many women around our world. I know who you are.”

“Oh,” I said.

“You set foot in my bar again, I will get you run out of town.”

“Understood,” I said.

She got out of the car and slammed the door.

Paranoid about screwing up again, I switched cars twice more before driving to one of my bolt holes. I’d thought about breaking into Mama Lorenzo’s Hollywood Hills estate tonight, but I already had a good deal of information to sift through, and I was tired. At least my foray into blackmail was moving along swimmingly—hopefully I’d be able to cross the Mob off my to-do list sooner rather than later.

I stayed up long enough to scribble down everything I remembered, but investigating the veracity of what the men had told me would have to wait till the next day and access to a computer. Besides, even if I’d had a laptop, I hadn’t slept the night before, and the long wait in the dumpster and subsequent gunfight hadn’t exactly been relaxing. I took a moment to text a new burner number to everyone who might need it and slumped onto the mattress.

CHAPTER 9

“SHE’S BROKEN,” someone said.

No, I’m not, I tried to protest, but instead of words a lightning flash of agony spiked through me—

I sat by the ocean, the waves soaking me time after time, but I didn’t feel it, didn’t move. A handsome man with dark, curly hair came and pulled at me, cajoled me, almost desperate, the spray lashing his face, and then I was in a dim room and he was frowning at me, and standing next to him was a tall Asian man in a trench coat—Rio—

I shivered like I had a fever, and my teeth chattered.

“We’ll destroy them,” said another voice, right next to me, a woman with strongly accented English, and I was sitting on the ground outside now. “There will be nothing left. *We’ll burn them to the ground and scorch the earth...*”

I bolted awake. The wan light of dawn was just seeping in through the blinds, and my watch told me it was still early, too early to do anything useful.

I leaned back against the wall and squeezed my eyes shut. I didn’t usually dream when I was on the job. When unemployed, all bets were off, but working...the focus of work had brought dead, black sleep, the nightmares only returning once I was off contract.

Lately, the dreams had been creeping into my employed life. Not always, but here and there over the past year.

The past year. Since Pithica. Since Dawna and her psychic attack—or whatever it had been. Since she had crawled into my brain and torn through my memories.

I still wasn't sure what she had done. I only knew the dreams had gotten worse.

For the millionth time, I thought about calling Rio, demanding that he help me reverse the mental block that made me unable to go after Pithica again. Even if it meant resetting my count with Arthur, I owed Dawna Polk.

But Rio had continued to refuse without giving me a reason, and then disappeared off to corners of the globe unknown to wreak the wrath of God on the guilty, as he was wont to do. Whenever he dropped back in, he met my continued frustration with indifference or mild amusement, depending on his mood—which, of course, pissed me off even more.

I lay back down and tried to go back to sleep, but it was no use, so instead I spread my guns out in pieces on the floor and set to work. I'd cleaned the sniper rifle before storing it and I'd only fired it a few times, so most of what it needed was a minute inspection to ensure nothing had gotten banged up in our tumble to safety, but my 1911 needed more care. I took longer than I had to, rubbing off every bit of residual crud and coating each nook and surface with oil until the coefficient of friction dropped enough for the glide of the slide to feel slippery. I reassembled it, guiding each piece into place with more deliberation than it required, then loaded it, chambered it, popped out the magazine to add one more round, and stuck the newly cleaned gun in the back of my belt without clicking the safety on. The thing had a grip safety; I wasn't worried.

The hour was almost decent when Arthur called this time.

"Trouble," he said, without apologizing for the time. "Just got the second confirmation. Your tip is right. Plutonium—someone's after it. For serious."

"That was fast," I said. "Thanks."

"Not sure of this yet, but the rumor is someone called Ally Eight," he said grimly. "You heard of them?"

"No."

"Well, I'm pulling in every resource on this. We got to get more intel. This is real. Ain't found out if they got it yet—maybe they're still looking.

But I got two sources confirming the inquiry's out there. Plutonium-238."

"Wait, back up—238?" My brain whirled. "Are you sure that's what they said?"

"Yeah. Why?"

Isotope arithmetic tumbled through my head. "Ha! I told you so."

"Told me what? Ain't this a big deal?"

"Plutonium-238 isn't fissile." I didn't have nuclear trivia memorized, but the equations for fissility unfolded in my head, laying out the information for me. "You'd need 239 for a bomb."

Arthur didn't speak for a good handful of seconds, and then the breath gusted out of him like he'd collapsed in relief. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. You got no idea how scared I been."

"I told you, terrorism is statistically trivial." I might have been gloating a little bit. "It's not a—"

"Okay, okay, shut it, you were right. What's 238 used for, then?"

"I have no idea," I said. Nor did I care very much.

Unless...unless I could snake the job of obtaining it. On second thought, the gig would probably pay a heck of a lot better than Warren would, and since I might be well on my way to having Mama Lorenzo taken care of...

"I'll find out," I amended. "But I don't think it can be anything dangerous, so relax. Thanks, by the way. How much do I owe you?"

He made an inarticulate sound. "Russell, you got to stop trying to pay me for every little thing. I wanted to find out about this, too. 'Sides, it's what people do for each other."

"Your experience with people is very different to my experience," I said. "Let me know how much time you spent. I'll talk to you later."

He heaved a sigh. "Good-bye, Russell."

I hung up and dialed Checker, running right over him when he tried to greet me. "Plutonium-238. What's it used for?"

"Why, good morning to you, too, Cas Russell. Yes, I was awake, thank you for asking. Are we speaking again?"

"Temporarily."

"Couldn't live without me, huh?"

I was still mad at him. "Don't push your luck."

He laughed. “Two thirty-eight. So, an ultra-quick Internet search tells me...hmm. Radioisotope thermoelectric generators, which provide electricity for things like space probes and pacemakers, and radioisotope heater units, which provide heat for ridiculously long amounts of time and are also used for things like space probes. Basically, mini-heaters or generators or batteries that will last forever, that’s 238. The half-life is almost eighty-eight years, so it can provide power for a heck of a long time. Though not very much.”

“What does that mean?”

“As far as I know, and my quick skimming is supporting this, atomic batteries have about enough juice to power a wristwatch. But they’re way too costly for that. They’re only used for some pretty specific things.”

I graphed protons and neutrons in my head. As long as the 238 isotope wasn’t anomalous for some reason—“Alpha decay, right?”

“Right on,” Checker confirmed. “What’s all this about, anyway?”

“Someone’s looking for it. Hey, can you find out about a group called Ally Eight for me? At least, I think it’s a group. Could be a person.”

“Spelling?”

“No idea.”

“You’re helpful. Are they the ones looking for the plutonium?”

“Possibly,” I said. “That’s the rumor, at any rate.”

“Well, let ’em look, as far as I’m concerned. It isn’t actually dangerous. Unless you eat it or something, but drain cleaner’s a lot cheaper. And it seems like it’s kind of impossible to find anyway—I’m still skimming, but nobody’s producing it anymore, not even Russia. Too expensive.”

Expensive. And difficult to find. This was *definitely* a job I needed to be doing. “Put together some research for me,” I said to Checker. “I want to know where to find some of this stuff. Hypothetically.”

“*Hypothetically*. Sure,” He drew out the word teasingly. “You’re going to try to find some and then sell it to them for a ridiculous price, aren’t you?”

“Less talking and more research, or you don’t get your cut.”

“I get a cut now?” He sounded like he was trying not to laugh. “Is that in addition to my hourly rate?”

“I’m not sure you’re going to get *that*,” I shot back. “I’m suffering sorely from a lack of customer satisfaction. And I’m still mad at you.”

“Then I guess I’m lucky we’re bartering on this one. Hey, I’ll start sticking the plutonium stuff in your folder on my server. Does that work?”

“Yeah, but I need you to set up security on another computer for me first. I can bring one by.”

“What! Another one? What’d you do this time?”

“Someone’s head needed percussive maintenance.”

“Someone’s *head*? When did—?”

“A few weeks ago,” I said. “There was this guy who didn’t want to pay —”

“Never mind,” he said hastily. “I’ve got an extra laptop with me you can have; I’ll text you the address. Honestly, I don’t even know why I bother... *percussive maintenance*...”

“You’re a gem,” I said with no sincerity, and hung up.

I fingered my phone thoughtfully. I supposed I should call Harrington next, let him know he could sleep at night.

Harrington, who had given me the tip in the first place, suggesting he’d heard a rumor about the plutonium. Harrington, who was about as well plugged-in to the corporate underground as it was possible to be. Harrington, who was in a downright panic about the nuclear threat.

Hmm.

He picked up almost immediately, despite the early hour. “Miss Russell. Have you any news on the situation?”

“Yeah, I’m on it.” I paused. “Have you heard of Ally Eight?”

“Certainly,” he said. “They are...perhaps you could say they are competitors to my firm, in the specialties they offer. They mainly represent several different Japanese interests.” His voice darkened. “Are they the ones who are seeking—”

“Maybe,” I hedged. “It’s complicated. I need to meet with someone over there. Who’s their you?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Their equivalent of you. If they’re looking for something off the books, who’s their guy?”

“I don’t know a name,” said Harrington slowly. “It may be more than one person. But I could arrange a meeting.”

“Brilliant,” I said. “Do it.”

“If they are the ones seeking—”

“I told you, I’m on it. I’ll call you later and explain.”

“It may take some doing,” he warned. “We are, to some degree, rivals.”

“Just set it up,” I said. “We’re talking about plutonium, remember? Tick tick.”

Sometimes it’s nice when people are paranoid about terrorism. He hurriedly ended the call with a promise that I’d have my meeting as soon as he could possibly arrange it.

I waited for the morning rush hour to die down and then hopped on the freeway and zipped over to the address Checker had gone to ground at, which turned out to be a pleasant apartment complex in North Hollywood. The code Checker had texted let me buzz through the gate into a cheerful outdoor courtyard surrounded by Spanish architecture.

I paused, eyeing the decorative banana leaves and lush succulents, my senses tingling with the echo of the ambush at Grealy’s. It was all too easy to imagine a pipe bomb stuffed into a mailbox or a drive-by peppering the courtyard’s pretty landscaping with bullet holes. I cautiously stepped down the path to where it opened into a first-floor hallway, automatically drawing lines of sight and angles of possible danger.

I turned the corner and spotted apartment 109 at the end of the hall. And approaching the door was a dark-haired woman who was putting a hand into her bag.

CHAPTER 10

I DIDN'T think. The math became a near-light speed optimization of the fastest way to incapacitation, and the woman's bag hit the floor as the back of her head smacked into the wall next to the apartment door. I was in her face, one hand pinning her wrist, the other forearm across her throat. She was a tall, lithe Asian woman, quite young—a bounty hunter, maybe, or on contract to the Lorenzos—

“You go after me first!” I growled. “That was the deal!”

“Wha...” she gasped, choking against my arm.

The door opened, and Checker's head poked out. “What are you—Cas, let her go!”

I didn't.

“*Cas!* She's not a—I know her!”

I released the woman and stepped back. She coughed, rubbing her throat.

“Miri, are you okay?” said Checker. “Cas, what the hell are you doing?”

The smart thing. Just because my assumptions had been wrong didn't mean the call hadn't been right.

“You must be the psycho ex,” croaked the woman.

“What?” I said.

Checker winced. “No, no, she's just a friend. A psycho friend. Cas, meet Miri. Miri, meet Cas. This is, uh, her place. I thought you weren't going to be home,” he said to Miri, an apology in his voice.

“I stopped by to pick up a few things,” Miri said.

“Wait, ‘psycho’?” I cut in. “For Christ’s sake, Checker, people are trying to ki—”

“Let’s have this conversation inside,” said Checker hastily.

Miri picked up her scattered belongings—her bag had spilled clothes and keys and a towel across the hallway, no weapons—and we stepped into her apartment, two cats winding around our feet and mewling as we entered.

“The white one’s friendly. The tabby will nip if you try to pick him up,” Checker informed me. I shied away from both cats. I try to avoid animals; they’re even more unpredictable than humans.

The apartment was bright and clean but excessively cluttered, with books and knickknacks and exercise paraphernalia strewn across every surface, and an absurd number of houseplants that made me feel as if we were trapped in an arboretum. I also disapprovingly noted the lack of security options. The door had an additional heavy bar installed, which Checker had reset once we were inside, but if nothing else the place had a truly godawful number of windows, even with the vertical blinds slatted shut. And if Checker knew the woman who lived here, that made the location at least theoretically traceable.

Of course, given that it was *Checker*, maybe the list of women who would lend him a bed was prohibitively long. I moved a stack of magazines to sit grumpily on the dark red couch, spider plant fronds dangling in my face from up above. “Doesn’t it seem like an unwise solution to solve one problem with a girl by running and shacking up with another one?”

Checker put a hand to his face, and I got the distinct impression he was resisting banging his forehead against something. Miri’s jaw dropped open and she let out a throaty laugh.

“First of all,” said Checker, “that is an incredibly rude thing to say; second of all, despite what you may think, I am perfectly capable of being friends with women; and third of all, Miri is very generously letting me stay here-slash-housesit while she does a show down in Long Beach, where she is living for the time being with *her girlfriend*.”

Oh.

“Miri’s my dance partner,” said Checker. “I was already watering her plants and feeding the cats so she doesn’t have to drive up here every day. I told her I was having psycho ex-girlfriend stalker problems and she said I could stay for a while.”

Well, that was one way of describing the situation. “Wait. Your dance partner? You dance?”

“Hey,” said Miri. “Don’t sound so surprised. That’s not on.”

“It’s okay,” said Checker. “Yes, people in chairs can dance, let’s all move past that, and the fact that you’re a horrible friend for not knowing this about me, and—”

“That’s not what I—” I could feel my face flushing hot. I tended to forget Checker used a wheelchair unless I thought about it—the mathematical model of a person’s movement was what it was, and that was it. “I meant it’s *you*. I’m just shocked you have anything approaching grace.”

Checker shrugged. “I’m not claiming to be any good, mind you.”

“Liar,” said Miri. “He’s quite good. You should come see us compete sometime.”

“Well, that’s all you,” Checker told her. “Miri’s a real dancer. Like, professional level. Like, it’s what she went to school for.”

Now that I took a good look, Miri did have a pleasing sort of mathematical fluidity to her, a lift to her posture and an elegance to the equations most people lacked. I wished she was ex-military or something instead.

“Staying here doesn’t seem very secure,” I complained.

Checker grinned. “Oh, not that you can *see*. Miri had a break-in about eight months ago. I might have helped her upgrade a tad based on my own new security system, the stuff I installed at my place after the whole Pithica thing. Possibly, uh, without consulting her landlord.”

“It’s pretty rad,” Miri put in cheerfully. “Cameras and sensors everywhere, and if I want my vandals extra-crispy, I can electrify the—”

“Hey! Ixnay on the apping-zay when your neighbors might hear,” interrupted Checker. “Anyway, none of it’s lethal or anything of course, but it’s better than nothing and they won’t be expecting it. Oh, Miri, speaking of—I temporarily switched the panic button to Cas instead of the police.”

Miri shrugged. "Sure, whatever you want."

Okay, that was all a little more mollifying. I knew how creative Checker could be when he set his mind to it.

"Hey, I just came from rehearsal, so I'm going to grab a quick shower while I'm here," Miri said. She turned to me. "Cas, right? Make yourself at home, but do me a favor and don't choke out my cats."

"I'm really sorry about that," said Checker. "Cas is...well..." He gave up. "Are you okay?"

Miri winked at him over her shoulder as she disappeared into the hallway. "Fine. My girlfriend's given me worse."

"Too much information!" Checker yelled after her.

A minute later we heard the shower turn on.

"You don't think I have to worry about the Lorenzos coming after her for letting me stay, do you?" asked Checker, his forehead knitting. "I can get a motel..."

I thought for a minute and shook my head. "Mama Lorenzo's too civilized. She's strung up enforcers who've gotten innocent people caught in the crossfire." Come to think of it, her boys putting Cheryl in danger was one more piece I could use for blackmail. I wondered if Mama Lorenzo would be making reparations to Grealy's, too—Cheryl might come out ahead on this. "If Miri's all the way down in Long Beach, she should be well out of the way anyway. Besides, I told you, I bought us some time."

Checker crossed his arms. "About that. What did you mean when you said they were supposed to go after you first?"

Oops. "Nothing."

"Cas!"

"I'm still working on it, okay?" I snapped. "You are in deep trouble! She wouldn't back off—nice work with the whole 'shagging a student' thing, by the way, bang up job there—and the only way I could buy time was to threaten her, which, as you might guess, is only a temporary solution when it comes to the Mafia! I'm working on something more permanent, but she's hell bent on taking down both you and your and Arthur's business, so a little gratitude here would be nice." I leaned back in a huff and blew spider plant babies out of my face.

Checker had gone pale. “Cas,” he said. “I swear I had no idea—you should have told me it was this serious—”

“You knew the *Mob* was gunning for you and you didn’t think it was *serious*?”

“But before, when you said you bought some time—I thought it was—I thought we were—this is going too far. I’m so sorry I got you into this.” He pulled out a laptop and opened it with the force of a man on a mission. “I’m going to drag Isabella out of her retreat if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Who?”

“The niece. The, uh, young woman in question.”

“Wait, you didn’t talk to her *already*?”

“It’s not like I didn’t try! She made it very clear that our arrangement was to be no-strings-attached, which, awesome, that was what I wanted, too, but when I tried to get back in touch with her she sent me a very polite email that made it sound like she’d be very angry if I insisted on contacting her and that she’d delete all future communications unread because our relationship had been a commitment-free one, and I know how she hates having all her family baggage brought up, but I don’t think she knows what’s going on—and now she’s on some school retreat up in the mountains —”

“Tell me where she is; I’ll go talk to her in person.”

“Don’t you dare! If Gabrielle Lorenzo hears you went near her niece, she will alter the space-time continuum to see you dead! I’ll figure out a way to get in touch or get them to send her back to LA. I don’t care if I have to tell them her grandmother died.” His fingers were already drumming across the keys.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” I said. “All Mama Lorenzo needs is another excuse to come after you. She might not wait.”

“Fine, then I’ll figure out a way to get a message up to her. Or something. Hey, answer me this, why would anyone voluntarily go to a place with no computers and no cell phone coverage? Not to mention no electricity or indoor plumbing? I swear, I absolutely do not get why people would ever camp out of their own free will. It’s like they *want* to go back to the stone ages. Modern technology is part of what makes living today *better* than living a few millennia ago; you might as well write off every

advancement from internal combustion to RSA as a total waste of time if you're going to—"

"You do that," I cut into the flow of words. "Where's my computer?"

"Oh, right." He twisted to grab another laptop from behind him and handed it to me. "Don't break this one, okay? I set the password to the last twenty digits of Graham's number; reset it to one of your own after you log in."

The water in the bathroom shut off, reminding me Miri was still in the apartment. I'd continuously been on the alert to make sure I'd catch anyone trying to follow me, but still...I was the one who had a target painted on her right now. The faster I was gone, the safer Checker and Miri would be.

"Thanks," I said. "I'll head, then. See you later."

"Yeah," said Checker, buried in his laptop again.

I tucked the computer under my arm and started for the door. Checker's voice stopped me.

"Hey. Cas."

"Yeah?" I turned.

His hands had stilled on the keys, and his thin face was pinched behind his glasses. "I really am sorry I got you into this. I didn't think—I didn't mean to put you in any danger."

"Oh. Uh, I know." My temper had cooled, and him dwelling on it was making me feel wrong-footed. After all, I'd successfully escaped all the hitmen so far, albeit with a few hitches. "Don't worry about it. It's not that big of a deal."

"Yes," he contradicted with a sigh, "it is a big deal. You just don't think so because you're weird and scary. I'll get Isabella back here and fix this; I promise."

"Good," I said. "That's good. Hey, thanks for this." I hefted the laptop. "I'll see you soon."

"Promise you'll be careful?" said Checker.

"Sure," I answered. For some definitions of *careful*, at least.

CHAPTER 11

I STUCK the laptop in my trunk and tried to decide where to go next. I could see if Denise Rayal was home, but I wanted to check out her hard drive first, now that I had a working computer. I'd see about chasing down more information on the Lorenzos once night rolled around—who knew, by then Checker might have gotten in touch with Isabella and the whole thing might've blown over. It would be nice only to have to dodge Mafia assassins for another day or so.

That left Arkacite. Specifically, one Albert Lau, who had definitely known more than he was saying. He'd be at work right now. I texted Checker to check whether he lived alone, and when I got an answer in the affirmative I hit the 405 and drove back to Venice.

The address for Albert Lau's condo turned out to be on a crowded street with no parking at all. I didn't want my new computer to get towed and didn't fancy bringing it in with me, so I drove around for twenty minutes until I found a tiny stretch of empty curb. Not that I wouldn't have a problem if parking enforcement drove by with a license plate scanner—this was still the final car I'd jacked after the escape from Grealy's the night before—but that hardly ever happened.

Lau's condo was on the second floor, through a tall, locked gate in a hedge and up an outside flight of stairs. I'd forgotten to bring lockpicks again, but mathematics was an easy substitute for the appropriate tools, and I'd found a couple of paper clips and hairpins in the detritus on the floor of my stolen car. I worked the makeshift picks into first the lock on the gate and then the lock on the condo door and walked into an excessively neat

apartment that looked like it belonged in a furniture catalogue, all horrendously stiff white couches and granite countertops and steel appliances. The only thing even approaching clutter was a few artfully placed magazines on the glass coffee table that were far too glossy and crisp-looking ever to have been read.

Well. At least the place would be easy to search.

I pushed through a door into a large bedroom. Lau wasn't a secret slob—the bed was made with the precision of a hotel maid, and blandly impersonal art prints hung on the wall. Even the closet was neatly ordered, his suits all facing the same freakin' direction. The pristine bathroom had a second toothbrush, a box of tampons under the sink, and a profusion of brightly-colored women's bath products lining the edge of the tub, but apparently Lau was very particular about his girlfriend leaving anything else around the apartment.

I wandered back out to the living room. The only thing that appeared promising was a closed white laptop that looked like it had been chosen to match the decor. I started to step over to it when a key scraped in the lock.

The sparse apartment had nowhere to hide, but I crouched down behind the arm of the sofa where I was at least not advertising my presence. The door swung open, and Albert Lau appeared, briefcase in one hand, eyes on a folded newspaper in his other hand as he walked in.

Apparently he'd come home for a late lunch break. Oops.

I stood up and crossed the living room as he shut the door, and when he turned back he ran straight into me. He stopped in his tracks and stumbled back a step. The paper flopped to the floor.

"Hi," I said. "Remember me?"

He tried to bolt for the landline. I whipped my arm around and clotheslined him.

He sprawled to the carpet in an ungainly heap and shot me a look that was half fear and half loathing. Then, with a wince of pain, he edged back from me a few feet in a crab walk until he was against the wall. "What do you want?"

"I want to talk about Warren's daughter," I said.

His eyes hooded with the same cagey expression he'd displayed at Arkacite, and he didn't say anything.

I drew my gun.

He choked, his feet skidding fruitlessly against the floor as if he could push himself through the wall and back outside.

“Tell me,” I said.

He wet his lips, then burst out, “Warren’s the person you should be asking. Maybe he knows it’s worth more than his useless hide to tell you.”

That was not the response I had expected. “Tell me what?”

Lau was a terrible liar. His eyes skittered across his dropped briefcase by my feet.

“Stay where you are,” I said. Keeping my gun on him, I crouched down to turn the briefcase toward me and pushed at the hasps.

Lau’s eyes bugged out when he saw what I was doing. “No, *don’t*—!”

He was too late.

On top of the papers was a thick sheaf of some sort of project reports. My eyes skipped down each page, but the language wouldn’t connect into meaning at first, the headings just black words on a white page—

Subject’s reactions to isolation from human contact—

Subject’s fear response—

Subject’s reaction to pain stimuli—

A strange buzzing filled my senses and the papers hit the floor as I descended on Lau. He tried to stumble up and get away but I slammed him against the wall, my hand on his throat and my gun in his face—he choked and gurgled against me—

My finger squeezed against the trigger, not quite enough to trip the hammer, but close. “You’re experimenting on her,” I whispered. “A little girl.” My skin felt too tight, the mathematics too sharp, razor edges of vectors and forces singing to me of the pathetic fragility of one worthless human life...

Lau’s brownish complexion had paled to the color of parchment, his skin slack against his bony face. “It’s not what you—!”

I moved before I had considered it. The math felt red with rage as my hand blurred and I whipped the Colt against Lau’s face before he could react to it coming.

His head cracked against the wall, and his body sagged suddenly, a dead weight collapsing against me. I stepped back and let him tumble down in a heap, his limbs smacking against the floor. He would be painfully bruised when he woke up, in addition to the head injury. A jagged laceration had opened across his cheek where I'd pistol whipped him. Blood trickled down his limp features.

My right hand twitched against the gun. I still wanted to kill him.

A child. They were doing this to a *child*.

I forced myself to take a deep breath. Then another.

I slid the gun back into my belt. I picked up the scattered papers and returned them to the briefcase, trying not to look at them, revulsion crawling through me as I touched the pages. I forced myself to check the computer, but it was so spartan it was obvious he used his work computer for almost everything.

I picked up the briefcase and left.

I didn't look at Lau again. I knew what I would do if I looked.

CHAPTER 12

I WAS half an hour away from Lau's place before I realized I didn't know where I was going.

I stopped the car in a red zone and sat gripping the steering wheel. My breath scraped in and out. I was having trouble remembering anything after leaving Lau's building.

I should have killed him, I thought.

Or maybe I should have taken him. Interrogated him. Found out everything about Arkacite, used him to break in and rescue a scared five-year-old girl who had done nothing wrong.

My phone jangled in my pocket.

"What!" I yelled into it, without looking at the ID.

I heard an indistinct shuffling. "Hello?" asked a tremulous female voice.

"You called *me*," I said. "Who is this?"

"Pilar Velasquez. From Arkacite."

"Oh. Yeah." I tried to pull myself together, to sound something less than hostile. "What do you want?"

"I..." Her voice hitched, and I suddenly realized what the noises I was hearing were: she was crying.

"What happened? What's wrong?" I demanded, too fast. After what I had just learned—

"I lost my job," she burst out, and started full-on sobbing.

I had to strangle back the urge to take her fucking head off. On the scale of one to important, Pilar Velasquez getting fired didn't even *register*. And why the hell was she calling *me* about it? "So what?" I snapped.

"I'm in big trouble," she hiccupped. "I've got rent due in less than a week and my car payment right after that and I—I don't have any savings—but that's not why I called. I, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to dump on you, only you asked, and it only just happened, and I don't know what to do..."

I didn't have time for this. "Get to the point."

"It's, it's Denise. I found out—she's not dead."

"Oh," I said. "Yeah, I know."

Silence. Even the crying had stopped. Then Pilar wailed, "You could have *told me!*"

"Sorry," I said, with no sincerity. "I didn't think of—"

"You didn't—? I was depressed all night about this! I got *fired* because of it!"

"They can fire you for that?"

"Well, I was talking about it at work today; I asked a couple other people if they knew she'd passed—I wanted to do something, like, I don't know, a company memorial or something, and then Mr. Lau called me into his office and asked where I had heard that and asked who I'd been talking to about Denise and then he accused me of corporate espionage and—and —"

And fired her. I thought of Lau lying unconscious and bleeding on his floor at home. Too bad for Pilar I hadn't done that this morning.

"And I also wanted to tell you, before I left I ran the program thing your friend sent me," Pilar added, sniffing. I started to demand, *What program?*, but she ran right over me. "I wasn't sure I was going to—I mean, it seemed like kind of a shady thing to ask me to do, you know? But when they fired me I just figured, what the heck, right? What are they going to do, fire me again?"

By that point my brain had caught up with my mouth. "Uh—thanks," I said, the word coming out only a little too firmly.

Pilar hesitated. "You *did* send it to me, right? I didn't just unwittingly commit real corporate espionage against my former employer? Because I'm pretty sure they can arrest me for that—"

“You’re fine,” I said. It wasn’t a lie; Checker had broken me out of jail before in less than half a day, so if Pilar did get arrested we could get her out of it. “I’m going to call you back in five minutes.”

I hung up over her sputtering protests and dialed Checker.

“Why didn’t you tell me you sent her a program?” I ranted, before he’d finished answering. “That was you, right? Tell me it was you.”

“Hang on, slow down! I assume you’re talking about the lovely Miss Velasquez? Yes, that was I, and I *would* have told you if you had been speaking to me at the time. In fact, I distinctly remember leaving you a voicemail about it, which apparently you didn’t listen to—”

“What did you have her do? Are you getting anything useful?”

“Hold your horses! I had her run a script that Trojans me in behind their firewalls. And yes, it worked. I just need some time to—”

“We don’t *have* time on this! They have a little girl.” *Subject’s reaction to pain stimuli...*

“I was *going* to say I just need time to figure out their system. You know, Pilar might be really helpful, if she’s willing—she can give me the Cliff’s Notes on how all the departments are set up so I don’t have to keep on looking everything up; this company is absolutely Byzantine—”

“Done,” I said. “I’ll send her over to you.”

I hung up and dialed Pilar again. “Hi,” she said. “Is everything okay?”

“You just lost your job, right?” I said. “Do you want a few hours of work?”

“Uh...yes?” The word was a perfect blend of hope and skepticism.

“My friend who sent you the program wants some help figuring out the ins and outs of Arkacite. I’ll pay you cash. What’s your standard hourly rate?”

“Uh—I don’t know—I guess, well, I was making seventeen an hour at Arkacite—”

“Done,” I said. As far as I was concerned that was abysmally cheap; the woman was lucky she didn’t have that job anymore. “I’m going to text you an address. Go straight over; this is time-urgent.”

“I—uh—okay,” said Pilar. “Listen, I don’t mean to be rude or anything, and I really appreciate it, but, uh, this isn’t, like, illegal or anything, is it?”

“They kidnapped a little girl,” I reminded her. *Subject’s fear response...* “Does it matter?”

“Well—it does to me, a little. I don’t want to go to jail.”

“You *won’t*. Besides, running the script for us in the first place was probably way worse than giving us the lowdown on the company will be. If they want to jail you, they’ll jail you for that. Now will you help us or not?”

She made an unhappy squeak.

“You met Liliana. For God’s sake, her father just wants her back.” *Subject’s reactions to isolation from human contact.* “Jesus Christ, we’re not asking for a lot!”

“Okay,” said Pilar in a tiny voice.

“Good. I’m sending you the address now.” I hung up and forwarded her Miri’s apartment, making a mental note to tell Pilar that if anyone from the Mob found her and put a gun to her head, I would kill her myself if she told them anything.

On second thought, maybe she was right to be nervous about being associated with us.

CHAPTER 13

I'D BEEN too hasty, I realized.

Checker and Pilar would find out where Arkacite was holding Liliana, but I would still need a way in. Albert Lau might be able to help give me that.

I pulled a U-turn in the middle of the street, ignoring the horns that went off around me, and headed back to his condo. I parked the sedan illegally this time and pounded back up the stairs.

Lau was gone.

A dark stain on the carpeting showed where his head had been, but the flat was empty. He'd run. I stood staring for a few minutes, my thoughts scattered, wondering what I should do next.

He wouldn't be good at staying hidden, I felt sure. People used to being on the grid rarely were. He would use a credit card, or keep his cell phone, or feel the need to see his girlfriend. Or maybe he'd gone to the cops. Regardless, Checker would be able to find him eventually, if I asked him to, but I wasn't sure it would be worth it. Tracking him down would take time, time I could use to find a way into Arkacite without him.

I was a dumbass for letting him get away, though. I'd been too impulsive. Too emotional.

A worse thought struck me. What if Lau went back to Arkacite? What if he warned them I was coming for Liliana? What if they moved her somewhere we couldn't find, locked her away in a hole in the ground—or worse, cut their losses and destroyed the evidence? They had already

somehow erased the paper trail of her existence; would they consider murder to be going too far?

My stomach folded in on itself, and I leaned a forearm against the wall, feeling dizzy. I swallowed against a tight throat and fumbled my phone out of my pocket.

I'm coming over. Find me a way into Arkacite tonight. I don't care what it takes.

I sent the message to Checker and found my way back down to the car. The math still felt too sharp, angry and distracting, making it hard to see straight.

I drove to one of my storage units, where I exchanged my stolen ride for a clean one and packed the trunk full of any equipment I might need for the night. Then I headed to Miri's. It was late in the evening by the time I arrived, the sun low on the horizon.

I buzzed in at the gate, and Pilar met me at the door to the apartment. "Hi again," she said. She seemed to have calmed down, though her makeup was still slightly smeared.

"Hi," I tossed over my shoulder as I pushed past her. "Checker? Give me..."

I trailed off in the middle of demanding an update. The bright, cluttered apartment had been covered in printouts, as if someone had decided to play a practical joke by coating every object with paper.

"Hey," said Checker, lifting his head from a laptop. He gestured at the snowfall of paper. "We ran out of desktop space. Computer desktop space, I mean. I think I might owe Miri a new toner cartridge."

"Did you find a way in?" I asked. That was all I cared about. I'd brought in the reports from Lau's briefcase but couldn't force myself to look at them again; I added them to one of the stacks.

Checker and Pilar exchanged glances. "Well—"

"Tell me what's going on!" I slammed home the security bar on the door behind me, too hard, and Pilar jumped.

"Maybe you should sit down for this," said Checker.

"Checker, so help me God—"

"We found out where they're keeping her," he blurted out. "Or rather, Pilar did—" He looked for her again, but she had edged away from me to

hover in the kitchen doorway. “Cas, stop being scary for one second; this isn’t our fault! We’re on your side here!”

“Then tell me what you found!”

“They—they’ve got her in a lab!” He held my gaze, nervously, defiantly.

“I know that,” I said. “What lab?”

His jaw worked, and his expression would have been funny under other circumstances. “I—Zeus, we were so nervous about telling you, what with your thing about kids—”

“*Which lab?*”

“Rightly so, I guess,” he muttered to himself. “Pilar’s the one who deserves the credit, so stop making her think you’re going to eat her. She’s a real-life Super Temp—get out of the way, Donna Noble—and, uh, anyway, we found it; it’s in a sub-basement. There’s no other reason they’d be sending kids’ toys there.”

“Show me.” I strode across the room to look over his shoulder, stepping between the piles of paper.

He hit a couple of keys and the screen changed to a floor plan of Arkacite. The place was bigger than I’d thought when I’d visited. Instead of being the one large building I’d assumed, it was a cluster of several connected ones housing floor after floor of offices and labs.

“How good is their security?” I might have managed to hop their perimeter for the offices, but turnstiles and metal detectors on the public-facing side were already a few orders of magnitude more paranoid than Swainson. The security they’d have on the labs... “Can you disable it?”

“I think—hang on.” Checker’s phone had gone off with a tinny blast of lyrics about a monkey; he fished it out. “Hi, are you here? Yup, the code is one-zero-eight-five. And it’s apartment one-oh-nine.”

“Who’s that?”

“Arthur. I called him; is that okay? I know this is your case, but I figured we could use the extra set of eyes—”

I didn’t care. I’d put his fee on Warren’s tab. “Yeah, fine.”

“And I figured if you went berserk on us about them abusing a kid, Arthur could use his ninja calming skills to dog-whisperer you,” he added hastily as a knock sounded.

I went over and dragged the door open to reveal a tall, handsome black man in a leather jacket. “I’m going in tonight,” I said, before Arthur had a chance to greet me. “If you want to help, great. I’ll charge it to the client.”

“Uh—okay,” he said. “I ain’t caught up. This have to do with the plutonium thing?”

“No. Another case. Pilar will fill you in. Do it fast,” I ordered her.

Pilar still hovered in the doorway to the kitchen. Arthur offered her a hand. “Arthur Tresting. Nice to meet you, Pilar.” I’d said her name more like “puh lar,” but he pronounced it with a crisp lilt.

“Not the time for pleasantries,” I snapped, as I went back over to Checker and his laptop. “Get to work or get out.”

“*No es tan antipática como parece,*” Arthur said to Pilar, with a sideways glance at me. “*Te lo prometo.*”

He was definitely mocking me. Ass. “Fuck you,” I said. “I assume.”

Arthur grinned.

“Uh, I only speak LA Spanish, anyway,” Pilar said. “I can order a taco; that’s about it. Pilar was my grandmother’s name.”

“Oh! Sorry. Rude of me,” said Arthur. “Got somewhere here we can step away so you can bring me up to speed before Cas takes our heads off?”

They moved off down the hallway. Checker reached up and plucked at my sleeve. “Hey. For real. You okay?”

“No.” Arthur’s brief moment of levity hadn’t done anything to dull the crush of sick anger that had been strangling me since Lau’s. “So let’s figure out a way to get her out of there. Talk to me about security.”

He looked like he wanted to say more, but he hit a key on the laptop to zoom in instead. “This is the lab here—as far as we can tell, at least. The security’s mostly electronic, which I can help you with—though not as much as I’d like—but they’ve also got human security guards doing sweeps.”

“Armed?”

“Tasers and walkies.”

“Child’s play,” I scoffed.

“Maybe.” He didn’t sound as optimistic as I wanted. “Their security system is good. On this short notice, you have two choices. I can cut it

entirely, but someone would notice within seconds.”

“Not the best plan,” I said.

“No. The other option is that I can take out pieces of it for you, but it’ll take longer. Every time you need to move through a new area it’ll be a few seconds’ delay for me to loop the cameras and get you through the doors. I’ve been trying to work out better estimates of exactly how long, but the point is, I’ll have to do everything manually.”

“Then do that.”

“You’ll be a sitting duck. And the guards—there are a lot of them, and they do regular sweeps and check in all the time—”

“I can hide from guards and cameras,” I said. Four-dimensional vector analysis, not a problem. “That’s not hard. And I can get through doors myself if you’re too slow for me.”

“You bust down a door, security will be on you in seconds. I’m telling you, on the lower levels they have things wrapped up tighter than an airport. And don’t forget, oh All-Powerful One, you’re going to have a kid with you on the way out, and she might not be—” He shut his mouth.

“She might be hurt,” I finished.

“Yeah. One thing that might help on the way back, though—being the ridiculously rich corporate headquarters these are, they do have a helipad on the roof you can get to through the executive elevators. I’ve got time estimates for access there, too—”

“I can’t fly one.” Flying was just math, of course, but it helped to know all the variables first, and I didn’t have time to learn them. I wasn’t about to risk Liliana’s safety by experimenting live.

“Wait, you can’t?” Checker’s mouth quirked. “And here I thought you could do anyth—”

“I assume you have a list of their security protocols?” I wasn’t in the mood for chitchat.

“Right, right. Uh, on the ottoman, I think.”

I picked up the printouts and sat down where they’d been to start leafing through them, memorizing and extrapolating. “Give me a floor plan, too. And those time estimates for getting through doors.”

By the time Arthur and Pilar came back, the lines of sight for the security cameras, the timing of the guards, the doors, the route through the

complex, Checker's estimates—factoring in a child on the way out—they all fell into equations in my head, expanding to matrices and reducing...

...to rows of all zeroes.

"Dammit!" I growled.

Arthur crouched down next to me. "What can I do?"

"We need another edge," I said. "I can avoid all the security to a point, but the problem's always reducing to no solution eventually. Somebody'll catch me somewhere along the way. I need a faster way through the complex."

"Do you know what you're doing about the front desk guard?" Pilar asked.

We all turned to look at her, and she twitched a little.

"Go ahead," said Arthur, in a tone that could calm a skittish rhinoceros.

"Um, after-hours the security guard at the desk checks everyone's employee IDs manually, before they go swipe in," she said nervously.

"Really?" Checker tapped furiously at the laptop for a moment. "It's not in the security guidelines..."

She scrunched her shoulders. "I don't know what to tell you. But they do it."

"So I'll go in another way," I said.

"You think that's possible?" said Checker. "You're welcome to do your supernatural mathy thing and check it out, but their guard coverage—"

By then I'd already run the numbers. "No. You're right. Breaking in's a no-go. It's got to be the front." I took out my phone and snapped my fingers at Pilar. "You. Did they take your ID card?"

Her eyes got wide. "Oh! Uh, Mr. Lau told me to give it to him, but then I started crying and ran out of the office—" She hurried over to her purse and dug through it, pulling out handfuls of pens and makeup paraphernalia and other odds and ends. "Here!"

The card was a photo ID, with a terrible blue-tinted close-up of Pilar's face that made her look like an angry prison inmate. Instead of a magnetic stripe, under her name and employee ID number shone the tiny gold contact pad for an embedded circuit. I'd already dialed Tegan while she thrust it at me; I listened to the rings follow each other with agonizing slowness.

“You calling Ari Tegan?” asked Arthur.

“Yeah,” I said.

Checker took the card from me. “It’s an integrated circuit. You think even Tegan can do this by tonight?”

“Tegan can do anything,” I said. “He’s gotten me a lot more in a lot less time than this.”

“Didn’t hear that,” muttered Arthur.

The ringing went to voicemail.

I felt a deep worm of apprehension. The Mob guys had used Tegan’s name to get their meeting, and now I wasn’t able to reach him. Mama Lorenzo wouldn’t have approved taking action against him—not only was it not her style, but Tegan stayed strictly neutral in all disputes, was very well-liked, and was considered off-limits as a target by pretty much everyone—but my three less-than-intelligent friends from Grealy’s might have struck out on their own. They’d shot at the bar with Cheryl still in it, after all, and she was as well-regarded as Tegan was.

I hung up the phone and bit my lip. “He’s not answering.”

“Is this a guy who, like, makes fake IDs?” ventured Pilar.

I shot her a withering look—Tegan was an *artist*, not a college kid with a laminator—but Arthur answered her. “Among other things. He’s a documents man.”

“What about you?” Pilar asked Checker. “Aren’t you all computer-y? Could you make her one?”

Checker coughed. “What? Um, no. I’m a hacker, not a forger.” He cocked his head to the side. “Although—I can almost definitely get the chip inside the ID better clearance than it has. You probably only had access to less-restricted office areas, right?”

“I guess so,” said Pilar. “I never tried going anywhere else.”

Checker’s fingers tap-danced across his keyboard. “Yup, I’ve got your employee ID number here. Actually, they’ve already deactivated you. But I can not only un-deactivate you if I want to, I can give you better security clearance than the CEO. How’s that for getting fired?”

“I’d rather have a job,” admitted Pilar.

I turned my phone over in my hand. Tegan still hadn't returned the message I'd left a full day ago, and that was unheard of for him. I couldn't wait and hope he'd appear; I'd need to find a new forger for tonight.

I hated working with people I didn't know. Tegan was going to hear it from me for not picking up his phone.

Assuming he was all right. Fuck.

Focus. Child in trouble. "Any suggestions for a different ID guy?" I asked Arthur and Checker.

"Just use hers," said Arthur. He'd plucked the card from Checker and was holding it up to the light. He tossed it to me. "You'll pass."

"It's a photo ID," I pointed out, in the voice I reserved for explaining things to particularly dull people. "We look nothing alike." Our bone structures and skin tones were entirely different, not to mention that Pilar was cute and curvy with long hair and an infectious smile, and I was built short and thick, more like a very angry tomboy gymnast.

"Trust me, ain't no one looks twice at photo IDs," Arthur brushed me off. "People ain't even look like their own photos. You ain't white and you're the right gender, and it's a bad picture of her anyhow."

Checker moved next to me to peer at the ID in my hand. "You know, speaking as a white guy—if you straighten your hair, he could be right. If people question it, you can just tell them you cut your hair and lost some weight."

"Hey!" said Pilar.

"Wait, what—no!" cried Checker, aghast. "I definitely didn't mean that as a—you're very—"

"Shut up, you two," I said.

An ID to aid my way through would make the rest of my route faster as well, by a significant margin. I put in the new timing values and ran the numbers again. Nonsingular matrices reduced beautifully, the solutions played out with a healthy margin of error, and the whole endeavor became suddenly doable.

I thought about Liliana, locked in a lab. Alone.

In pain.

If someone called me on the ID, I'd just put his face through a wall. He'd deserve it for working there.

“Fine,” I said to Arthur. “I’ll use it, but if I get caught, it’s your fault.”

“I got every faith in the world’s unconscious racism,” he answered with confidence. “All brown people look alike. You might want to dress different, though.”

I looked down at my usual ensemble of cargo pants and combat boots. “Good point.” I jabbed a finger at Pilar. “You have clothes that would work, don’t you?”

“What? Um, sure. I mean, they’ll be too big, but I think you’ll pass.”

“Good, that’s settled. You, come with me. Checker, be prepared for—” I did some more math in my head, charting guard shifts throughout the night. “1:24 a.m. That’s when I’m going in.”

“Can I help at all?” said Arthur.

“Yeah,” I said. “I need you to check on Tegan for me.”

Arthur’s face tightened in a troubled frown. “Think there’s a reason he ain’t answering?”

“Maybe,” I said. “I don’t know. Just check in on him. I’ll pay your rate.”

He grunted. “Russell, I told you—you gotta stop trying to pay me for every little—”

“Argue with me later,” I said. “Checker, are you good?”

“I think so,” he said. “I’ll grab a quick nap and be in your ear by midnight; we can go over your route right before. Does that work for you?”

“Perfect,” I said. “Let’s go rescue a kid.”

CHAPTER 14

WHEN MIDNIGHT struck, I was shifting uncomfortably in the driver's seat as I sped back down toward Venice. Pilar had turned out to be an unexpected help—she'd not only provided me with clothes, but she'd given me a corporate makeup job and straightened my hair for me, after which she'd declared my usual sawed-off haircut “atrocious” and gone to work with scissors until the newly-flat hair lay in even layers above my ears.

Of course, she'd also declared her only pantsuits looked “horrifying” on me, and insisted on taking in a skirt to make it fit. We'd had a vehement argument on practicality versus aesthetics, which she had won by virtue of it being too late to stop by a store and me not having any idea how bad it would be to present myself in a clearly ill-fitting wardrobe. Her dress shoes were also all too tight and almost exclusively tall heels, which I flat-out refused to agree to, but she finally found a pair of worn almost-flats in the back of her closet that my feet managed to squeeze into and which she dubiously declared would “do.”

On the plus side, the oversized clothing had allowed me to conceal a small arsenal under the suit jacket.

Checker rang in exactly at the stroke of twelve. “Hi there,” he said in my ear—the tiny, flesh-colored earpiece wouldn't be visible to the casual observer. “Get some sleep?”

“I was too busy arguing with Pilar about fashion and memorizing the floor plan,” I said.

“Fashion? What, did she put you in an evening gown?”

“Skirt and heels,” I answered.

He choked back a laugh. “I want a picture.”

“Shut up.”

“Well, I didn’t sleep either, if that makes you feel any better. Too hyped. I’m wired on coffee and Red Bull right now.”

“If you get me killed because you need a bathroom break, I will come back and haunt your hard drives.”

“Ouch. Uh, hey, I did find something interesting while I was going over everything. I didn’t want to call with it right away, because I didn’t know if you’d decided to grab a nap...”

“Spit it out.”

“Arkacite’s got some atomic batteries.”

“What? The plutonium ones?” I hadn’t thought about the plutonium job at all since I’d found out what Arkacite was doing to Liliana. I dragged my mind back around to it with an effort.

“Yup. A dozen of ’em. They’re being stored in one of the labs.”

“You’re kidding. What for?”

“Well, Arkacite’s got their fingers in everything electronic—heck, they probably *do* make pacemakers and space probes. If anyone’s got ’em, it’s not that big of a surprise it would be Arkacite.”

Hmm. I hadn’t heard back from Harrington yet, and I didn’t usually work on spec, but places to steal plutonium from weren’t exactly thick on the ground. If it wouldn’t delay me too much...

“Tell me where.”

“I figured you’d say that.”

He named another sub-basement lab across the building from Liliana. Grateful I’d memorized the entire floor plan and guard rotation, I sent the equations ticking and clattering through my brain with the new variables. The batteries would have to be first, as Liliana’s condition and stamina were unknowns that needed a maximum error margin...and I might have to adjust the start time...the possibilities brute-forced their way through, and a pleasantly constraint-satisfying string of numbers fell out. Excellent. I could pick up the batteries and still zigzag through the guard rotation, still get Liliana out from under their noses without a single eyewitness or a flash of

our faces on the security cameras. As long as Checker stayed in my ear and helped hide us.

“I’m adding it in,” I said. “Optimum time of entry is now 1:20.”

“Remember to act tired when you go in,” said Checker. “World-weary. You don’t want to be coming in that late, but your dick of a boss is making you burn the midnight oil just to meet a project deadline. Don’t march in there like you own the place; people don’t do that in real life.”

“Like you know anything about working in an office,” I scoffed.

“Oh, I did my time as a cubicle monkey,” said Checker, surprising me. “I have a dark and dangerous past, Cas Russell. Mwa-ha-ha.”

“Well, I’m glad Arthur saved you from such a terrible life.”

By this time, I was pulling up around the block from Arkacite. I waited in the car as the hour ticked later, using the time to go over the details of my revised route with Checker, and at twelve minutes after one I restarted the car and nosed it closer. I cruised past the dark stone plaza and cut down an alley one building away from Arkacite’s headquarters, which curved into a small but well-groomed parking lot that served the back entrances of several smaller businesses. My pre-planned parking spot was at the far end behind an independent hairdresser’s shop, just across a strip of grass from Arkacite’s looming walls.

I checked that the concealed utility belt around my waist had everything I might need—ceramic knives, plastic and liquid explosives, Tech line, a few other things that wouldn’t set off the metal detectors—double-checked that Pilar’s ID card was clipped to my lapel, and got out of the car, wincing at my pinched feet. Then, with a grimace, I ducked back in to retrieve the purse Pilar had insisted I bring (“No woman would come in without a purse; it’s downright weird”).

At least the purse had been a good place to stash a few things that might’ve set off the metal detector—like detonators. I just hoped nobody manning the x-ray machine would know what they were. I shifted the thing from one shoulder to the other, then to my elbow, trying to figure out where it would balance in a way that wouldn’t interfere with a leap into action, and settled for dangling it in my left hand, where I could drop it.

I straightened up, did a mental check of my gear one more time, and then walked around to the front of the building.

“Remember, your name is Pilar Velasquez,” Checker reminded me, speaking a little too fast. “If they ask why you’re there, I’ll give you a line. If they engage you in small talk, just say ‘yes’ or something. Less is better.”

“This isn’t my first rodeo,” I said.

“Yes, and you’re *horrible* undercover. You always end up punching people instead.”

He wasn’t wrong.

At exactly 1:20 a.m., I pushed open the glass front door of Arkacite and stepped inside. It felt different at night. The vast, shiny lobby loomed cavernous, like I was entering a crypt. I walked up to the front desk with Pilar’s ID already in hand and held it out to the front desk guard, a light-skinned African-American woman.

She barely glanced at me as she took it.

I thought nervously about Arthur’s “unconscious racism” comment. Would a black woman be more astute? She stuck the ID into a scanner, typed something on the computer, and then raised the card back up toward me without ever looking back up.

Somehow I didn’t think this was unconscious racism. More like extreme boredom.

I took the ID back and walked over to swipe through the turnstiles, heading for the metal detectors. A security guard stood here, too, just like in the morning—an older, grizzled South Asian man. I curled the ID card in my hand, the picture against my palm. He wouldn’t want to look at it, would he?

“Purse on the conveyor,” he said in a disinterested monotone as I walked up.

Oh. Right. The purse. I stepped over and stuck it on the x-ray machine’s conveyor belt, then stepped through the metal detector.

It went off, the repeated high-pitched beeps echoing through the lobby like gunfire.

I whirled and froze, the mathematics crystallizing, but neither of the security guards had moved. The one at the desk hadn’t even looked up.

“Any keys, coins, or phones in your pockets?” said the security guard next to me, with the same bored disinterest. He held out a tray.

Adrenaline coursing through me, I slowly took my phone out of my pocket and put it on the tray. I'd forgotten about it.

"Walk through and back again," prompted the guard when I hadn't moved.

I did as he said. The lobby remained silent.

The guard held out the tray with my phone and I took it back. I felt as if my hand should be shaking, but it was steady. I almost forgot to pick up the purse from the other side of the conveyor belt as I stalked off toward the elevators.

Checker laughed in my ear. "Holy *Christ*, you suck at undercover!"

"Shut up," I muttered.

"Don't worry, I'm erasing the footage now. No one will ever bear witness to the great Cas Russell forgetting about a cell phone. Except me, of course."

I ignored him. I was sixteen seconds behind schedule.

I took the elevator up to the second floor.

"Hold on," said Checker.

I stopped, one hand against the elevator doors to keep them open.

"I'm looping the security cams just ahead of you...you're good to go."

I swiped out of the elevator banks into a darkened hallway filled with locked doors. The floors here were linoleum instead of carpeted, and Pilar's shoes clacked against them, echoing off the dimly lit walls. I'd forgotten to take the sound of her shoes into consideration in my calculations—they wouldn't matter now, but later, in the more restricted areas, when I couldn't afford to be seen or heard...

I kicked them off, stuck them in the purse, and continued barefoot down the hallway, loping quickly to make up the time.

I ghosted through the maze of corridors, Pilar's expanded access card letting me through all the internal doors between sections, the guards always just missing my presence by a hallway or three. Checker halted me every so often to hex the cameras ahead of me, but I still managed to make up enough time that I reached the first lab exactly on schedule.

Pilar's access card lit up green here, too, but the light on a keypad nestled next to the door remained red, and the door didn't open. "Checker? I

need an access code.”

“One second.”

It was more like nine seconds before he came back with, “Five-six-oh-nine-seven-five-star,” and I slipped into the lab just before the next security guard rounded the corner.

The door behind me was thick and solid, leaving the room pitch black, but I’d put a few LED flashlights in Pilar’s purse on the theory that they weren’t suspicious and might have set off the metal detector if I’d stuck them in the utility belt. I pulled one out now and shined it around the room. Edges and corners of strange equipment leapt to life in the beam like grotesque abstract metal sculptures.

“Any idea where I should look?” I asked Checker.

“None, sorry. Somewhere locked up, I would imagine.”

I’d had the same thought. I found my way to the walls and slipped along the edges of the room until I found a bank of four solid metal drawers that looked more like vaults for a bank than depositories for lab equipment.

“I think I’m on the money,” I said. “If I start breaking things in here, is it going to set off an alarm?”

Checker paused, then came back with, “Not anymore.”

I inspected the drawers. They had key locks rather than combinations, probably with disc tumblers at this level of security. I could still pick them, but a proper application of force would be easier and faster.

I put the flashlight between my teeth and drew out a small bottle of acid, which I poured in a thin stream just around the top of each drawer. As soon as it hit the metal it began hissing and smoking. I coughed around the flashlight as the acrid stench hit.

Then I packed in the tiniest chunks of C-4 into the cracks, calculating decibel levels as I did so, stuck det cord in between, and pressed a detonator in above the top drawer. The detonators I’d brought were small, but the wires were still long enough to let me move all the way across the room and crouch behind a solid lab bench. I checked my watch, and the second I had the largest possible radius from any of the security guards, I pushed the button.

The bang and crash were loud and startling in the quiet lab.

Checker yelped. “A little warning! Everything okay?”

“Did anyone react to that?” They would’ve needed supernatural hearing from where the guard rotation had been, but it was always best to double check.

“Uh—no, no, you’re good, none of the security people seem to have heard it.”

I’d crossed back to the drawers during the exchange with Checker, stowing the detonator and donning a heavy pair of protective gloves. The doors of several of the drawers had fallen to the floor. One still hung crazily by its right side, the metal bent backward on itself. I stuck the flashlight back between my teeth again and reached inside.

Two of the drawers were empty. The other two were heavily padded with some kind of dense foam, and nestled into each one at intervals were six cutouts for six tiny flat rectangles in small plastic cases. At least, one of them had six—the other had five, with one cutout indentation in the foam empty.

I wondered briefly if the batteries were fragile. See, this was another reason I didn’t work on spec—usually the client could tell me if something needed to be transported in a certain way. Well, presumably if I damaged them, the plutonium inside would still be good. I scooped out all eleven in their plastic cases and slid them into the empty pouches in my belt. I wasn’t worried about radiation; alpha particles couldn’t make it through a sheet of paper.

I took the flashlight out of my mouth and moved back to the door. “Is the hallway clear?”

“Yes. But two of the guards have stopped to chat down the way you’re going.”

“Roger that. Tell me when they move.” Shit. This might mess up my timing.

When Checker gave me the all-clear, I slipped back out the door—the air in the hallway felt blessedly cool and clear after the astringent fumes I’d clogged the lab with—and continued on. I was twenty-three seconds behind schedule, which meant I’d have to delay again coming up to avoid the next guard circuit, and I’d lose another fourteen or fifteen seconds. But these areas were too restricted to risk letting them see me before I got to Liliana, even with an ID they might buy.

My schedule backed up on itself twice more when I had to wait to make it past guard routes. I tried to make up the time, but I reached the lab where they'd locked Liliana almost fifty-four seconds behind. This lab had a keypad as well; I slid in Pilar's ID and entered the code Checker passed me. Both lights flashed green, and I pushed the door open.

I found myself in a large area filled with cubicles and computers, like an office space. But the wall across from where I'd entered was made up entirely of large panes of glass, with five cameras set up tripods in front of it, all recording video. Behind the glass was a well-lit playroom, colorful children's toys scattered across the floor.

And in the corner of the playroom hunched a girl.

She looked a lot like Denise Rayal. Her skin and hair could have been a perfect match for her mother's; her father's genetics weren't evident anywhere. She wore a sky blue party dress that was so frilly it edged toward absurd and black patent leather shoes, with a matching ribbon twined in her dark brown hair. It struck me as an outfit someone might imagine a five-year-old girl as wearing—I wasn't sure I had ever seen an actual five-year-old girl dressed that way. But then, I didn't know much about children.

Liliana had her knees drawn up in front of her and her head buried in her arms, the ringlets Pilar had been so jealous of tumbling over her knees. Her shoulders shook ever so slightly. Other than her and the scattered toys, the playroom was empty—no bed, no clothes, not even a door to a toilet.

I closed the distance to the glass wall without being conscious of it, a small polymer pry bar clenched in my hands. One of the large panes was a glass door; I wedged the pry bar into its metal frame next to the lock and threw my whole weight against it. The door burst open with a crack and a screech.

Liliana's head jerked up, and she quailed away from me, her brown eyes wide and wet with tears.

I forcibly curtailed my angry dash, stumbling to a stop and putting away the pry bar to raise my hands ever so slightly. "I'm not going to hurt you," I said, my voice scratching as I tried to squeeze the rage out of it. I wasn't sure I succeeded. "I'm here to take you home. Okay? Your dad sent me."

"I want my dad," she said.

Something about her voice sounded odd, but I couldn't pinpoint it. I stepped carefully closer until I was in front of her and reached out a hand.

“Can you get up? Are you okay?”

She grasped my hand and pulled herself upright, unfolding from the floor with symmetric grace. Her fingers were cool and even on mine.

Too cool. Too even.

“Jesus Christ.” I snatched my hand back from her and recoiled away.

“*What are you?*”

Liliana started to cry.

CHAPTER 15

HER HICCUPPING sobs struck me as wrong the same way her voice had, and I realized why now: the sounds were even, patterned, a layering of too few repeated sinusoids.

Not organic. Not human.

Jesus Christ.

And yet...I was standing in front of a crying child. As much as half my senses were telling me *this wasn't real*, the other half were screaming that I was seeing a terrified little girl in trouble who was locked in a laboratory sobbing her heart out.

I don't like it when people lock little girls in laboratories. Even fake little girls.

I squatted down so I was at eye level with her. I left my hands on my knees; the thought of touching her again unnerved me. "Hey, kid." I made my voice as even and unthreatening as I could. "Hey. Can we try that again?"

She raised her tear-streaked face to mine. Her bone structure was completely symmetrical. It meant she was an adorable girl, and also freaked me the hell out. I swallowed.

"My name is Cas," I said.

"Hi, Cas," she said. "My name is Liliana."

I pushed aside the uncanny mathematics and concentrated on the child. "I know. I work for your dad. He sent me to find you."

“I want my dad,” she said again.

The cadence was exactly the same as when she’d said it before. My breath caught. “I, uh, I bet you do. We can go and find him together. Do you want to do that?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t we go do that, then?” I stood back up, forcing myself to hold out a hand.

She didn’t move. “You said ‘what are you.’” Her eyes were wide and fearful, her voice reedy and plaintive and *not real*. “What does that mean?”

What, indeed? Noah Warren had a lot of questions to answer. My brain flipped through all the possible responses I could give to a question like that, and in the end, I couldn’t get away from the fact that I had a five-year-old child giving me moon eyes. “It’s just, uh, you’re a little different,” I floundered. “Special. Has your dad told you that?”

“Yes,” she said.

“I was surprised, that’s all. Hey, why don’t we go find your dad now?”

“Okay.” She reached out for my hand. I succeeded in not flinching.

I led her through the glass door and out of the playroom. My eyes kept tracking back to watch her movement with the same fascination most people reserved for train wrecks and car crashes.

“Cas?” ventured Checker over the earpiece. “Is everything all right? What’s going on?”

“Later,” I said. I detached my hand from Liliana’s and started pulling the memory cards from the cameras in front of the glass.

Liliana trailed after me, looking bereft. “No, I want to find him now. Please. I want my dad.”

It took me a moment to follow what she meant. “Uh—we are. I promise. I was, I was talking to a friend of mine. It’s an earpiece.” I waved at my ear as I yanked the last card from the portable cameras. “Checker, are there building security cams in here?”

“Not that I can see. It’s a black hole from my end.”

“Good.” I forced myself to take Liliana’s hand again and moved to the door, looking at my watch. I’d scheduled in some extra time here, but I was still almost two and a half minutes behind. “Are we clear outside the door?”

“Almost...now you are.”

The guards’ circuits were still right on schedule, then, at least to within a few seconds. I ran our route through my head on the revised timetable. Best if we waited here for another sixty-five seconds.

“Liliana,” I said thoughtfully. “How fast can you run?”

“Pretty fast,” she said.

I crouched and took her by the shoulders. “This is very important. How fast *exactly*?”

She hesitated. “Four point two three meters per second.”

“Good girl,” I said, even as something in me shivered. “Take off your shoes.”

She obediently undid the patent leather straps; I slipped the shoes into my purse along with my own.

“When we go out this door, I need you to stay right next to me, okay? Don’t say anything, make as little noise as you can, and run right next to me. This is very important. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she said. “I understand.”

I had to take her word for it. If she didn’t comprehend me, telling her again wouldn’t make a difference, I had a feeling. “Okay. Ready?”

“I’m ready,” she said.

“Checker. Have you zapped the cameras in the hallways ahead of us yet?”

“All set.”

I took a deep breath, counted down, and opened the door.

We ran. The dash was a halting one, stopping and starting for the guard timing and to wait for Checker, but we made good time, and within minutes we crouched against the wall of the westernmost building in the complex. On the other side of that wall was my car, less than forty feet away.

I pulled out my shoes to squeeze back into them, and gave Liliana hers as well. I watched her sit and buckle them. She wasn’t out of breath, despite the running.

“There’s going to be a bang,” I whispered to her. “I need you not to make any sound when it happens. After the bang there will be a hole in this wall. There’s a car parked ten point eight meters away outside, a black

sedan. We're going to run through the hole and get into the car. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

I took out some C-4 again, placed it carefully, and then herded Liliana behind a metal desk across the room. "Remember," I whispered. "Don't make any noise. Just run when I run. Now cover your ears."

I didn't know if the directive was necessary, but it couldn't hurt. She squeezed her hands over her ears, ducked her head, and closed her eyes.

I pushed the detonator.

The explosion was much bigger this time, thundering through the room, vibrating through my skull. People would hear it, but that was all right.

I grabbed Liliana's hand and we plunged toward the wall. The cloud of dust made it almost impossible to see, but I knew where we were going, and we stumbled forward, tripping on chunks of debris. My eyes watered and I pressed the sleeve of my other arm against my nose and mouth, trying to breathe. The distant ringing deep inside my ears made all of my senses feel muffled.

Liliana lost her balance and almost fell; I pulled her back up.

We lurched out onto the grass on the other side, into the dark, quiet shadow of the building and the cool night air. It wouldn't be quiet for long. I tugged on Liliana's hand and we broke for the car at exactly four point two three meters per second.

"Get in," I barked at her as we hit the passenger side. She obediently opened the door and climbed in. I leapt and slid across the hood on the fabric of Pilar's skirt to land on the asphalt on the other side; I made it into the driver's side so fast that I slammed the door at the same time Liliana closed hers. Before the dust had started settling from the explosion, we peeled out, back to the street, and away.

I drove at exactly three miles per hour above the speed limit on a circuitous route back toward the freeway.

"Checker," I said.

"I'm here. Everything okay? You made it, right? They're crawling like an anthill."

"Yeah, we're good. Do you have access to Arkacite's research data?"

“Sure, absolutely—by which I mean I *could*; I have to break into those areas in particular, but I can. Up till now I’ve only been focusing on what we needed for tonight. Do you want—I assume there’s something I should be looking for?”

“Just get all of it,” I said.

“Okay. Uh—what you said in there—what’s going on?”

I cut my eyes sideways at Liliana. She sat in the passenger seat, legs dangling, her hands folded in her lap. She’d buckled her seatbelt. “I’m headed to you—I’ll explain everything when I get there. I’m hanging up now; I have to call Noah Warren.”

Warren didn’t pick up—*again*—I strongly suspected he was dodging my calls because I’d started mentioning he owed me money. I left a terse voicemail message telling him we had Liliana, giving him Miri’s address, and instructing him to leave his cell phone behind and make sure he wasn’t followed. We might have to consider the apartment burned anyway and go set up elsewhere after tonight, despite any upgraded security—I’d do a risk assessment later—but right now I was going to need Checker’s eyes on this.

Liliana was perfectly quiet the whole way back to Miri’s. I found parking down the block from the apartment complex and got out into the silence of a three o’clock in the morning street. When I walked around and opened Liliana’s door, she undid her seatbelt and climbed down next to me without prompting.

“Hey, are you okay?” I asked her belatedly.

“I’m okay,” she said. “Is my dad here?”

“He will be,” I assured her. “Come on.” I took her hand again—it was becoming easier—and we walked down the block together, buzzed in at Miri’s apartment building, and picked our way across the dark courtyard. I tried to stop looking down at her as we walked, but my eyes kept creeping back.

Checker was waiting at the door; I’d barely raised a hand to knock when he pulled it open. Behind him the apartment had been cleaned up somewhat, with the Arkacite printouts in stacks to one side and the rest of the flat as cluttered as when I’d first seen it.

“Here she is,” I said, ushering Liliana through the door ahead of me. The sentence felt inane, but I had no idea how to say the important part.

“Liliana, this is Checker.”

“Hi, Checker,” she said, sticking out a hand. “My name is Liliana.”

He grinned at her seriousness. “Hi, Liliana. Nice to meet you.”

The white cat bounded up and paused, its nose testing the air near Liliana’s ankles. Whatever it smelled, it decided it didn’t care. It butted up against her and then dashed a few feet away and looked back, begging to play.

“Kitty!” she cried, running to pet it. The brown tabby lurked, zipping back and forth with its attention on the girl—or whatever she was—like it was thinking about pouncing on her. I wondered what they smelled.

I moved past her, crossing the room to sit down on the couch while I tried to decide what to do. The tabby apparently gave up its suspicions and deigned to take part in the attention, demanding to have its ears scratched. Liliana cooed.

“Noah Warren’s here,” said Checker, joining me and holding up a tablet. Right, the security cams. Checker’s eyes followed mine to Liliana. “Cute kid, isn’t she?”

“No. She isn’t.” Now that we’d safely escaped, I couldn’t stop watching her. Her fine motor control was off, but consistently off, like a screw needed to be tightened.

Checker smacked me in the arm. “What are you talking about? She’s adorable! Cas Russell, you have no heart.”

Wow, this was a conversation one didn’t have every day. “No, I don’t mean she isn’t cute. She isn’t a kid.”

“Oh-kay.” I could almost hear him trying to process that. “Then what is she?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re scaring me a little.”

“She...” I scrubbed a hand through the air in front of me, as if I could clear my vision of the errant mathematics. “She’s all wrong.”

“Hey. Hey.” Checker’s hand was on my shoulder; he tugged insistently until I turned to face him. “What’s going on?”

A thudding knock came at Miri’s door, and a muffled voice called, “You got her? Is Liliana there?”

Noah Warren. Who had a hell of a lot of questions to answer. I marched over and dragged the door open; Warren pushed through with eyes only for his daughter and tried to run straight to her.

I stopped him with a hand to his chest. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?” he said distractedly.

“Daddy!” Liliana cried, and ran up to wrap her arms around his legs. Noah Warren crouched and enfolded her in an embrace so tight and close I thought he would never let her go, and gazed up at us with an expression that challenged us to judge him.

“Your daughter’s a robot,” I said.

CHAPTER 16

WE SAT around Miri's table, Warren and Checker and I. Warren had settled Liliana down in the corner playing with the cats again. By all appearances they continued to delight her.

"Are you serious? She's a robot?" Checker demanded of me, completely ignoring Warren. "This is—I can't—that's amazing. She passes the Turing test, at least to a certain point. The natural language processing—"

"Don't call her that." Warren had gone as stiff as he had back in the coffee shop when he'd hired me. He stared straight ahead as he spoke, not looking at either of us.

"Call her what?" said Checker.

"That word. Please."

"What, 'robot'?" I said. "Jesus, it's not a value judgment."

"You tell me that once you see her cry," said Warren.

"This is why Arkacite wants her," Checker said slowly. "Your wife—she invented her, didn't she? She's—she's your wife's work product; that's why you're suing them."

Warren lowered his head in something that might have been a nod.

An avaricious smile was growing on Checker's face, and his gaze strayed over to Liliana as if he wanted to go over and start running tests on her at that very moment. "This is *so cool*."

"Look," I said. "I don't care if your daughter's a—I don't care what she is. But I don't like it when people lie to me."

A muscle in Warren's face twitched. "Would you have helped me if I'd told you?" When I didn't answer, he continued, "She's my daughter. It shouldn't mean anything. And she—she shouldn't have to deal with people seeing her as—how would you feel, if it was you?"

"She can feel?" asked Checker with interest. "I know you said she can cry, but being able to shed tears is different from being able to feel for real. How do you even measure something like that?"

"Stop," said Warren. "Please."

I took pity on him. Liliana was still his kid, even if she...wasn't. "Can it," I said to Checker. "Warren, like I said, I don't care. I've gotten back a lot worse for people who lied to me a lot more, okay? Just don't do it again."

He nodded.

"As long as I get my fee, I'm good," I said. "I don't judge." Considering how often I worked for arms dealers and gangsters, stomping on a sad man with a slightly delusional parent-child relationship didn't seem worth it. "Speaking of which, we need to talk payment. And we have to figure out where you're going to go from here. Legally, Liliana belongs to Arkacite, so from where I'm sitting, it looks like you two have to run somewhere they can't find you."

Warren raised his head to fasten his expression on mine, the first sign of animation he'd shown in our little conference. "Can you help us do that?"

"Well, yeah, as long as you can pay me."

"I—okay. I—I'll find a way."

Great. I wasn't exactly surprised by the response after learning about his eviction, but I hated complications. "I hope you understand I'll have to keep custody of Liliana until you can. She's really the only thing of any value you've got."

He took a breath. "You'll take good care of her?"

"Sure," I said. Checker's eager eyes had strayed over to her again; I reached under the table and smacked him. "She doesn't need to eat or, well, anything else, does she? Is there anything I should know about her?"

"She has a special drink, but she only needs some every few months. But—take good care of her, and play with her, and—she needs love. That's what she needs."

“What about power?” asked Checker.

“Power?” repeated Warren.

“Well, yeah. She must need to recharge, right?”

“No,” said Warren. “I don’t think so.”

“Really?” Checker’s eyes lit up even more. “I’d love to know what kind of—”

“Anything else?” I cut in over him. “Does she sleep?”

“Yes,” Warren answered.

“Does it serve a purpose, or does she just close her eyes and go inactive for a while so she seems more human?” asked Checker.

I smacked him in the arm again, this time not bothering to hide it. And people say I’m the insensitive one. “We’ll take care of her,” I told Warren. “But not for too long, you get it? If you can’t come up with the money, I’ll have to take her back to Arkacite. That’s just how it works.”

“Or I could keep her,” said Checker.

“You can’t give her back.” The tension in Warren’s statement made it almost frightening. “You can’t.”

“Then I guess you’d better come up with my fee.” The words were automatic, and I ignored the twitch in my gut that wasn’t sure I meant them. Liliana wasn’t real—which made this just like any other job. Didn’t it? “I’m in business, not charity. I only worked on spec in the first place because I wasn’t sure you had a case.”

“This isn’t her fault.” Warren’s voice had started shaking.

I suddenly felt very tired.

“Look, I’m not going to do anything without letting you know, okay?” I told him. “Go try to raise the money. Tell people it’s to hire a lawyer or something. I’ll give you a little time.”

He nodded, turning his face away.

“Now skedaddle,” I said. “We have stuff to do, and so do you.”

“Let me have half an hour,” he whispered. “Please. I haven’t seen her in so long.”

“Fine.” I waved a hand; he rocketed out of his chair and back toward Liliana like he’d been released from a slingshot.

Checker let out a low whistle. “Holy mother of Gandalf. This is seriously—she’s seriously—? This is *incredible*.”

“Yeah,” I said, staring at the two of them. Liliana was pointing at one of the cats and explaining something with the graveness of the very young; Warren had all of his attention riveted to her like nothing else was in the room, his head bent toward her with a smile. “Incredible. Or something.”

“I’m going to dig out the specs on her tonight. I can’t believe—this is unbelievable. How did they keep this under wraps? What kind of AI—”

“You do that.” I stood. I didn’t want to think anymore. Every muscle felt heavy and exhausted. “I’m going to sleep. Kick Warren out after half an hour, and don’t let him leave the apartment with her. Oh, and warn him that he’s probably going to be investigated for tonight.”

“Sure. I can give him some sort of alibi, if he needs it,” said Checker, still goggling at Liliana distractedly. “Hey, are you really planning to give her back to them if he can’t pay you?”

My eyes lingered on Warren and his fake daughter. They looked like they belonged on a Hallmark card. “I don’t know.”

Checker glanced up at me, a quick, piercing look. “Go get some sleep. You look like shit.”

“Thanks,” I muttered. “You’re on babysitting duty after he leaves—wake me up if you run out of Red Bull. And no taking her apart.”

He grinned. “Oh, don’t worry. I only take things apart when I know how to put them back together.”

“Liar.”

“Okay, fair. But in this case I won’t—promise. Cross my heart and hope to die and return as a cyborg.” He cleared his throat. “Hey. Do you think there’s any chance she’s really...do you think she’s *conscious*?”

“I don’t know,” I said again.

CHAPTER 17

WITH WARREN and Liliana still in the living room, I crashed on Miri's bed. I was too tired to change out of Pilar's clothes first, though I did swap my explosives-laden utility belt for my Colt. If I don't have a gun on me, I have trouble sleeping.

I woke in the early dawn and stumbled back out into the living room. In the morning sunlight, the first thing I saw was Liliana nestled under a blanket on the couch, her ringlets fanned across the pillow and her eyes closed in apparent sleep. The white cat was curled up snoozing on top of her.

The incongruity of it threw me.

As promised, Checker was still awake, leafing through some printouts with one hand while sipping a mug of coffee with the other and balancing a laptop on his knees. Another laptop sat open next to him, scrolling code.

"Coffee," he said without looking up, gesturing toward the kitchen with his mug. "Miri only has soy and almond milk, though. Heathen."

I always took my coffee black anyway. I poured myself a mug and came back out to the living room. "Find anything?"

"Yeah. Lots of things. First of all, the answer is no."

"The answer to what?"

His eyes darted to Liliana, and he lowered his voice. "The consciousness question. Or sentience. Or whatever. The answer's no."

"Oh," I said. I'd barely started considering the idea; it felt odd to have a definitive answer already. "How do you know?"

“Because I’ve been reading her code. There’s some fantastic stochastic creativity, but she’s definitely no more powerful than a probabilistic Turing machine—I’ll leave it to your math brain to figure out the exact modeling. The NLP here is something else, though—talk about sophisticated. Did I say incredible? I meant *amazing*. I want to talk to the people who programmed her. I am in awe.”

“Down, boy,” I said. “In the throes of your tech nirvana, did you remember to check on the fallout from last night?”

“Cas Russell, what do you think of me? Of course I’ve been keeping tabs.” He put down his coffee mug, lifted the laptop from the table next to him over to balance half on top of the first one, and hit a few keys.

“Interestingly, the higher-ups at Arkacite are not making it particularly easy for the police; they’re claiming they don’t know what was taken. I think they just don’t want to say—probably either they were doing something mildly illegal somehow or they don’t want to reveal their secrets. I’m betting on the latter, considering how cutting edge this technology is. But anyway, nobody can recall your face or the name on the ID card—one of the guards said he remembered that the metal detector went off, but that was it—so this is what they have as a composite.”

He half-turned the screen so I could see it. The drawing was atrocious; it looked nothing like either me *or* Pilar. “They need new security guards,” I commented, sipping my coffee.

“Oh, people make terrible eyewitnesses in general. And of course there’s no digital trace of your presence, which is freaking them out just the tiniest bit, if I do say so myself.”

“Quit preening,” I said. “Who are they looking at for it?”

“Not Warren, oddly enough. The police don’t even seem to be considering him—probably because Arkacite didn’t tell them what was stolen. Arkacite’s doing their own investigation, I’m sure, but they haven’t emailed each other about it so I don’t know.”

“I can’t imagine why they wouldn’t trust their computer security this morning.”

“I am the stuff nightmares are made of,” intoned Checker, with something like a maniacal giggle.

I finished draining my coffee and set down the mug. “I’ve got errands. What should we do with Liliana for the day?”

Checker shrugged. "I can keep watching her."

I wasn't crazy about that idea. If Arkacite found out where we'd taken their tech...

But what was the alternative?

I'd promised Warren we'd treat her well. The image flashed in my mind of Liliana in Arkacite's basement lab, hunched in a corner, crying.

She's not a little girl.

I looked over at her. One of her hands had snuggled the cat against her in sleep. Jesus.

"Fine," I said. "But stay on top of the investigation. If you get the slightest hint they're tracking you down, take her and get out of here. And I'll send Arthur over to you." It wouldn't hurt to have another gun around.

"Good idea," said Checker. "I'll need to sleep sometime anyway. I can call Pilar back to help, too—if she wanted to sell us out, she's had ample opportunity already."

I'd forgotten to threaten her. "Tell her if she does, I'll kill her."

"Cas!"

"Well, at least make sure Arkacite's not tracking her. And you can also tell her I'll pay her again. I'll put it on Warren's tab."

"That man's going to end up in indentured servitude to you at this rate."

I turned to head back toward Miri's bedroom. "Not my problem."

I retrieved my phone to find someone had left me a voicemail while I was in the living room. It turned out to be Harrington, saying he'd arranged the promised meeting with the Ally Eight rep for a park at two that afternoon, ostensibly for a business proposition. I left him a message confirming without telling him it was a real business proposition, a message for Cheryl Maddox telling her I wanted to arrange to dead-drop her some cash, and finally a message for Arthur telling him to call me back. The fact that I couldn't reach him was troubling—I was still worried about Tegan.

Then I changed back into my normal clothes, stole Checker's printouts on the plutonium batteries, and went out to my car. I sat in the driver's seat for a moment considering where to go first, but before consciously making the decision I'd started for Altadena.

The hour was early enough that I beat rush hour to Denise Rayal's house. The little cottage was still in shadow, the sun not having peeked over the mountains yet. I marched up and banged on the door. When nobody answered, I banged louder and longer.

The bolt finally scraped back, and Rayal cracked open the door a few inches—her face was the same one from the pictures, only more tired. She wore a faded pink bathrobe, and her hair was tousled with sleep. “Can I help you?”

I didn't know.

I'd come here for some sort of answers, but I didn't know what—we had Liliana's code, after all; I easily could have stayed on Miri's couch reading it and learned more than I could talking to Denise Rayal. Heck, every time I looked at Liliana I saw and heard the artificial mechanisms shimmering in the mathematics of every movement, a too-exact shadow of strings reminding me every instant that she was a puppet, even without reading through the probabilistic master that controlled her.

She was a valuable piece of technology. I should have damned Warren's entreaties and locked her in a safe while I waited on him, and meanwhile moved on to dealing with the Lorenzos. But considering actually doing that slammed up against a churning revulsion deep inside, a sick queasiness I didn't know how to define. Disconnected snippets cycled through my head: Liliana's tear-stained face in the lab, her apparent delight at playing with the cats, her repeated questions about her father.

Questions that had all been asked with the same cadence.

“I need to talk to you,” I said to Rayal.

She wrapped her bathrobe around herself more tightly. “What's this concerning?”

“Do you know what happened last night?”

Her expression twitched.

“Liliana was stolen from Arkacite,” I said. “I assumed they would have called you or come knocking. Asked if you had anything to do with it.”

“What do you know about it?” she asked after a beat.

“I work for your husband,” I said. “I'm the one who took her.”

Rayal's whole body tightened, her posture knotting into a defensive stiffness. After a moment's pause she stepped back, almost as if forcing

herself, and tugged the door open a little wider. “Come in.”

I followed her inside. We sat down in her tasteful and comfortable living room. Rayal perched on the edge of the couch, her arms hugging herself. She didn’t offer me anything to eat or drink.

“How do you know I won’t call them?” she asked in a low voice.

“What would you tell them?” I said. “Are you going to report your husband? He’s disappearing soon anyway, along with her.”

She hesitated. “What do you want?”

“I want—I want to know what happened.”

Her face went dead. “I’m not allowed.”

I thought of the inches and inches of nondisclosure agreements in her file cabinet. “I’ve already met Liliana. I know what she is.”

She blinked at me rapidly, her eyes shining too brightly.

“I can read her code if I feel like it. I just—I guess I want to know how this happened. With you and your husband. And with her.”

She hiccupped, a sound somewhere between a humorless laugh and a dry sob. “I suppose it would be a relief—I can’t talk to anyone about it. Even my therapist, if I told him, he’d have me committed. He’d think I don’t know what’s real anymore.” She swallowed. “I...I had a son.”

“I know,” I said, thrown by the non sequitur.

“Sam. He was—he was everything to us. To me. My world. You hear about what happens when you become a parent, how much love—but it doesn’t prepare you.”

“He died, right?” I asked, and winced. It probably wasn’t a polite question.

Denise Rayal didn’t seem to notice. “Yes. Leukemia. I thought—I’d never felt so much pain. I thought I would never get past it.”

“And is that why...?”

“Why I made Liliana? No. It would be the right answer, wouldn’t it? But...I did get past it. I thought I never would and then I did. I got up one day not too much later and wanted to live again. Wanted to work. Eat good food, be happy, have sex—Sam was gone, and it didn’t kill me. Does that make me an awful mother?”

“I wouldn’t know,” I said.

“Noah, though—he couldn’t move on. After a while our marriage was...empty. He used to make me laugh, so much, and...I buried myself at work, because to be around Noah was—I would have left him, but I felt so guilty. Now he would leave me, if he didn’t need my name on the case for Arkacite—he would leave me in a heartbeat.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because I gave back Liliana.”

“Wait—what?”

Denise took a deep breath. “You have to understand. I didn’t build her to replace Sam. She was a *project*. The idea she could be anything more was—I never considered it. She was an experiment in natural language processing and machine learning and robotics and—and that was it.” She gestured helplessly, frustrated with making me understand. “But our team wanted—we needed to see how human she could be. How much she could learn. Arkacite set up a secure place off-site; it took so much to make it happen—so much paperwork, so many promises, especially for them to let Noah in on it.”

“Why did they?”

“I wanted to be living with her twenty-four hours a day, to be studying her behavior responses over the long-term. So there was some reason for me to ask that my husband be allowed into the project. But I hoped—I wanted—” She paused and steadied herself. “I had hope, that maybe bringing him into my work, sharing my accomplishments with him, that something could rekindle for us. That he could find some way back to me.”

Well, her plan had sort of worked. “And you didn’t expect he would start seeing her as his daughter?”

“Maybe I’m stupid. Maybe I should have—she looks like a girl, but I never thought of her that way. She was a toy. A very sophisticated toy. One I was proud of, but I didn’t—she wasn’t alive; how could anyone think she was?”

“Until your husband did.”

She nodded. A tear spilled over and slid down her cheek; she brushed it impatiently away. “I didn’t even realize it at first. The path we were on. I only saw that he was back. My husband, I had him back. And so help me, I started doing it, too. Treating her as a child. It was so easy, so easy to

pretend, to fantasize that we were raising a girl together, and in so many ways she felt so important to me already, after so many years—you know how people will sometimes refer to their projects, they'll say, 'my baby'? She was that to me before this, and it just became so *easy*, with Noah, to tuck her in at night, to hug her when she cried, and I knew, I *knew* she only stopped crying because her programming said—there was no free will, this was not the Singularity, there was no *child*, but God help me..."

"You started to see her as one," I said.

"I started to care. I started...I wanted to love her."

"I don't know if that's a bad thing," I said. "It's love. That's—you know. Good. Right?"

Right?

"*Love!*" exclaimed Rayal. "When the child you love is making choices on a coin toss *you* programmed in? When you know, you *know*, exactly how she works, that inside she's silicon and wires and sophisticated language emulation and when she laughs it's because her programming has been told *this is when little girls laugh* and when she cries it's because we wrote in that when she falls down, her face should wrinkle up and her eyes should drip water? Is that the kind of child you would want to love?"

I swallowed. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"I know you didn't. I know." She lowered her head, pressing her fingers against the bathrobe over her knees, breathing hard. Her hands curled into fists, bunching the fabric. "I was building myself up to love a child I had already lost. A child who didn't exist. She could act like a five-year-old, but she would never grow up, never have her own thoughts, never...never love me in return. I gave her back to Arkacite, and resigned, and moved out here. I'm in therapy. I'm...I'm coping."

I didn't know what to say.

"You know, I tell my therapist—I tell him I lost someone who was like a daughter." Rayal's voice had gone back to resigned. "I don't say who. I tell him I was too attached. That she wasn't mine to love."

CHAPTER 18

I LEFT Denise Rayal's house more disturbed than when I'd arrived. After standing impotently by my car for a few minutes in the cool morning, I sighed and dug out my phone. I had other obligations. Whatever was rankling me here, it could wait.

I tried Arthur again first, and he picked up right away this time. "Russell! Finally!" A cacophony of canine barking erupted in the background.

"Shit, are you still at Tegan's?"

"You're right, something's wrong—the mail from yesterday ain't been picked up, and I don't think anyone fed the dogs, but their cars are here—*shit!*" More barking.

Oh, no. "I'm on my way."

I broke thirteen different traffic laws on my way to Tegan's and thanked my lucky stars no cops spotted me. Tegan lived with his partner in a small house on a large plot of land in Topanga; I came onto the absurdly steep street nearing sixty and careened downhill, slamming on the brake to skid to a halt less than two centimeters from Arthur's back bumper.

He was in Tegan's driveway, near the high fence that surrounded their wooded backyard.

"What's going on!" I shouted at Arthur over the near-constant racket of the dogs.

"Don't know!" he shouted back. "I keep calling—I tried both Tegan and Reese a hundred times—finally went in, but they ain't in the house, ain't

nowhere—”

“Did you try his workshop?” Tegan’s shop was a separate building out back, where he did most of his work.

“The dogs are out! And Tegan and Reese ain’t gonna appreciate it if I shoot ’em! I tried everything—got some meat from the grocery store, even tried calling a vet for some tranqs and she threatened to call the cops on me. Almost got bit climbing the fence—”

“I’ll take care of it,” I said, heading for the front door.

“Hang on, I locked back up,” Arthur called, drawing a set of lockpicks out of his jacket pocket and tossing them to me. “Be careful!”

I was glad Arthur had his picks on him. It didn’t seem polite to break down Tegan and Reese’s door, even to make sure they were okay.

Shit, they’d better be okay.

The dogs in the backyard became more agitated as I approached the house. The sound waves teased out to only four different animals—same as the last time I had been here—but if I didn’t concentrate on the math, it sounded like a hell of a lot more. Tegan’s place wasn’t squished in next to his neighbors like the houses in the city proper, but still, it was amazing no one had called in a noise complaint yet.

Amazing and lucky. If there was one thing Tegan would appreciate less than anything else, it was having the cops called to his property.

I slid the metal picks into the lock and felt the pins go up one after the other, the mathematics clicking beautifully into place. I twisted the cylinder and pushed the door open.

Tegan and Reese had a homey living room, with squashy furniture across from an entertainment center surrounded by shelves of books and DVDs. On the other side of the room from the door a stone fireplace formed a partial wall; behind it opened a large custom kitchen that let out into the backyard. I’d never seen any more of the house, but from the outside dimensions I knew it couldn’t be much larger, and I was right: a bedroom opened to the right of the living room with a bathroom and closet behind it, and that was it. I did a cursory check throughout the house, but Arthur was far more observant than I was and he’d already been through. It was empty.

I went to the back door. The barking escalated to deafening as I approached, along with scratching and snarling, as if the dogs wanted to

burst in, tear my head off, and rip my flesh limb from limb. “See, this is why I don’t like animals,” I groused aloud. “You guys have met me before.”

To be fair, this was the first time I’d broken into their home.

I surveyed the house. I needed to get the dogs *in* here and get myself back *out* without letting them follow me. I could yank open the back door and then race out the front, but then they’d be free to return into the yard. I needed to trap them.

My eyes flickered around the space. The bathroom had doors to both the bedroom and the kitchen, so I could potentially open the back door, run through the kitchen and living room, circle around through the bedroom, and then cut back to the kitchen through the bathroom and be out the back door. If the dogs chased me through the circuit, I’d be able to get back out while they were still in the house and shut them all inside.

I peered out the back window. All four dogs were barrels of corded muscle and fur, coiled power and vicious jaws. I let my vision fade out and concentrated only on the mathematics: the oscillations of movement, the symmetry of gait, the bunching and releasing of muscles bending limbs into locomotion.

Christ, they were fast.

Faster than I was, if we were talking a dead sprint. In my head, I extrapolated through opening the door, and the variable values of the dogs’ sheer power crashed against me in hypothetical, tearing me to shreds. Well. That seemed like a nonstarter.

Unless...

I counted out the split seconds between when they scratched and pounded against the door trying to get to me. I could buy myself maybe a quarter second’s delta by forcing the dogs to push open the door themselves. But it still wasn’t going to be enough to keep me from getting ripped open.

I cast my eyes around the kitchen, and my gaze fell on the polished hardwood floor.

Hmm.

I scuffed my boot against it, estimating the coefficient of kinetic friction. Then I started pulling open cabinets.

Either Tegan or Reese was quite the chef, because I found seven different types of oil in glass bottles. I collected them along with the dish soap and the dishwashing liquid and shook out a droplet of each one in turn onto my fingers, wiping my hand off on a paper towel in between.

The oils won hands down. I took the slipperiest one with me and returned to the back door.

I emptied the entire bottle in a broad slick right in front of the back door, taking care to keep my boots out of it and leaving a tiny strip of dry wood against the wall. Then I stood on my toes on the very edge, creeping along the dry bit I'd left until the door was within reach. I leaned across the puddle, put my hand on the knob, and took a deep breath—my equations here were not exactly ideal, and had far too many variables I couldn't control.

The dogs pounded against the door, untiring. Bam. Bam. Bam. Scratch. Bam.

I unlocked the knob. Bam. Bam.

Just as the next beast hit, I turned the knob ever so slightly so the latch disengaged, leapt over my slick of oil in the other direction, and ran like hell. A quarter of a second later, the next dog threw itself against the door in my wake, and it burst open.

I flew forward, toward the front of the house.

The dogs piled in on my tail with a roar of barking, leaping forward with a terrifying amount of velocity—and slipped.

I heard them behind me, their claws scrabbling for purchase as their burst of power turned them into cartoon figures bicycling against the floor. And then they clambered through it and gave chase, right on my heels, the deafening roar of their barking enough to rend me to pieces all by itself. My adrenaline spiked into overdrive as I swung into the bedroom. I wasn't sure I was going to be fast enough.

The dogs skidded after me, all four of them, and the definite *snap* of jaws closing on air rang right behind me—the only thing that saved me was that they tried to take the turn too tightly and their oily paws slipped again, sending them into a pileup against the bedroom door—

My vision tunneled. I sprinted for the bathroom, head down, legs churning. I wasn't going to make it to the back door. They were too fast.

I dove into the bathroom and kicked the door shut behind me as hard and fast as I could. The monster at the head of the pack slammed into it, snarling.

I didn't have time to breathe—they would come back around through the living room. I practically leapt over the width of the bathroom and back out into the kitchen, then over my oil slick and to the door.

The dogs burst back out into the living room and shot at me. I fell out onto the deck and took the knob with me, slamming the door so hard the window panes rattled in the wall. Something very heavy, very angry, and very vicious pounded into it from the other side an instant later. And then another.

They couldn't get through. Could they?

I did a quick force calculation to make sure. Then, just in case my estimates as to the strength of Tegan's door jamb were too low, I took out Arthur's lockpicks again and used them to turn the deadbolt home from the outside. My hands were shaking more than I wanted to admit.

I drew in a deep, shuddering breath and staggered back a few steps, away from the snarling and scratching going on inside the house. That had been way too close. The muscles in my legs felt like I'd liquefied them.

I stumbled off the deck and onto the hard-packed dirt of the backyard, trying to slow my breathing. Arthur vaulted down from the fence and came over. "You all right?"

"Child's play," I said, still panting. "God, I hate animals."

We hiked back to the workshop. I still had Arthur's lockpicks out; I slid them into the lock and opened the door.

"Oh, Lord," whispered Arthur, and pushed past me.

Tegan and Reese were bound and gagged on the floor of the shop.

I spent a moment in paralyzed shock before I dashed after Arthur. He'd pulled out a knife and was cutting Tegan's bonds; I did the same for Reese, dragging the gag off and sawing through the thick ropes that knotted Reese's muscular wrists and ankles to the bolted-down workbenches. I consciously didn't think about the stench in the air.

"I gotcha," I heard Arthur murmuring, over Tegan's coughing. "Just breathe. I gotcha."

I wished I knew what to say. Both of them were moving limply, lethargically, their faces strained and hollow. I didn't know whether to offer a hand up or turn away so they wouldn't have to react to me seeing them this way.

"Ari," croaked Reese, in a voice so hoarse it faded out for a hitch in the middle. "You all right?"

"Nothing a shower, a hot meal, and a good night's sleep cannot cure," said Tegan, waving off his partner with his good hand—his left hand and leg were prosthetic below the elbow and knee. The trembling in his fingers belied his statement, but none of us called him on it. "Are you all right, my friend?"

"Angry," answered Reese, very deliberately. Reese was a person of few words.

Tegan, on the other hand, epitomized gentlemanliness and set very high stock in being cordial, and he had the look of a thin but sprightly grandfather to go with it, complete with downy white hair and long mustachios. "Arthur. Cassandra. Thank you both." He touched Reese on the arm. "Will you check on the dogs?"

Reese grunted and staggered upright, wobbling only slightly. Reese might have been the same age as Tegan—it was hard to tell, especially as I suspected Tegan looked older than he was and Reese younger. Athletic and muscle-bound, with a deep tan and short bristly haircut, Reese had been a fixture here since I'd first hired Tegan for his forgeries years ago, and to this day I didn't have the slightest clue as to whether Reese was a man or a woman. Reese was just Reese.

Reese pushed up to standing and limped out the back door, toward the house and the howling dogs.

Arthur grabbed a water bottle off a nearby workbench and twisted off the cap. Tegan set it aside after only a tentative few sips and then leaned on Arthur to gather himself up and seat himself on one of the workshop's stools. I stood by awkwardly.

"Thank you," murmured the old forger. "So kind of you, my friend. My thanks."

"Who did this to you?" asked Arthur, sounding pained. I didn't blame him.

Tegan didn't look toward me. Or maybe he didn't know. "Oh, Arthur. You know I don't get involved."

"Seems to me someone already got you involved," said Arthur.

"Ah, well, yes. That is between me and them." He sounded wistful, like someone who missed playing with fireflies as a child, not someone who had just been hog-tied on the floor of his own shop.

"They hurt you?" pressed Arthur. "You need to see a doctor?"

"No, no, thank you. The people who were so impolite as to involve us, as you say, were at least quite...gentle."

My jaw was clenched so hard my teeth were grinding together. I forced myself to unclamp it. I was very, very carefully not letting myself react yet, not letting myself think, because if I registered what happened here, if I considered my part in it—

Reese came back. "The dogs are okay."

"No ill effects?" Tegan sounded concerned.

"I didn't hurt them," I assured them quickly. "Only locked them in your house."

Tegan and Reese looked at me as if they had just remembered I was in the room. They hadn't been talking about me.

"How'd they get past the dogs?" asked Arthur.

The room got still and awkward.

Reese came over and touched Tegan's elbow, ignoring Arthur's question. "Ari. Come inside."

"I do find myself sorely in need of a bathroom and a bed," admitted Tegan. He turned to us. "Might I beg your leave, with my apologies for so brief a welcome? Did you have an urgent business need?"

"No—God, no! Don't need nothing," said Arthur. "But what if they—can you be sure whoever did this won't come back? I can stay for a while. Watch your backs."

"Unnecessary, though I do thank you," said Tegan calmly. "I believe they got what they came for." Reese stared at him, arms crossed, and for some reason I became suddenly certain I was watching a bizarre, silent argument, even though neither of their faces had changed expression.

“We’ll talk,” Reese told Arthur after a moment, and then helped Tegan up and back toward the house.

Arthur and I followed slowly. The dogs, released by their masters, came and nosed at us, solid masses of brown and gray muscle. I watched them nervously, but they didn’t seem to remember wanting to tear me to pieces, or at least had no hard feelings about it.

Conscious of both the mercurial dogs and of Arthur still next to me, I tried to control my breathing, to keep my muscles from tensing. But a raging, animalistic temptation was rising in me, urging me to start an all-out war with a certain crime family, because *to hell with it, you don’t get away with this, you do not get to drag other people into the middle of a private vendetta and almost kill them because they won’t give you a fucking reference—*

“Checker said your job went okay,” Arthur said quietly. “Got a hold of him before you and me caught each other.”

The words gave me whiplash, swinging me back around to my Liliana problem. My stolen mechanical child, who was unsettling me more than I wanted to accept. I tried to steady myself. “Yeah. It went fine, I guess. Did he tell you anything else?”

“Yeah. Robots. Unbelievable.”

Unbelievable was one word for it.

We trailed Reese and Tegan back into the house—one of them had thrown down paper towels to soak up my oil slick—and stood in the living room waiting. The sound of running water reached us from the bathroom.

“Checker told me another thing,” said Arthur, his hands shoved in his pockets like he was about to bring up the most casual subject in the world, which probably meant I needed to brace myself.

“Jesus. What?”

“Said you’re giving her back if the poor man can’t pay you.”

“I said I *might*, ” I corrected. Arthur giving me shit was all I needed right now. Not when I still had no idea how I was supposed to feel about a little girl who wasn’t, not when I had a Mafia boss attacking people I knew just to facilitate setting me up. “Aren’t you against stealing? I thought you’d be all for me returning a company’s rightful property.”

“This ain’t a usual circumstance,” Arthur answered.

I'd never figure out the logic of his morality. "This isn't a hobby. If I do work for someone, I expect payment."

"You got plenty of money. Can afford to do a good thing for someone."

"I can afford it, sure," I said, for the moment ignoring the fact that I wasn't sure I'd be able to give Liliana back myself. "How is that related to whether or not I get paid?"

"The man got kicked out of his home."

"And that makes what I do less valuable how?"

Arthur gusted out a breath and sank down on Tegan and Reese's couch. "Come on, Russell. Please? You can't take his money."

Something in Arthur's voice made me stop and focus on him more fully. He gazed up at me with terrible earnestness.

"I can so take his money," I said, though not quite as glibly. "What's it to you?"

Arthur's shoulders rose and fell almost self-consciously. "Just think a dad shouldn't lose his kid, is all."

"His *fake* kid?"

"He ain't hurting no one," said Arthur. "Please, Russell? Consider it a birthday gift to me."

"Wait, what?" I said. "It's your birthday?"

"No, but—"

"Hang on, I've known you for almost a year. When *is* your birthday?" Shit, I'd never even thought about this. Birthdays. Obligations. People who wanted me to do them favors. *Jesus*.

"Ain't the point—"

"I think it is. I didn't even know when your birthday is, so it's pretty clear I wasn't going to get you anything."

Arthur sighed, a long drawn-out breath I had come to recognize as the sound he made when I wasn't being normal. "My birthday is December twenty-fifth." He said it as if imparting something deeply personal.

"You were born on Christmas?"

"Yup."

I had never celebrated Christmas. Or birthdays. At least not for as long as I could remember. And I hadn't gotten Arthur a Christmas present, either.

“So when’s yours?” said Arthur.

“My what?”

“Your birthday, Russell.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because next time, we should celebrate.”

Which sounded worse than getting my teeth yanked out with rusty pliers. “That’s a stupid reason to pry into my personal life.”

He half-smiled. “You trying to make it hard to be friends with you, girl?”

“Of course,” I said. “If it were easy, everyone would do it, and I’d never get any work done.” I flopped down next to him on the couch, pissed off at Arthur and the world and the fact that having friends now meant people expected things from me and the horrible reality that I couldn’t even protect a delicate old man anyway, and *why couldn’t everyone just not matter—*

“Take the dad’s case,” said Arthur softly. “You want a reason, well, you keep trying to pay me for stuff. Pay me by giving this guy his daughter back.”

“He owes me a lot more than—”

“For me, Russell,” said Arthur. “Please.”

“Jesus Christ, *fine*,” I said. “If it means that much to you, I’ll help him keep his fake daughter. You are a pain in the ass.”

“Yup,” said Arthur cheerfully.

Damn. Had I just signed up for helping Warren and his robot child disappear on my own dime? That was a lot of work, a lot of money, and all in all a pretty fucking stupid thing for me to have agreed to.

Though something in me was also relieved—relieved at not having to make the call. It wouldn’t matter anymore how I should feel toward Liliana, whether I should still care even if Warren came up dry. I’d help her and her father get away as a favor to Arthur, and it would be done.

A thought struck me. Maybe there was an easier way to deal with all this anyway. Maybe there was a *much* easier way. Warren wouldn’t like it, but screw him—if he wanted to dictate terms he could come up with my fee. I pulled out my phone, but the signal was dead.

“Reception’s spotty here,” said Arthur. “S why I missed your first call.”

I took a second to recall the name of Arkacite's CEO and then texted Checker instead: *Send me Imogene Grant's number.* The message made it through, and my phone buzzed with a reply almost immediately.

"Thanks," said Arthur.

I grunted.

Reese and Tegan took their time. Eventually Reese came back out into the living room, looking cleaner and in a new set of clothes. Arthur and I both stood up.

"It's someone you know, ain't it?" said Arthur, when Reese had done nothing but stare blandly at us for a few moments, arms crossed. "They got in 'cause they know you, drugged your dogs—how close am I?"

Reese didn't say anything.

"Let me hang and keep watch, okay? At least till you two can get some rest, get some more security over here."

"Kay," said Reese, with an expression that looked like the opposite.

"Okay—great," said Arthur, clearly flummoxed by not having to marshal any other argument. "Uh, I'll be right here."

I wet my lips and said, "Can I talk to Tegan?"

Reese gave me permission with a little head jerk. I left the two of them in the living room and approached the bedroom door, knocking as I opened it. "Tegan? It's Cas."

"Cassandra. Come in." Tegan was the only person who called me Cassandra, and with the second syllable pronounced long and fancy, as if he were British. It had always bugged me, but for some reason I'd never corrected him.

I pushed the door open. Tegan was in a robe and sitting up in bed against a mound of pillows, the covers drawn up and his prostheses removed. In this context, instead of on a stool in his shop, he appeared shockingly old. I swallowed, clicking the door shut gently behind me. "I know who did this."

"Do you?" he sounded unconcerned.

"The Lorenzos were using your name to get to me." I said it bluntly. Baldly. "I'm sorry."

He closed his eyes for a moment and touched his forehead, as if he had a very delicate headache. “They were...genteel. They did offer to pay me first. Handsomely.”

“To sell me out?” Fuck. It wasn’t right that Tegan should have refused such an offer in order to protect me. Wasn’t right at all.

“No, not quite. They simply asked that I not answer my phone for twenty-four hours. I knew the purpose must be underhanded, so I refused.”

“If they come back, just give them what they want.” My voice scratched. “I promise I can handle it.”

“Then you underestimate the danger.” Tegan folded his hand across the blankets, a calm statue of resignation. “Mama Lorenzo is much more powerful than she was even a year ago. Make peace with her, truly. Or I fear for you.”

“I’ve beaten everyone she’s sent after me so far.”

“Then she has not been trying.”

The room felt very quiet.

“She’s not getting away with this,” I said. “I won’t let her.”

Tegan bowed his head. “Cassandra, it’s not worth it. Make your peace with her, I beg of you. Before it’s too late.”

“It’s already too late,” I said.

CHAPTER 19

I DIDN'T have a plan.

My blackmail scheme wasn't ready, and I still couldn't put a bullet in Mama Lorenzo's head without making everything exponentially worse. But somehow, some way, I had to drill it into her coiffed marble skull that she was capable of pushing me too far. That there were *rules* to this little war of ours. That she was *not fucking invulnerable*.

Or maybe I was just too angry to think straight, my slow-burning guilt and rage smoldering up as soon as I left Tegan's and filling me with the blinding need to prove I wasn't powerless.

I didn't buzz in at the estate's intercom. Instead, I ran up the pillar next to the gate and vaulted over the iron spikes to land on the driveway inside. A couple of guys who were clearly private security started scrambling toward me. I shot them each in the leg and then marched up and kicked down the door.

Alarms started going off, the wails a deafening echo in the immaculate foyer. I shot the nearest alarm system box for good measure.

The housekeeper saw me and shrieked, thrusting her hands into the air and dropping the cleaning supplies she held. I strode past her through the house and burst into Mama Lorenzo's study.

The woman herself was just rising from her chair behind the wide desk. I pointed my Colt at the center of her forehead.

"You asshole," I said. "Somebody needs to put you down."

"If you kill me—"

“You’ll be dead. After that, you’ll hardly care what your family does to me.”

“Though I think you would.” She was entirely serene. Jesus, the balls on that woman. Betting her life on my sense of self-preservation when I had a gun in her face.

“You underestimate how stupid I’m willing to be to get one brief moment of satisfaction,” I shot back. “This is between us. And you’re not playing fair.”

“‘Fair’ is for people who want to lose.”

“Pithy. I thought you had rules. I thought you didn’t go after innocent people.”

“What happened with Ms. Maddox was regrettable,” she allowed. “I have spoken to her.”

“And Tegan and Reese?”

She raised her eyebrows. “They were not harmed.”

“What are you *on*?” I cried. “Your men left them there for a day and a half! They could have died!”

“Someone would have returned today to free them. Mr. Tegan refused a perfectly reasonable offer.”

Oh.

Oh, *fuck*.

I might be the one who had the gun, but the power in the room had suddenly flipped, with Mama Lorenzo holding all the cards. Because until now, somewhere in my head I’d still been assuming Mama Lorenzo hadn’t known about the attack on Tegan and Reese, that her men had acted unsanctioned. Tegan—it wasn’t just that he was well-liked.

You didn’t go after Tegan. *Nobody* went after Tegan. Not on purpose.

Either Mama Lorenzo was flaunting remarkably idiotic hubris, or Tegan was right about how massively, unassailably powerful she was. And Gabrielle Lorenzo was not an idiot.

My mouth was dry. I didn’t know if I should keep up the bravado or run like hell.

Mama Lorenzo canted her head slightly, watching me, as if she’d only been waiting for me to catch up. “You’re proving unexpectedly irritating,”

she said.

I found my voice. “Yeah, I’m like that.”

“I’ve made some inquiries about you.”

“What, after I owned your hitmen?” I managed a sneer.

Mama Lorenzo flicked a well-shaped fingernail as if she were dispensing with a fly. “They tried to impress me. They failed.”

My hands had started to sweat. Jesus, she was *testing* people on me. This was bad. “Your guys are after me,” I said. “Me. Not Tegan, not Reese, not Cheryl Maddox.”

“I had not thought you so concerned with the lives of others.” She smiled thinly, her voice turning heavy with the ominous weight of someone perfectly capable of carrying out exactly what she threatened. “I’ll make use of that.”

No. No. No *way*.

Every bit of apprehension and uncertainty crystallized into rage. Adrenaline flooded me, the numbers shattering my senses and tearing reality apart. I lunged forward, sweeping Mama Lorenzo’s notes and papers and computer monitor off her desk in a chaotic cacophony and leaping to land on the blotter in a crouch, my 1911 pointed up under her chin. My finger was against the trigger, and I barely stopped myself.

She laughed. The sound was terrifying.

I almost didn’t catch it when her eyes slipped to the side.

My body reacted faster than my fury-soaked brain, and I dove off the desk and past her just as a rifle report echoed through the room, followed by three more. A side door was disgorging masked security, all toting the latest hardware out of Germany. Mama Lorenzo had already slipped backward, out of reach, escaping toward the side of the room—

I fired my remaining rounds through the desk, five shots that hit the first five guards each in the hip or leg, the mathematics drawing the trajectories through the wood for me. Then, while the people behind the downed men were still tripping over their comrades, I ran for the plate glass window and jumped.

I’d forgotten momentarily that the house was built into the side of a *fucking mountain*.

I hit the glass at a decent angle—I felt a small nick to my right elbow and that was it—but as I twisted to see a snapshot of the ground below me, my brain exploded into *oh, SHIT*—

I'd busted out over a sheer drop, over thirty feet of empty air between me and the mountainside.

I had an instant of weightlessness to think about it, the crash of the glass still echoing in my ears, a spectacular view of Los Angeles spread out below me, and I had no options but one.

I fell.

Calculus slammed through my head as I plummeted—I'd be hitting a near-vertical slope, with rocks, with trees, with the glass panes showering around me—*shit shit shit!* I had just enough time to twist and fall feet-first, and with a silent, cringing apology to the memory of Samuel Colt, I thrust out my empty 1911 a handful of instants before I hit, carving a swath into the dusty cliff and almost jerking my shoulder out of its socket but slowing my plunge just the tiniest bit. Then I kicked out a leg to brake myself with one boot, dropped the gun, and snapped into a ball as the mountainside came up to meet me.

My bodily crumple let my ankles and knees cushion most of the force as they bent and buckled, and by then I was rolling instead of falling, the mountain alternately pulverizing my feet and back and shoulders as I tumbled. A cloud of dust and gravel choked me—I couldn't breathe, couldn't see—sturdy tree trunks whipped by on either side, near-misses that were far too close to splintering my skeleton. And then it was all rocky grass and weeds. I grabbed at the foliage as I went, ripping it out by the roots in an attempt to curb the momentum sucking me downward, the sharp blades and leaves slicing at my hands and face.

My velocity ticked down in my head, a touch lower, a hair slower. The instant it decreased just enough, I unrolled and jammed my feet out below me, digging them into the mountainside.

The impact jolted through my knees and hips and my body thumped over a few more rocks, but then my feet caught me and I jerked to a stop.

I didn't have time to take a breath. I pushed up off the slope and continued downward at a run, leaping down the incline in a juking zigzag. The trees would help screen me, but the Lorenzo security had the high ground. If they had any good snipers...

I sprinted.

I didn't slow down until I'd put a chunk of a mountain between myself and the Lorenzo estate, and then I only decelerated to look around and triangulate the way to a road—I had no idea how large Mama Lorenzo's private army really was, or how fast she could scramble them. I rounded into a patch of woods and silently cheered when I almost crashed into another secluded house, this one much less extravagant than the Lorenzos'.

Yes!

I made a beeline for the truck in the driveway. The tires spit gravel behind me as I peeled out and careened down the slope.

My phone had somehow stayed in my pocket, banged up but miraculously still working. It had been inside my jacket, so probably my body had protected it—lucky phone. I dialed Arthur as I drove. “Are you still at Tegan's?”

“Yeah, I thought I'd stay until—” Reception fuzzed out. “—you. Russell? Can you hear me?”

“I'm in the mountains,” I shouted. Why I thought shouting would improve a bad connection I had no idea. “Stay there, okay? Stay there!”

“If I...spotty here, too. You...”

“*Stay at Tegan's,*” I bellowed. “You hear me? *Stay!*”

“...but I gotcha. You going to...” He faded out again, and the phone beeped, dropping the call.

I shot him a brief text message: *stay, danger*. It would have to do. I couldn't remember all the people I'd called on this phone and didn't have time to check—driving one-handed, I popped out the battery and stowed the pieces in my pocket.

My watch was so scratched up the numbers were barely visible. Fuck, I was going to be late to my meeting with Ally Eight.



I **LURCHED** into the park Harrington had directed me to more than half an hour after the appointed meeting time. I'd swapped the truck for a rundown SUV, and the thing had zero suspension, jolting up my spine at every pebble.

Hopefully the Ally Eight rep had waited. Harrington had said they represented some Japanese companies; surely they knew that in LA nobody was on time for anything.

I took a moment in the SUV to take stock and try to make myself marginally more presentable. This mainly consisted of picking twigs and grass out of my hair and smudging the most obvious dust and blood off my face and onto my jacket sleeve. It didn't do much good. I still looked like I had gone four rounds with a maniac wielding a hedge trimmer.

I was also acutely aware I wasn't carrying anymore, and I hadn't had time to stop somewhere and pick up another sidearm. If Ally Eight ended up double-crossing me, I supposed I could throw my spare magazines at them. Those had survived the fall quite happily in my pockets, causing nice rectangular bruises up and down my legs.

I limped into the park, haplessly trying to blot a cut on my scalp that was trickling blood down my neck and back. I remembered Harrington's instructions and looked around for a bench under a bronze statue.

An older Japanese woman in a pantsuit sat waiting for me. She was average-looking in all ways—not strikingly tall or short or fat or thin, her appearance neither exceptionally beautiful nor exceptionally lacking. She wasn't young or old either, but somewhere in between, gray just starting to sprinkle her short dark hair.

It was hard to read her expression as I approached. I guessed it to be, *I really hope that's not the person I'm supposed to be meeting.*

"I'm Cas Russell," I said when I'd reached her. "Are you waiting for me? Excuse my appearance. I just had a vigorous...business meeting."

"Oh—it's no problem." Her English was almost unaccented, with only the slightest edges of a different intonation rounding her words. She stood and extended a hand. "My name is Janet Okuda."

I looked down at my right hand, which was streaked with dust, covered in scratches, and oozing blood from a torn-off fingernail, and we had an awkward moment of understanding in which I didn't shake her hand and she plainly appreciated it.

She cleared her throat. "I understand you have a business proposition for me."

“Yeah.” God bless Harrington. I got right to the point. “My specialty is acquiring items of value for people. I may have a source for a quantity of plutonium-238 in the form of alphavoltaic nuclear batteries. Would that be of interest to you? Or to anyone you represent?”

Her eyebrows lifted slightly, and she glanced around before stepping closer and lowering her voice. “Yes. Significant interest.”

“Excellent,” I said. “Let’s walk, shall we?”

We moved aside briefly for a cyclist to speed by before starting down the path. Okuda made sure he had passed out of earshot before adding, “I should clarify for you, Ms. Russell, because I believe there have been some rumors circulating. My clients are not interested in elemental plutonium. They require an atomic battery of a particular design, no matter what it might be powered by.”

“Oh. Okay,” I said. *Dammit*. Clearly someone had heard the word “plutonium,” panicked, and started gossiping about it. It was going to be a real pain in the ass if the Arkacite batteries didn’t fit her clients’ specifications—see, this was why I didn’t usually work on spec. I pulled the printouts from Arkacite’s files out of my pocket. They’d ended up in a crumpled, tight wad and I had to peel them apart. “Here’s what I know I can get for you. If this won’t work for your clients, give me the lowdown on what will, and I’ll keep my eye out.”

Okuda took the pages and stopped walking for a few moments to study them. “No,” she said slowly. “No, this is exactly what we need.”

“It is?” God Almighty, something this day had finally gone right. “Then I can get them for you.” I didn’t tell her I had them already. Best to make her think I’d have to work for them.

She handed the papers back, a small smile touching her lips. “We do have a time incentive. I will give you a significant bonus for sooner delivery.” She held eye contact with me. “For instance, today.”

I squinted at her. “How big of a bonus?”

Her slight smile grew. “I thought so.”

Either my lack of skill at subterfuge had bitten me in the ass again, or she knew someone had stolen from Arkacite. The latter wouldn’t surprise me—Harrington always seemed to have his fingers in a dozen corporate

espionage pies; why wouldn't Okuda have found out Arkacite had been broken into the night before?

"How big of a bonus?" I asked again.

She smiled even more broadly, and from there it was just haggling.

CHAPTER 20

I FIGURED as long as I was on the move, my mobile wouldn't compromise me—I'd have to pick up a new one, again—so I put the phone back together on the way back from the meeting with Okuda. I had a promise to keep to Arthur, after all, and with so much going on, the sooner I got this taken care of the better. Time to dial up the Chief Executive Officer of one of the largest tech companies on the planet.

Imogene Grant answered right before the call went to voicemail, her voice slow and suspicious. "Hello?"

"Hi," I said, yanking on the SUV's wheel to get around a tractor-trailer—I was pretty sure the power steering was gone. "I'm the person who has Liliana."

Grant inhaled sharply. "You've gone way too far this time. Did you think our message was exaggerating? We will destroy you for this, both publicly and privately!"

"I doubt that," I said. "What message?"

She hesitated, and when she spoke again her voice was much less certain. "Whom do you represent?"

"Whom do you think I represent?"

She snapped back to harshness. "If you are attempting to become another player in this game, this will not go well for you. I promise you that."

"What game?" I asked curiously.

She didn't answer right away. I floored the accelerator on the SUV while I waited; it reluctantly dragged its way toward freeway speed. Grant finally found her voice. "Who are you?"

"I'm the one who's got your tech," I repeated. "I called to negotiate."

Again she took a moment to respond. I was starting to think this conversation was confusing her just as much as it was confusing me. "Why would we negotiate with you?" she asked at last. "We have all of the legal standing."

"Which you're clearly not interested in using," I pointed out. "You haven't even reported what was stolen. You don't want the details out there. Trust me, if you try to make this into a criminal case, we will make your technology very public very quickly. Not to mention that we have Liliana right now, so as far as I can figure, we have all the leverage."

She didn't say anything.

"Besides which," I continued, "I don't know who you think you're dealing with, but I really don't care at all what's legal and what's not. If you don't negotiate with us, your little foray into humanoid robotics disappears forever. Period. End of story."

"What do you want?"

"To sit down and talk to you. Figure out a way to make everyone happy. I'm just a nice, accommodating person like that." And someone who wanted to get a suddenly-pro bono case over and done with as fast and cheaply as possible.

"All right. We'll...talk." The words sounded like she dragged them out through gritted teeth. "On one condition—you tell me who you're working for right now. Otherwise I call the nice detective and tell him we figured out *exactly* what was taken."

I had to bring Warren to negotiate anyway, and if Grant started talking to the police, he was the first person they would look at. "Okay," I said. "But be warned, if I catch one hint any of you are coming after my client, I will target you personally. Ask Albert Lau about that—he met me."

"You!"

"Yup, that was me. And I work for Noah Warren."

This time the silence was filled with disbelief and rage, before Imogene Grant exploded, "*Him?*"



I DETOURED to swing by one of my storage lockers to pick up another sidearm, this one a heavy steel HK P7M10. Next stop was an electronics store to buy a new phone, as well as a few spares—the rate I was burning them on this job was outrageous, even for me. Equipped again, I drove back to Miri's, mulling blackly about my Mafia problem.

I didn't know where to go from here. My barely-begun blackmail plan had started feeling laughably flimsy, like going up against Mama Lorenzo with toothpicks and twine, but I didn't have any other ideas. At least, not any good ones.

Maybe I could start kidnapping members of her family—I imagined holding Benito hostage; Mama Lorenzo would probably laugh and write him off as a loss. Or maybe I could confess to Checker how bad this had gotten—not my first choice—and enlist his help in finding a way to bust their financial rackets, hold them over a barrel economically. We'd need an impossible amount of intel to pull it off, but it wasn't like we hadn't succeeded at that sort of thing before.

Jesus. Checker. Should I tell him to go somewhere else, to disappear somewhere not connected with one of his friends? But where? What if Mama Lorenzo had eyes everywhere? What if she had enough people to put them all to work calling around to hotels and asking about a guy in a wheelchair?

And with a curdled feeling in my gut, I realized Checker probably wasn't the one I actually had to worry about. Mama Lorenzo already knew going after him without taking me out first might make me stupidly brazen enough to finally damn the consequences and assassinate her. I'd told her that in so many words during our first meeting. But she could go after literally anybody else, holding over my head that she still had Checker to kill if I made a fuss about it.

Her voice rang in my head. *I had not thought you so concerned with the lives of others. I'll make use of that.*

Fuck.

The irony was, I was the *last* person who'd be accused of caring too much about random people's lives. But there was a difference between

someone dying and that person dying because a Mob boss was using them as leverage against me, wasn't there? I knew plenty of people I might not consider friends but still didn't want to see in that category. Too many. Tegan had been a good first guess for Mama Lorenzo as someone who knew me—everyone knew Tegan—but what if she tracked down my regular clients? Harrington, or Yamamoto, or Dolzhikov? Not that most of my recurring clients weren't awfully good at taking care of themselves, but...

At minimum, this would get very bad for business. I ignored the uncomfortable squirming that suggested the business aspect wasn't what worried me most.

And what about Arthur? What about Tegan and Reese and Cheryl, whom I'd already tipped my hand about not wanting dead? What about Checker's other friends—Miri, if Mama Lorenzo tracked us to her apartment, or anyone else Checker associated with when he wasn't breaking digital laws?

What would be Mama Lorenzo's next move? I couldn't protect them all.

I amused myself for a moment by wishing she would try to go after Rio. He was my oldest acquaintance, after all. But even if she knew about our connection, Mama Lorenzo wasn't that stupid.

Maybe I should call Rio for backup, in fact. But no—this was my mess; I wasn't going to drag Rio away from his own shit because I couldn't handle it.

I had to be smart about this. Outwit her. And there was only one person I knew of that I could threaten Mama Lorenzo with as much as she could potentially threaten me: Isabella.

I could kidnap Isabella.

Oh, geez, are you high? Mama Lorenzo will drop a nuclear missile on you from orbit for that! Not to mention that Arthur would probably disown me for such a plan—but, hey, he didn't have to know. I could kidnap Isabella and threaten her until Mama Lorenzo made a deal.

It would be a fucking tightrope, of course. How to walk that line? And how to keep Mama Lorenzo from breaking all hell loose on me once she had her favorite niece back safely? I'd have to put some sort of fail-safe in place...

Shit. Talk about getting innocent people involved. Just because I didn't *care* didn't mean this was my preferred mode of action. It wasn't my MO to shoot people who weren't shooting at me—or, well, at least annoying me. And as far as I could tell, Isabella was just some college kid.

I'd sleep on it, I told myself, as I got out of the SUV at Miri's and headed in. Make some plans. And meanwhile get Warren and Arkacite the hell off my plate and into a wrap-up phase.

"Cas Russell! How was your—oh, shit, are you all right?" Checker hurriedly slid his laptop over onto a side table and came up to gaze at me clinically as I entered the apartment. "You look like someone blended you. In a blender. What happened?"

"I fell out a window."

"Into a moat of piranhas?"

"Into the air," I said. "A lot of air. The air was soft. The ground was not." I surveyed the living room. Pilar had opened the door for me when I arrived, and Warren and Liliana were playing together in the corner.

"What's he doing here?"

"Oh, have a heart," said Checker. "He wanted to play with his Tamagotchi daughter. It's too sad not to let him."

I pointed a finger in Checker's face. "My case, my rules."

"Those who depend on others to babysit can't throw stones," he said. "Uh, seriously though, are you all right? Miri might at least have some hydrogen peroxide or something—"

"I'm fine," I said. "Hey. Warren. Get over here."

He turned his head to look at me, then spoke very softly to Liliana before getting to his feet, his whole posture knotting up as he did so. As if my presence transformed him from a loving father into a soldier about to face a dressing-down.

He stepped over to us. "She's my daughter."

It took me a minute to place the non sequitur; I realized he must've thought I was about to kick him out. "Whatever," I said. "We've got a meeting with Arkacite tomorrow. I need you there."

"No!" The word tore out of him, low and ferocious. Frantic.

"No? *No?*" I exploded. "I am trying to handle this case for you *despite* you lying to me and *despite* you welching on me and *that's really what you*

want to say to me?”

His expression flickered. He glanced uncertainly at Checker.

“What’s going on tomorrow?” asked Checker, clearly trying to be the voice of reason. It was a terrible fit for him.

“What’s *going on* is that I’ve arranged a meeting with Arkacite, who are *very pissed off* that we stole their technology, but they agreed to talk things out and see if we could find a solution that works for everyone because *I* was kind enough to threaten them into it. I don’t even know why I’m helping you.” I got right in Warren’s face, craning my neck back to compensate for the fact that he was more than a foot taller. I might not have a solution for Mama Lorenzo yet, but I’d be damned if I wasn’t going to control the rest of my sorry life. “Now get. Out. And be at Arkacite tomorrow at nine a.m., or so help me, I will tell them it’s over and they win and *fuck you*.”

Every muscle in Warren’s face tightened, and to my surprise, his eyes suddenly gleamed with unshed tears. “I’m going to say goodnight to my daughter,” he whispered, and turned away.

“Hey, you didn’t punch him! Good on you,” said Checker.

I glared at him.

“Sorry, sorry, I have a highly inappropriate sense of humor. Speaking of which, I’ve never seen you try to negotiate. Are you sure that’s such a good idea?”

“I can still punch *you*,” I reminded him.

“Point. I’ll shut up now.”

“I need you at this thing tomorrow,” I said. “You’ve been going over the code; you know her specs. I need you to help me convince Arkacite to work out some kind of arrangement.”

“Yeah, uh, sure, of course.” He narrowed his eyes at me. “You really are going to try to negotiate, aren’t you? This isn’t a Trojan horse where you blow up Arkacite once you’re there?”

I sank into one of the chairs at Miri’s table, suddenly feeling drained. “I’ve been spending too much time around Arthur. The nonviolent thing is contagious.”

“It’s okay. You don’t have a very severe case.”

“Ha, ha.”

“Still, isn’t all of us going to Arkacite sort of like, uh, walking into the lion’s den or something?” Checker asked. “Not to criticize, just—I like not being wanted for felony theft these days, you know?”

“Grant wouldn’t meet anywhere else,” I said. I’d tried to push her, but the woman was scared of me. She would have picked going back to the police over the prospect of meeting a violent unknown like me anywhere other than a building where she had her own security force. “But you don’t have to worry; they’re not going to turn us in to the cops. They’re involved in something a lot bigger here. That’s why they weren’t suspecting Warren.”

“Something bigger like what?” asked Pilar.

I jerked around—I’d forgotten she was in the room. She made one of her squishy, exaggerated faces, this one a mix between self-consciousness and anxiety, as if she was afraid I was going to tear her a new one for venturing the question.

I studied her, contemplating. “Grant wouldn’t tell me what. Do you have any idea?”

Her eyes popped wide. “No, I—I don’t think so. I mean, I was just an admin.” She bit her lip and thought for a minute. “They were always super paranoid about secrecy, though. Like, *super* paranoid. We weren’t even supposed to take anything out of the office with us—I’m pretty sure most people did, but they would’ve been in big trouble if anyone found out.”

I remembered the briefcase I’d stolen from Lau. He’d had more than one reason for being horrified at me opening it.

“And all the corporate espionage stuff,” continued Pilar. “I always got the feeling someone really was leaking, and that they couldn’t find the person or stop it. I mean, we were always getting memos about it, and it always sounded to me like they were reacting to actual bad stuff happening, not like they were just suspicious. And the whole atmosphere there—we were always being told to change our passwords, and getting asked if we’d seen anything, and the background information they wanted on me just to temp was kind of insane. Plus, look at the security we had to go through just to get to work each day, and every different project I did paperwork for I had to sign a different NDA.”

“And you talked to *me* when I came in?” I said. I was starting to have slightly more admiration for her gumption.

She shrugged, the rise and fall of her shoulders so extreme it was comical. “I didn’t say I had good judgment.”

Checker smothered a laugh. Well, I suppose I had walked into that one.

The dust and dried blood caked on my skin was starting to itch. Mulling over Pilar’s information, I dragged myself up and washed my hands and face, then raided Miri’s kitchen for some food. She had mostly unrecognizable organic things with unpronounceable names, but I succeeded in throwing some edible-looking piles together on a plate. Warren swept out in the meantime, shutting the door behind him almost too quietly, the way a man would if he was trying like hell to maintain his dignity.

I almost felt bad for him. Almost.

My eyes caught on Liliana, who had spread paper out on the floor and was intent on her crayons. Warren must have brought them—I thought it unlikely Miri had crayons lying around.

After a moment of hesitation, I took my plate over and sat down next to her. “Hi.”

“Hi,” she said. I managed not to flinch.

“What are you drawing?” I asked.

“I want to draw Mr. Mittens,” she said, pointing at the white-booted tabby, who was busy batting at the fronds of one of Miri’s many plants, “but he isn’t being still.”

“Why don’t you draw, uh, that one instead?” I asked, jabbing my fork at the white cat. It was snoozing on its back, its legs sprawled in a way that didn’t look like it could possibly be comfortable.

“I drew him already.”

I blinked. The NLP shouldn’t have been tripped up by one irregular verb. Maybe Liliana’s programming threw in random errors to make her seem more natural.

She dug through the blank papers she had spread out and offered me a sheet festooned in color. “Do you want to see my picture?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Sure.”

She raised it toward me with delicate reverence for her own creativity.

I stared. She'd drawn the room—or at least, the prominent shapes in it, the contours of every object. Behind the wax outline of the cat in the foreground rose the couch, the table, the door—every line perfect, the mathematics of the perspective exact.

"I like drawing," said Liliana, oblivious. "Do you like drawing?"

"Um," I said. "I guess I never really thought about it."

"Here." She thrust a piece of blank paper and a fistful of crayons at me. "Draw with me."

"I, uh, I don't really have time," I said.

Her lower lip trembled. "Please?"

When it comes to kids, I'm a sucker—apparently even when they aren't real. I put down my plate and took the paper and crayons.

Liliana sprawled on her stomach and started a new picture, her crayons dragging across the page in precise lines. The new drawing looked almost exactly like the old one, only in different colors.

I hesitated with a red crayon poised over my sheet. I could do the same thing as Liliana, if I wanted: register every edge and corner before me with mathematical precision. The certainty of the result struck me as boring. Instead, I started to push the crayon in abstract shapes, letting my mind wander.

It didn't make a difference what Liliana was or wasn't, I reflected, or whether Warren was right in the head to want to stay with her. We'd sort it all out tomorrow and make everyone happy. Meanwhile, I'd called Okuda on the way home; I wanted to get the batteries to her tonight and then go straight to Cheryl's and leave a deposit. I didn't know how much the Grealy's repairs and loss of income would amount to, but Okuda's payment would at least be the right order of magnitude, conveniently saving me the time and effort needed to pick up large amounts of cash from my hidey-holes. I didn't want to leave Cheryl massively in the red if something happened to me. Something like a Mob hit.

Speaking of which, after taking care of Cheryl, I had to prepare for the Arkacite meeting tomorrow, and while I was doing that...

"Hey, Checker," I called. "Your girlfriend. When is she getting back?"

"I told you, Miri isn't my—"

"Not her. Isabella."

His face wrinkled with concern. “Are things getting—I mean, are you —?”

“I’m peachy,” I said. “You said you were getting her back here. When?”

“Um, I’d think by Monday at the latest,” he answered. “You made a good point about not antagonizing her aunt further, so I’ve had increasingly hysterical reports of a crazy and aggressive mountain lion auto-posting different places since yesterday. Today her school got flooded with emails worrying about the outdoor club camping trip thingy she’s on, some of which weren’t even faked. She was supposed to be there another week with them, eating mud and team building until the first day of classes, but I’m betting university administrators are getting interrupted at dinner by calls from frantic parents right about now—whether it pushes through on a weekend depends how motivated by potential liability they feel, but they’ll be axing the trip and bringing the students back.”

Slower, but it wouldn’t trace back to us or single out Isabella. In fact, under different circumstances it would have been a good idea, but in this case it left me two or three more days to evade Mama Lorenzo—and make sure she didn’t come after anyone else.

If Isabella wasn’t back by the time I’d squared away Warren and Liliana tomorrow morning, I decided, I’d take her return into my own hands. Which gave me less than twenty-four hours to figure out exactly how I was going to play her kidnapping. I needed to anticipate Mama Lorenzo’s next move, and the move after that...make sure to force her into the endgame...I circled the crayon in my hand, mushing it against the paper.

“Hey,” said Checker from above my left shoulder. “Where is that?”

I looked up. “Huh?”

He pointed. “What you’re drawing. Where is it?”

My drawing had splayed out into overlapping red shapes, circles and rectangles and long straight lines slashing through them. “It’s just a doodle.”

“It looks like a floor plan.”

Walls rising up, extending, dimensionalizing—

“No. It’s just scribbles.” I stood abruptly. “I have to get going.”

As I gathered my things and left, out of the corner of my eye I saw Checker lean down, pick up my drawing, and fold it into a pocket. For some

reason, that irritated me. I banged my way out of the apartment.

My first stop was back at the park, where Okuda waited on the same bench, this time with a messenger bag beside her. I unzipped it and peered inside. The setting sun revealed a tumble of mustard-colored currency straps wrapping bundles of hundred-dollar bills. I gave the bag a precise shake to rearrange the contents and checked again—she'd been as good as her word.

“Nice doing business with you,” I said.

“With you as well,” said Okuda, with a slight inclination of her head. She turned and left the park, the package of plutonium batteries tucked under her arm.

I hefted the messenger bag. Christ, it was nice when things went smoothly. I called Harrington on the way out of the park to tell him all was well and the plutonium situation was taken care of—which it was—and set off for Cheryl's.

I'd thought about doing a dead drop, but this was an awful lot of cash to leave somewhere. At the same time, I wasn't fond of showing my face around Cheryl's while I still had a hit out on me, just in case the Mob had connected the dots and figured I'd show up. So I texted Checker for Cheryl's address and stopped about a block prior, parking crookedly in front of a fire hydrant.

The backseat of the clunky SUV had plenty of clutter from its previous owners, from empty fast food bags to papers and receipts to some ratty sweatshirts. I stuffed some of the clutter into the messenger bag on top of the money so it wasn't visible anymore and then hopped out, all my senses on alert.

Cheryl's block was on the rougher side, apartment buildings all mashed up against each other and trash strewn across the sidewalks and into the streets. A homeless guy was snoozing on the sidewalk against a low wall in front of one of the apartment buildings. I went up and crouched down next to him, my nostrils twitching at the odor of stale sweat and staler alcohol. “Hey,” I said.

He blinked awake, his eyes bloodshot in a face greasy and black with grime. “Can't a man sleep!” he slurred at me aggressively. “Fuck you!”

“Wanna make a hundred dollars?” I asked, undeterred.

“Hundred dollars! What you talking about making a hundred dollars? I look like I have a hundred dollars to you?”

I pulled five twenties out of my pocket. “No, I’m giving you a hundred dollars. Take this bag to number 5208. Give it to a blond woman named Cheryl. You do that, I’ll give you this money. Okay?”

He reached out a grimy hand to snatch at the bills; I lifted them out of his reach. “No, take the bag first. If she’s not there, just bring it back. I’ll be watching.”

“Fuck you, hundred dollars,” he mumbled at me, but he wobbled upright and reached for the bag.

“Number 5208,” I reminded him. “A woman named Cheryl. Got it?”

“Five-two-oh-eight, fucking Cheryl, not fucking stupid,” he mumbled, and ambled off. I went back to my car and watched. I wasn’t sure my messenger was quite all there, but he would do.

I dialed Cheryl while he ambled down the street.

“Hello?”

“Cheryl? It’s Cas Russell.”

“Russell.” She snorted. “What do you want?”

“Are you at home right now? I’m sending someone to your door with some cash.”

She paused for a minute, as if that wasn’t what she’d been expecting. “Yeah, I’m here. Got no place else to be, you know. Grealy’s is a fucking crime scene, thanks to you.”

“Well, there’s a guy heading up to you with a bag of cash. Ignore the smell. The bag’s from me.”

“I got no idea how much the damage’ll be,” Cheryl said, still belligerent.

“Then you can consider this a down payment, and you can update me,” I said impatiently.

She hesitated again. I realized she hadn’t actually expected me to make good on the other night. Probably with reason, considering I’d been the one to get her bar shot up in the first place.

“Christ, I’m not going to leave you hanging,” I said. “That’s not how I do business.”

“You’d be surprised,” she said. “More and more douchebags out there tryin’ to stiff me on shit. Nobody’s old school anymore.”

By that time my dirty messenger had made it to her doorstep. I watched him ring the bell; Cheryl pulled open the door, nodded to him, took the bag, and shut the door again.

“Got it,” she said in my ear. I heard some rustling, and then Cheryl’s voice took on a very different tone. “Shit. Russell. This is too much.”

I’d been hoping that would be the case. “Then consider it an apology for the inconvenience.”

“You’re still banned. This don’t change nothing.”

“Yeah, fine.” My delivery man was shuffling back toward me; I put down the window and tossed the folded up bundle of twenties out onto his little stack of belongings before starting the car and peeling away from the curb. “If the Lorenzos give you any trouble, call me.”

She didn’t answer.

“Cheryl?”

“I got someone here right now wants to talk to you.” Her tone was back to belligerent. “I’m not taking sides in this, you get me? I don’t want me or my bar in the middle of your goddamned feud. You and me, we’re square, and anything else happens, I’m not a part of it. That fucking clear?”

I opened my mouth to ask her what the hell she was talking about, but before I could, Benito Lorenzo’s voice came loud and obsequious over the line. “Cas! It’s Benito!” He drew his name out like it was a declaration. “You didn’t call me back, man! I’m hurt.”

I almost crashed into the car in front of me. Fuck, they *had* staked out Cheryl’s—or at least, Benito had. I’d thought I was being paranoid.

“Your family is trying to kill me,” I reminded Benito acidly. “Why on earth would I call you back?”

“It’s a misunderstanding,” he said cheerfully. “You and me, we’ll make this right, eh?”

Like I believed that for a second. “Your mother—”

“Stepmother,” he corrected. “My step-mama.”

“Your stepmother doesn’t see it that way.”

“Eh. She’s a woman, you know? They get emotional about these things.”

His dismissal was so far off from reality that I wondered briefly if he’d even *met* his stepmother. “I’ll tell her you said that,” I said.

“Oh, uh—better not. Don’t want to rock the boat, you know.” He laughed a little too loudly. “How about you and me, we work this out? Huh?”

“How?” I demanded.

“Eh?”

“How do we work it out?”

“Eh, you know. The Madre, she likes me,” he bragged. “I get her to come, I get you to come, we sit down all civilized and talk, right? Everyone’s happy. Worth a try, eh?”

“I tried talking to her,” I said. “It didn’t work.”

“Because I wasn’t there. I told you, I’m her favorite.”

“This is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” I said. “Good-bye.”

“Wait wait wait wait! You owe me one, remember? For the introduction? You said. Hear me out.”

“I’m not going to repay a favor by walking into an ambush—”

“No, no—just listen, okay? You let me finish.”

I wondered how long it would take someone to trace this call. If Benito himself was tracing me. How long had I been talking to Cheryl? The SUV had no pickup, but I flattened the accelerator, speeding toward the freeway. “You have one minute,” I said. “And that makes us square.”

“You drive a hard bargain, man! Okay. My stepmama—she maybe isn’t the best person to run things, you know?”

What the fuck? “What are you saying?”

His voice got lower, fast and cagey. “All I’m saying is, maybe I tell you where she is, is all. Maybe if she’s not running things no more, maybe there’s a new person in power. And maybe he’s got no problem with you and your friend. You know?”

I almost laughed. The idea that *Benito Lorenzo* would be the preferred person to step into a power vacuum was ridiculous, no matter what his family connections. But if he could at least leverage those connections to

get the sword lifted off Checker and me once Mama Lorenzo was out of the picture...well, I couldn't say I cared one way or another about what happened with the Mob's power hierarchy, as long as Benito could make sure we were forgotten.

Still, it felt like a long shot. A very long and dangerous shot, with a high probability that he was only drawing me in to try to double-cross me. And even if he wasn't, I'd be ensnarling myself in a Mafia coup as a hired assassin, which did not sound like a position with a lot of longevity.

But considering my other options, or lack thereof...

"Hypothetically," I said, "you have someone in mind you'd want to blame for this? I'm not going to take out Mama Lorenzo for you if it means this target on my back is going to become permanent."

"Right! Of course!" Benito said, way too fast. Paragon of competence and forethought, this one. Fuck me. "Of course. Uh—the Madre, she has enemies. Many enemies."

And fuck me twice. This was ridiculous. If there was one person I didn't want to depend on in a plot against one of the most powerful women on the West Coast, that person was Benito Lorenzo. "Come up with a plan," I said shortly. "I like it, I'll think about it."

"But this would solve all of our problems, for both of us—"

"I said I'd think about it. Come up with a plan that has a chance of working."

I hung up on him and texted Cheryl's phone the number for my permanent voicemail box, just in case Benito later had something worth saying to me. Then I popped the battery out of the phone in my hand in case he was already double-crossing me and swerved down the next off ramp. I needed to switch cars. And phones—I'd left the spares at Miri's.

Shit. *Was* there a way I could use Benito's hunger for power? A way that kept my back covered in case he was about to stab me in it?

I'd have to think about it while getting ready for the Arkacite meeting. Checker hadn't been mistaken when he'd asked whether it was a good idea to be meeting Grant on her own turf—we needed to be prepared. Not that I was expecting anything to go wrong; Grant might have a hell of a lot of private security, but at the end of the day, Arkacite was a corporation. They lived in the civilized world, a place where people didn't shoot each other on

a regular basis. If she turned on us, her game plan would be getting us handed to the police.

Which we didn't want to happen, obviously, but I didn't think it was much of a concern. Grant would go a long way to protect Arkacite's secrets, and she seemed as loathe to let the authorities in on this matter as we were. Compared to my other problems, the Arkacite meeting felt about as dangerous as going up against an aggressive flatworm.

But that didn't mean I didn't need a backup plan.

I thought about the Arkacite building schematics I had swallowed the night before. I had until nine a.m.

CHAPTER 21

I ARRIVED at Arkacite at 9:12 the next morning and recognized Checker, Warren, and Pilar waiting for me outside in the plaza. As I approached, Checker detached himself from the group and came over. “Everything good?”

“What’s Pilar doing here?” I said.

He shrugged. “Eh, she wanted to come. They treated her like crap here; I figured she deserved to see them taken down a few pegs. Besides, you never know when it might be useful to have someone on our side who can call them out if they try to bullshit us.”

He did have a point. But... “Wait. Who’s watching Liliana?” I’d tried to get Arthur back, but he was still at Tegan’s.

“Nobody needs to watch her,” scoffed Checker. “I just disabled her movement capabilities for the moment.”

“You *what?*”

“I’m joking! I’m joking. Calm down. Miri’s looking after her. She’s home for the weekend.”

I took a breath, unsettled by how strong my response had been.

“I made some noise about an abusive stalker parent and warned her not to leave the apartment or open the door, which she was frighteningly blasé about, by the way. My phone will get a ping if the security system detects anything.” He waggled the smartphone at me.

And thanks to Checker, Miri’s security was about as good as it was possible for a civilian apartment to have. Still, I would have felt a hell of a

lot more comfortable with Arthur. Given Checker's talents, I was less worried about the efficacy of Miri's security system than I was about trusting Miri *or* Pilar, but it wasn't like I had a lot of people on call to babysit a five-year-old girl.

Or something that looked like one. What I should have done was turn her off and lock her in a vault.

"In a few hours it won't matter, anyway," I said, more to convince myself than Checker. "We're going to hash this out right now."

"We hope," said Checker.

"Yeah." I fished into my pocket and pulled out a compact shape of rubber and metal about the size of my hand. "Speaking of, stick this in a pocket."

"What is it?"

"A gas mask."

"A *what*?" he yelped.

"It's a contingency plan, genius. Next time tell me if you're bringing an extra person." I relented at the horrified look on his face. "We're not going to need it. They're a corporation, not a crime syndicate—the worst we have to worry about is them calling the police, and they won't. They want to deal."

He took the mask, fingering it nervously. "I hope you're right."

We all walked into the broad lobby together. It was remarkably quiet, with only the security guards at their posts and nobody else. Come to think of it, the plaza outside had been empty, too.

"Did they send everyone home just to meet with us?" I wondered aloud.

Pilar gave me a funny look. "It's Saturday. I mean, some of the hardcore engineers still come in on weekends, but not many other folks."

Oh. Right.

Three people waited by the elevators. One was Lau, wearing an exceedingly sour expression and a surgical dressing over the gash on his face. The other two were women. One was a heavy white woman with a drab fashion sense and the type of fluffy haircut only older women seemed to get; I guessed she was Grant. The other woman was much younger, had longer hair, and was far too thin, as if someone had wrapped a business suit around a pencil.

The security guard at the desk made an abortive movement as we walked by. Pilar's stride hitched a bit, but the rest of us kept going and she hurried to keep up.

I led the way through the accessibility gate. When I went through the metal detector it went off spectacularly; I ignored it and marched up to the group by the elevators. "Grant?"

The older woman stepped forward. "Are you the person I spoke to on the phone?" She didn't offer a hand, and her tone was not quite hostile.

I matched it. "Yes, I am. You already know Noah Warren. These are my associates." I waved at Checker and Pilar.

Grant nodded at her people. "You and Mr. Lau have...met. Clarise Hryshchuk is the head of our legal team."

"Good," I said, "since I intend you and Mr. Warren to sign something by the end of this meeting."

Grant's face twitched.

"Shall we?" said the lawyer, looking back and forth between Grant and me. When neither of us answered, she stepped over and swiped a guest pass to call the elevator, her heels clicking on the lobby floor. "We have a conference room prepared," she announced to us as we followed them in. Grant and Lau seemed disinclined to be civil; the lawyer glanced at them and shifted uncomfortably, transferring her briefcase from one hand to the other. I didn't blame her. The tension was palpable.

As the elevator slid smoothly upward, Lau sidestepped closer to Pilar. "I knew you were up to something, you little sneak," he said snidely, talking down his nose at her.

Pilar scooted backward so he was no longer in her personal space and turned to me. "Can I kick him in the balls, or will that mess everything up?"

Checker snorted with laughter. A vein started pulsing in Lau's forehead.

"I'm normally not opposed," I said. "But hold off for now."

Lau and Grant glowered at us. The lawyer had a bizarre expression on her face, as if this sort of interaction was so far outside her realm of experience she didn't even know how to react.

We made it to the conference room. I commandeered the side of the table facing the frosted glass door for my team, and the Arkacite folk seated themselves across from us. The lawyer opened her briefcase and took out

some papers and a pen, as if she thought this was going to be a normal business meeting.

“Let’s cut the bullshit,” said Grant, making her lawyer’s eyes bug out. “We need the prototype back.”

Warren stiffened in his chair, his hands clenching on the edge of the table. The reaction could not have been more obvious if he had shouted. The tension in the room ratcheted up about a thousand notches.

“Okay!” I said, holding up a hand to give Warren pause. “Ground rules. For the purposes of this discussion, she’s a girl and her name is Liliana—all right, everyone?”

Grant’s mouth pinched.

Checker jumped in before anyone had a chance to boil over. “You have all of Denise Rayal’s notes and designs, right? And most of her team is still employed here. I’ve read the specs; you can build another, uh, another prototype. Why not let Mr. Warren keep his daughter? Why can’t he buy her off you or something?”

“The, uh, *Liliana* is privileged information,” said Grant acerbically. “Having it floating around out there while we develop for commercialization is unacceptable.”

I could feel Warren tensing even more beside me, the hurt and anger rolling off him in waves. ““She,”” I said. “Let’s call her a ‘she,’ okay?”

“Well, we don’t need a reason to want—her—back,” said Grant. “If we don’t want to give away our own technology, that’s our decision, and stealing from us in this farcical attempt to leverage a deal is despicable.”

“So is taking a guy’s daughter,” I said.

Grant opened her mouth, then glanced at Warren and pressed her lips together.

“You’re also discounting the value of the data we’ve been acquiring from her extended trial,” put in Lau. “We have no way of predicting what types of responses we’ll get from an AI with machine learning algorithms of this complexity. After Liliana was activated, Denise Rayal led a team of seven engineers who built up an extended behavior study that this department has poured resources into for over a year. If we stop those observations now, we lose that year. Any other prototype would start at the beginning.”

“Come on,” I said. “What does Arkacite even want with this technology anyway? Why would anyone buy one?”

“She belongs to us regardless of whether you believe we would want her,” said Grant. “As to applications, they could be considerable. We have many avenues to explore.”

“Like what?” I demanded. “It *is* relevant here, because this is a negotiation and she has a value to you. I’m trying to figure out why that value’s not zero.”

Lau and Grant exchanged a glance. Her expression was still pinched, but after a moment she waved him on.

“Children who act realistically could help parents prepare for real childrearing,” Lau recited, turning back to us. “Some people might be inclined to buy human-like company as a companion, the way they might a pet—something to love, if they need or want that. Others might consider one of our products for certain specific tasks, if we could program them to be proficient—to be nannies or tutors for their children, tasks a computer might be capable of but be otherwise considered too harsh, or administrative positions that do not require human intellect but benefit from a human face. And if we could upgrade the Turing mimicry to approximate something close to an adult woman...well, there are less savory applications that could be very lucrative. The prototype is *very* valuable to us.”

“Wait, you finally created a machine that passes the *Turing test* and you’re going to reduce it to producing *sex dolls*?” cried Checker.

A slight flush rose up Grant’s neck. “Of course we are. Palatable or not, it’s an obvious market.”

“I dunno,” said Pilar. “If I could buy a hot guy who would know when to shut up and how to please a woman and I could keep him in a closet between times, I’d be all over that.” Everyone stared at her. She shrugged and pulled a face. “I’m just *saying*. It’s not a totally bad idea.”

Checker choked. “I—okay,” he said. “Point taken, and, yes, maybe the market for it is obvious, and I’ve always been as pro-kink as it’s possible to be, but—well, I’ve been literally forced to do a lot of self-reflection this past week, and I’m just saying. Maybe training all your customers to treat women as objects who only say what they’re programmed to is something you should at least *think* about?”

“Commercial applications are years away from development,” said Grant, a sharp edge in her voice. “We will consider all we feel we should. This is not the time for that discussion. Nor is it, frankly, any of your business.”

“Well, it sort of is,” said Checker. “If we’re concerned about the integrity of what you’re going to do with the technology—”

“I’m not concerned,” I cut in. Checker shot me an annoyed look, but I ignored him; the last thing I needed was for him to get into a knock-down drag-out with Grant and Lau about ethics. I’d made a solid career out of flexible morals. “I couldn’t care less what you do with your tech. That’s your call. I’m concerned about one little girl and her relationship with her dad.” Warren let out a quiet breath beside me. “Grant, you wouldn’t be here if you weren’t willing to shift a few inches. You said we’d cut the bullshit. What are you willing to give?”

Grant folded her hands on the table. “We would be willing to allow Mr. Warren to...uh, visit.”

“No.” Warren’s voice was so quiet I wasn’t sure Grant heard it, but I put a hand on his arm regardless, warning him back again.

“That’s not going to cut it,” I said. “How about this. Why can’t Warren live with her and you observe her at the same time?”

“We need to keep her in a secure, controlled environment, not off-site under someone else’s purview. Remember, we *will* go to the police if—”

“That’s not what I meant,” I cut in. “What if Warren lives in your controlled environment with her?”

Grant recoiled. “He’s not going to be willing to give up his life—”

“Let’s ask him,” I said. “Warren, would you be willing to live in a lab with Liliana?”

“If she’s comfortable, well-treated—if I can care for her—”

“There you go,” I said to Grant. “Give ’em a nice locked apartment in a lab somewhere, like whatever you had set up before with Rayal. Your researchers can be the ones who visit.”

Grant’s forehead knitted. Lau cocked his head to the side thoughtfully. “It could help our research if this...relationship...were to continue,” he said. “She’s already been trained to respond to him as a father.”

“Even better,” I said. “You can put him on payroll.”

Grant squinted at Warren. “You’d give up your life for this project?”

“She’s not a project,” said Warren quietly.

“That means ‘yes,’” I translated. “Does that work for you?”

Grant’s jaw tightened like she had bitten down on something spoiled.

“May we have a moment?” said the lawyer.

Clarise the Lawyer shepherded Grant over to the side of the room and spoke to her softly. Lau stayed in his seat. He didn’t seem very comfortable; his gaze floundered around like he didn’t know where to look, and he’d started twitching. After a few minutes I realized why: Pilar was staring at him blandly from across the table.

“What do you want?” he hissed at her.

“Don’t mind me,” said Pilar. “I’m just imagining your head impaled on an iron spike while rats chew chunks out of your eyeballs.”

Checker choked.

“Quit it,” I said.

Pilar dropped her stare, though she managed to do it very deliberately, as though it was her idea.

Grant and the lawyer came back. “We can work something out,” said Grant, biting off every word. “But the fact remains that you broke in, stole our technology, and are leveraging it against us. That’s unacceptable. We need more.”

“What did you have in mind?” I asked.

“Which of you broke into our facility?”

“Why do you want to know?” I countered.

“You owe us,” said Grant.

“You want us to help you beef up your security?” said Checker. “Or are you talking about some sort of, uh, damage remunerations?”

One of Grant’s fingers twitched against the table. “Something along those lines,” she said.

Well, that was a nonsensically vague answer. I narrowed my eyes at Grant. I supposed it was possible she wanted security tips, but I had the distinct feeling she was aiming for something a lot less legal.

Oh, the irony.

Whatever. If it got me out of this mess, I'd take the job. "Okay," I said. "You've got an IOU."

The lawyer was scribbling. "We can specify the details—"

"No, that's all right," said Grant. "Your word is good, isn't it?" she asked me, an ominous shadow behind the words.

"Yeah," I said.

The lawyer stopped writing, her eyes widening. "Ms. Grant, as your legal counsel, I strongly advise—"

"Draw up the contract for the, the daughter. Mr. Warren and I will sign it," said Grant.

The lawyer looked like she wanted to argue, but instead she hesitated just long enough to convey stern disapproval. "All right."

Holy crap. We'd figured this out. Warren had his daughter back, Arkacite wasn't after him, and I'd steal something for Arkacite and everything would be hunky-dory. Well, except for the fact that I wasn't getting paid. That part sucked.

My cell phone rang.

"Scuse me," I said. The number was Arthur's; I got up and moved to the corner of the room, away from the conference table. "Yeah?"

"Are you still at Arkacite?"

"Yeah," I said. "What's up?"

"You seen the news?"

"No, because we're *still here*. Spit it out."

"It's—I think it's your robot girl."

Foreboding shot through me. "What?"

"Well—she's on the news. Russell, I don't know how it happened, but she—they—they killed her."

CHAPTER 22

THE WORLD felt like it tunneled to only me and the cell phone. “What? How? Who?”

“I ain’t sure—it’s a guy, he’s on every news channel—I don’t know yet how he got her, or why; I dialed you right away—”

“I’ll call you back.” I crossed to Checker, carefully avoiding looking in Warren’s direction. “I need Miri’s number, now,” I whispered.

“Is something wrong?” Grant asked, the edge back in her voice.

“No,” I snapped.

Checker’s expression went still and serious. He pulled out his mobile, scrolled, and handed it to me; I threw out an excuse I didn’t hear to the Arkacite team and retreated out into the hallway before I hit the screen to dial Checker’s phone.

Miri picked up on the third ring. “Hello?” She sounded utterly relaxed.

“It’s Cas Russell,” I said urgently. “What—”

“Oh, Checker’s ex, right? Hey, good to talk to you again.”

“Uh—no, I’m not—Liliana, tell me what happened to Liliana!”

“What do you mean?” said Miri, sounding taken aback. “She’s playing with my cats right now. Adorable kid.”

“Wait, she’s there?”

“Of course.” She strung the two words out with a dollop of cheerful sarcasm. “Hey, I know you strangle people randomly, so this might seem

weird to you, but when you babysit you aren't supposed to leave little kids alone. It's a thing. That's why they call you a babysitter."

I let out a long breath and leaned back against the wall. Liliana was okay, then. "Uh, keep an eye on her, all right?"

"I just told you," said Miri. "That's what babysitters *do*."

"Right. Thanks."

I hung up. What the hell was going on?

Checker's phone was a specially-secured smartphone instead of one of the disposables I usually carried. After a little fussing, I found its web browser and surfed to a news site.

Arthur was right. Smacking me in the face was a picture of a man on a podium, and cowering away from him was Liliana—and she was cowering away from him because he was attacking her with something akin to a cattle prod, blue electricity arcing against her skull as her expression contorted in pain and fear. An inset photo showed her small body collapsed on a chair, her limbs sprawling off the sides and her head torn open to spill broken and twisted metal shards down her front.

I stared at the pictures for a long moment, the horror not registering.

Artificial intelligence imposters revealed, read the headline below the photos, with the subheading, *Hunt is on for humanlike machines among us*.

I kept staring at the pictures, even though I didn't need to—I had already automatically done the math, the eigenvectors and isometric invariants of facial recognition. I never mix two people up. The girl in the picture had the same bone structure as Liliana, the same features, the same height. She'd been dressed in a girl's tank top and jeans instead of the blue party dress, but she was undoubtedly the same girl.

Unless in this case she wasn't. I dialed Miri back.

"Hello?"

"It's Cas Russell again," I said.

"Checker told me something of what's going on, you know," she assured me. "We're locked up tight here. You don't have to worry."

I ignored her. "Put Liliana on."

"Sure." I heard a couple shuffling sounds, and then Miri's voice said faintly, "Hey, sweetie. Do you remember Cas? She wants to talk to you for

a tick. Now, if she's mean, let me know and I'll take the phone away."

I glowered impotently at the speaker, though I supposed Miri had reason to take the mickey.

"Hello?" said a tremulous girl's voice.

The same wrongness rippled through it, the too-even cadence produced by a machine. It was Liliana.

Of course, so was the girl in the news picture.

"Hi there," I said. "I just wanted to say hello. Is everything okay?"

"Everything's okay," said Liliana. "Hello."

"You can put Miri back on," I said.

"I swear I am a mildly responsible adult," said Miri into the phone.

I didn't bother trying to explain. "Don't let her out of your sight. Not for a minute."

"Darn, and I was going to send her out for some smokes and whiskey."

I hung up on her.

Liliana had a copy out there. One not controlled by us *or* Arkacite. Or at least, she'd *had* one, until now. I started to look back at the news article to find out what the hell was going on—

—and an almighty roar sounded from back inside the conference room.

Shit! I tore the door open just in time to see Warren overturn the conference table with a mighty heave, all control lost—he'd seen the news already—

Goddamn people and their obsession with checking their goddamn smartphones every minute!

Checker and Pilar were trying to drag Warren back and having almost no effect at all, Grant and Lau were screaming at Warren in a rage—something about his fault and years of research down the drain—as Lau stabbed a finger in his face, and the lawyer had scrambled to a corner and was trying to look invisible.

"Hey! Stop it! *Stop it!*" I yelled.

They kept shouting. I did a quick acoustic equation in my head and stuck two fingers in my mouth.

The piercing whistle overwhelmed the room, echoing and redoubling off the walls, blazing through our skulls, taking every thought and smashing

it to oblivion. Pilar and Checker snapped their hands to their ears, letting go of Warren; he half-fell forward, catching himself on the ground with his hands and barely keeping himself from faceplanting on the overturned table. He curled over on his knees, arms wrapped over his head to shut out the noise. Grant, Lau, and the lawyer all clamped their palms against their ears as well. The lawyer started screaming.

I ran out of breath and took my fingers out of my mouth. My ears were ringing.

“Holy crap, Cas,” croaked Checker.

I was pretty impressed with the mathematics myself. At least it had quieted them all—with the exception of the lawyer, who was hyperventilating into her corner. I ignored her. “The girl in the news is not Liliana,” I announced to the room at large. “I just talked to her, and she’s *fine*. We will get to the bottom of this, but everyone needs to calm down. Right now.”

“That’s not possible,” said Grant, one hand still against the side of her head and her voice loud and over-enunciated. “Whether or not that was our prototype, it was definitely our technology. Your threat to go public means nothing anymore—this deal is off. Our security will detain you until we figure out how this theft of our property happened.” She brandished her phone at Warren. “I called when this menace started shouting. That should be our security team now.” The door burst open as six men and women with Tasers rushed into the room. They aimed at all of us with wild eyes and hands that were far too twitchy—then again, they had probably heard my lovely acoustic demonstration a minute ago.

“Is this legal?” squeaked Pilar.

“Go ahead. Call the police,” barked Grant. “You stole our property, blackmailed us into a deal when we tried to get it back, and then were responsible for a leak of corporate secrets that’s now having repercussions in national news. I’m sure the authorities would love to speak with you.” Her head whipped to me, and her eyes burned. “You gave me some grand statements about being above the law. I wonder how many warrants are out for your arrest?”

“None that I know of,” I said. Checker had taken care of quietly disappearing them.

“Then be my guest,” said Grant. “Call the police.” She held out her phone, first to me, then to Checker and Pilar, and finally to Warren, who was still kneeling on the floor. When none of us moved to take it, she put it back in her pocket. “That’s what I thought.”

“You’re making a mistake,” I said. My eyes flicked around the room. Checker was trying, subtly, to catch my eye, his hand in his pocket—*contingency?*

I shook my head slightly. Grant and her people still didn’t want to call in the cops themselves, which meant this was probably only grandstanding. On the other hand, if I started knocking out their guards or blowing holes in their building again, they might very well decide to throw up their hands and bring in the authorities. I wanted to avoid that.

Besides, having Pilar along messed up my contingency plan anyway.

Five more security guards rushed in.

“Keep them in this room,” said Grant to her team. She held out a hand. “Your phones, please.”

I handed her Checker’s cell and mine, making sure Checker’s screen had locked itself again first. Warren and Pilar also dug out mobiles and handed them over. They both had to put them together first, I was glad to see. Checker must have given them a security lesson—not that it mattered now.

“We’ll be back when we figure out what’s going on,” said Grant coolly, her voice still slightly too loud and overly-articulated around the edges. She turned and left, Lau close on her heels; the lawyer scrambled up with the aid of the wall, gathered her dropped papers in an awkward flurry, and followed.

One of the security guards—the one in charge, I presumed—motioned us to gather on the other side of the room. We moved obediently, Warren pushing himself up from the floor to join us, looking wrung out. Nine of the guards stayed with their Tasers trained on us; the other two left, shut the door, and stood outside, their silhouettes visible through the frosted glass.

Nine Tasers. Three people I needed to protect. An army of security between us and the outside. It could be worse.

“Uh, guys?” said Pilar. She had wandered over to the window, and now her eyes were bugging out of her head. “I think...”

I vaulted across the intervening space and joined her. Swerving into the Arkacite parking lot was a wagon train of shiny black SUVs, red and blue lights flashing from behind their tinted windshields. Behind me, the security guards' walkies exploded in overlapping chatter.

Shit.

"Go sit on Checker's lap," I said in a low voice, pitching the decibel level so the guards shuffling behind us wouldn't hear it.

Pilar's eyes flew even wider, but to her credit she didn't ask questions. She went over and touched Checker's shoulder, and then slipped down to snuggle with him, remarkably as if she were his girlfriend looking for affection.

Checker flailed for a moment in shock before he figured out what was happening, but fortunately he had come over to the window with us and was facing away from the now-distracted guards. He subtly adjusted Pilar's legs out of the way of his left wheel and slid his hand into his pocket.

The SUVs had begun disgorging men and women in crisp black suits. Crap and double crap. This wasn't the cops. This was someone else, someone who was here about the robot girl on the news. FBI? Homeland Security? I didn't want to wait around to find out.

I caught Checker's eye, breathed in deeply and held it, and waited for him to do the same. Then I brought down my hand against my right pocket at the exact angle I needed to break the valve of the gas canister there.

The slight hiss wasn't audible over the buzzing shouts on the guards' walkies. Pilar, who was nearby and without a high body mass, lost consciousness first, her head drooping down on Checker's shoulder. By the time any of the guards realized what was happening they were already listing, their vision fuzzy and their muscles melting—I'd slid off my jacket just in case—one young man fired his Taser as he went down but the darts snapped off into the empty air; a larger woman stayed upright longer and struggled to aim her wavering weapon, but as she pulled the trigger I flicked my jacket forward and caught the tangling leads. She slumped to the ground along with her colleagues.

I grabbed out my own gas mask and slid it on so I could take a breath, leaning down at the same time to snag keycards off two of the guards. Checker had his mask on too; I tossed one of the keycards to him and he

caught it one-handed, tugging Pilar closer against his shoulder with the other and rebalancing her weight before spinning toward the door.

“Where to?” His voice was muffled and metallic-sounding through the mask.

I was busy drawing Warren’s arm over my shoulders and heaving him into a fireman’s carry—he was not a small man. “Freight elevator to the roof. Back of the building.”

I staggered over to the door. The canister in my pocket was still hissing; I did some diffusion calculations and cracked the door—the guards outside already had to be sleepy from the gas seeping underneath it—

They both thumped to the ground in seconds. I kicked their legs out of Checker’s way as I went by, and we hurried into the hallway.

The floor was empty. No workers, and all of the other security personnel must have rushed downstairs to deal with the government people...

We ran. I lumbered unevenly under Warren’s weight. Checker built up a good burst of momentum and sped down the hall next to me; we blew through the doors and office corridors until we hit a back hallway. Panting, I smacked a hand down on the button for the freight elevator as Checker held up the guard’s keycard to the sensor, and the world constricted for the seconds it took before the elevator lurched up to our floor.

The doors on this freight elevator were manual. I heaved them apart, staggering as Warren’s weight shifted, and we piled inside. I half-slid Warren’s mass onto the floor and pulled the doors closed again as Checker punched the cracked button marked “R.”

The slow trawl of the elevator car felt like an age, but at last it wobbled to a halt. I shoved it open again to reveal a rolling metal door that was very securely locked. That was okay, because I already had the explosives out.

I packed in the C-4 and moved to the back of the elevator, crouching over Warren’s limp body in the corner. “Cover your ears!”

Checker spun to face the wall and ducked, but covered Pilar’s ears instead. I pushed the detonator.

The blast went off with a clang of metal, and a few whizzing bits of shrapnel pattered against the back of my jacket, though not hard enough to

hurt. I hurried back to the door, kicked away the broken pieces of lock, and yanked it upward with a screech.

Checker was already navigating his way out onto the sun-drenched rooftop by the time I got Warren hoisted up over my shoulders again. The sky was wide and blue around us, the top of the building becoming an island far above the world.

An island with a helicopter parked in the middle of it.

I'd been mentally timing the gas canister, and it had run out in the elevator. I pulled the gas mask down off my face with the hand I wasn't using to steady Warren's bulk over me and shouted to Checker as we charged across the smooth, hard surface the roof. Well, in my case less of a charge and more of a shamle. I'd been keeping Warren perfectly balanced, but he was *heavy*. And big. This had seemed like a much better plan the night before, when I thought I wouldn't have to use it. And when I'd figured it was a bad idea to tell Warren about anything other than what he strictly needed to know—I probably should've looped him in.

"I thought you said you couldn't fly a helicopter!" Checker cried as we dashed under the long shadows of the blades.

"I read the manual last night," I called back.

"You *what?*" Checker's voice climbed shrill surprise.

"Shut up and get in!"

I punctuated the last words with levering Warren off my shoulders and through the door of the helicopter, landing him on the floor. He was starting to stir—he had a large body mass, and the gas was wearing off. Checker disentangled Pilar to hand her up to me; I grabbed her under the armpits and heaved her into one of the passenger chairs.

"You good?" I called back to Checker, vaulting into the pilot's seat.

"Yeah, go!"

In my hours cramming helicopter schematics, I'd also figured out how to hotwire one—it had turned out not to be that different from jacking a car. The motor thrummed to life beneath us, the blades starting up and vibrating through the craft. I glanced back. Checker was inside and pulling his chair up after him; Pilar was slumped bonelessly, her head sagging to one side; but Warren was staggering upright, hunched over in the cramped space.

“Sit down!” I shouted over the engine noise. I couldn’t take off until the rotors were at velocity—

He turned toward me, anxious and terrified. “They want her! Those people, they want Liliana!”

“Probably,” I said. “Sit *down!*” I was trying to remember how to fly. Pedals, cyclic, collective, that was right.

Across the rooftop, the doors to the executive lift slid open, and both Arkacite security and the government people in suits poured out. They ran straight for us, but it was okay. They would be too late. I watched the RPMs and closed my left hand around the collective lever.

“Protect her!” shouted Warren, and jumped back down to the rooftop.

“What the *hell!*” I cried. Warren was sprinting toward the oncoming security forces, waving his arms, a man on a mission—the Arkacite guards had their Tasers out and the government suits were drawing Glock—*shit*—

I did the math, thought of Checker and Pilar, and pulled back on the collective.

The lift yanked us into the air with absolutely no finesse. Checker yelled and grabbed at Pilar protectively, as if he was afraid I would pitch them out the still-open door. I looked back and to the side as we rose away, in time to see no less than three of the Arkacite guards fire their Tasers simultaneously.

Warren went down.

The helicopter shuddered as I drove a forward acceleration into the lift, propelling us away from the scene.

The good thing about knowing math, I thought, was that I *knew* there was nothing I could have done. The probability I would’ve been able to get Warren out of there without one or more of the rest of us also being taken into custody, or worse—

I didn’t feel guilty, I told myself. The math exonerated me. It did.

The helicopter lurched and dipped for a moment. Fuck. I wrestled it back to level. *Jesus, concentrate! Just get them out of here, and then sort this mess out. He was only Tasered. He’ll be fine.*

A short hop later—and a terrifying one to my passengers, if Checker’s continued yells and Pilar’s eventual squeals were any indication—I dropped the helicopter onto the ground with the grace of a falling rock. The struts hit

the pavement in the parking lot of a nearby school where I'd parked a car that morning.

I was out under the slowing spin of the rotors and impatiently starting the engine of the car before Pilar and Checker had undone their seatbelts. "Come on!" I shouted.

Pilar was weaving as if in a daze, her equilibrium still off from the drugs. Checker helped her down from the helicopter and she tumbled into the backseat; Checker got in the front and pulled his chair in on top of himself before slamming the door. "We're here; we're good; go!"

"Don't get comfortable," I said, pressing down on the accelerator and spinning out so quickly that Checker grabbed onto the door and Pilar started scrabbling for a seatbelt. "We're switching cars soon."

Pilar made a squeaking sound.

"I'm still trying to get over the fact that you RTFM'd a *helicopter* and became Trinity," said Checker weakly. "Holy crap."

"Hang on," I said, and dropped us into the maelstrom of LA traffic far too fast.

CHAPTER 23

ARTHUR WAS waiting for us outside Miri's building.

"Tegan?" I asked.

"They got other friends with 'em now. People they trust." He took in our frazzled appearances—Checker looked a little green and Pilar was leaning on his shoulder to stay upright. "You guys okay? Been trying to call..."

"Fill him in," I tossed in Checker and Pilar's direction, and buzzed into the courtyard.

Miri stood up as we barged into her apartment. She'd been spread out with Liliana on the floor, with bowls of...some sort of milky liquid...that had the cheerful green tint of food coloring. Miri was in leggings and an overlarge T-shirt with the collar cut out, her hair thrown up with a pencil stuck through it and a smudge of white powder on her cheek. She looked so absurdly relaxed and removed from the insanity of our morning that the cognitive dissonance took me aback for an instant.

"Is everything okay here?" The words burst out aggressively. "No one's been bothering you?"

"Nope," she said. "Is something the matter?"

"No," I said. "Everything's peachy."

"Miri taught me to make oobleck!" chirped Liliana.

We all stared at her. She raised tiny green-stained hands toward us proudly and then smacked a palm down into one of the bowls; the fluid inside spasmed like a living skin.

I recovered and pointed a finger at Checker. “You—get on a computer. I need intel, now.”

Checker moved carefully around the mad science in the middle of the room and pulled a laptop off a stack of papers and knickknacks. “Sorry about this,” he tossed at Miri as he went by. “Taking over your apartment and all—we’ve got a, a situation, long story—”

“Oh, it’s fine,” said Miri. “I can go back down to Carol’s. Don’t have less crazy lives on my account.”

“That’s ridiculous. We’re not going to kick you out of your own home,” Checker objected, already typing madly on the laptop.

“It’s not a problem,” said Miri. “I’ll just wash the cornstarch off and get out of your hair. This does mean you owe me, though. I’m calling it a trip to Sacramento.”

Checker stopped typing, his jaw dropping open. “We’ve been over this! *You* might be good enough, but I am not *nearly*—”

“Then I guess you owe me extra practice time, too. Ta-ta!” She skipped off down the hallway.

“Hey. Intel,” I said.

Checker muttered under his breath and went back to his computer.

Pilar knelt down to pay attention to Liliana, whose face had started wrinkling up at the tension in the room and our lack of excitement over her non-Newtonian fluids. Arthur crossed the room to Miri’s television set, a squat little CRT with an indoor antenna.

The display was a touch fuzzy, but visible. The news conference was on every channel. Arthur found one that was playing it in full, and I came over to join him.

We stood and watched a man named Morrison Sloan as he introduced his Liliana clone to the audience. As he spoke to her for a while. As he suddenly collapsed her into lifelessness with an electrical surge, smashed open the silicone and metal of her skull, and tore her brain to careless pieces.

The whole time, he talked with a passionate charisma about the dire threat of artificial intelligences among us, about these false humans infiltrating us for some doubtless nefarious purpose, about the ominous danger now threatening us, and about the people we thought were friends

and neighbors who would turn against us in the worst sort of science fiction nightmare.

“We will find them,” he declared, “and we will tear them apart, and whoever is doing this will know—they cannot con us, they cannot dupe us; their lies will not hold! The spies they have sent among us, whatever their purpose, will be destroyed, just as these automatons will be destroyed!”

I watched him, feeling sick. “I don’t get it,” I said.

“Don’t know how this Sloan fellow got a hold of her,” said Arthur, “but he must not know she was just a research project. Or maybe he’s one of those people afraid of science or something.”

“No,” I said. “He’s not.”

“You think he got some other motive?”

“He doesn’t have a motive.” The words felt surreal. “He’s a robot, too. Just like Liliana.”

Arthur whipped around in surprise. “You sure?”

“Dead sure.” The too-even sinusoids of his voice and movement echoed tinnily through my senses. “He’s artificial.”

“What the hell’s the point?” cried Arthur. “Who’s setting this up?”

“Well, you’re probably right that it’s someone anti-science—or at least anti-AI,” I said. “Look how it’s hitting the news.”

“Cept that makes no sense,” pointed out Arthur. “If whoever’s behind this hates the tech so much, why’re they using another robot instead of doing it themselves?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I flashed back to all the warnings and paranoia about information leaks at Arkacite. Christ, they’d been right to worry, but *this*? “Checker, are you—”

“Already on it,” he called. “I’m looking Sloan up. We’ll figure it out.”

Arthur and I kept watching the news conference. Sloan finished his speech, nodded to the assembled crowd of reporters and spectators, and left the dais. Why was he even on a dais, I wondered? What was the pretext for this news conference? How had they gotten the reporters there?

“News reports have been saying he’s some business tycoon guy,” said Arthur, clearly thinking along the same lines I was. “I dunno, I never heard of him before this. They’re already mentioning him as a candidate for

Senate. Pushing some sort of down-with-AI platform, obviously, whipping people up about this ‘threat’ we got going hidden in the population...”

“Like we need another anti-science candidate,” said Checker, without looking up from his computer. “I’m thinking about starting my own country.”

“Fraid they’re already doing the anti-science thing without him,” said Arthur. “Was watching the news coverage at Tegan’s, and there’s calls out to shut down all sorts of different kinds of computer research until this is sorted, and some of the ones saying that are in Congress. There’s other people saying the government oughta be checking everyone with blood tests or something to make sure we’re real humans. And of course Reuben McCabe’s been making a ruckus, more’n the rest.”

“Him? Oh, God,” said Checker.

“Who?” I said.

“Seriously? McCabe? How have you missed this guy?” Checker split his attention between flailing at me and continuing to type. “He’s the poster boy for How to Wreck Your Country By Being Rich and a Douchebag. He puts his entire family fortune behind legislation that ruins people’s lives—his political action group was the one that hamstrung women’s rights in Texas, and shut down federal funding to certain types of genetics research —”

“They went crazy here in Cali back when we was fighting for marriage rights,” put in Arthur. “Poured so much money into the state it got ridiculous. We couldn’t combat that kind of resources.”

“Yeah, McCabe’s been spreading his filth for decades,” said Checker. “It felt like he calmed down a little the past few years—I hoped he’d been swallowed by irrelevancy, or better yet eaten by a grue. But he’s popped up again over this past year, and he’s been walking the line on inciting people to violence this time.”

“Walking the line? Ha,” scoffed Arthur. “He should’ve been arrested for the Yapardi shooting, no question.”

My eyes were glazing over from the political talk. “I don’t care. I’m concerned about us and Liliana. Can we figure out what the hell is going on, please? How are the people behind Sloan doing this? If the news is talking like he’s some business powerhouse, how long has he even *existed?*”

“A day,” said Checker. He’d stopped typing, and his voice sounded funny.

“What?” I hurried to look over his shoulder.

“It looks like more time—a lot more. There are records; he’s all over the ’net—people are claiming to have known him, although who knows, he’s been fabricated to be famous so maybe they’re just trying to sound important—but so far all the records I’ve found are backdated. From yesterday. Whoever did it knew what the heck they were doing, I can tell you that. They did an amazing job making it look like Sloan is some sort of top dog oil magnate. But he isn’t.” He blinked up at me. “It makes more sense this way, actually—if he’s got the same AI capabilities as Liliana, he wouldn’t be able to be a business tycoon for real. The programming isn’t that good.”

“He didn’t take questions,” I realized. “His speech—there must be NLP limitations. They sent him up there with a pre-programmed speech, but he wouldn’t be able to respond naturally enough to the reporters’ questions—they’d start figuring out something was off.”

“But then why use one of ’em in the first place?” Arthur asked again. “Specially if it’s such a risk of exposure?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“It’s not just Sloan,” said Checker, pounding madly on his keyboard again. “I’m finding—this Liliana, the one he destroyed, she had a backdated history, too. She was enrolled in daycare, under the name Alice Whittaker. She had—she had parents, at least they say she did, and there are all sorts of other records; they’re making it look like she existed after the fact—”

“Won’t hold up,” said Arthur. “It can’t. People got to realize eventually that no one’s ever seen her before.”

“Well, let’s see.” Checker hit a link and a video of a news interview popped up.

The woman with the mic in her face was a frazzled-looking soccer mom with gray poking in at her roots and some dumpiness collecting around her middle. She spoke haltingly, with wide eyes, about how her children had *played* with this girl, how they’d had her over to their *house*—she was emotional and believable and the type of woman any mother could relate to

—and *not real*.

I found my voice. “She’s one, too.”

“Why am I not surprised,” said Checker. “Holy crap, is someone really trying to take over the world with robots? There’s just no way that would work. The AI isn’t nearly complex enough—”

“For what?” Arthur asked.

“For—for anything!” Checker cried. “There’s nothing these sorts of androids can do that either a human or a different sort of computer couldn’t do a thousand times better! If the adults are anything like Liliana, they won’t even be able to pass for very long before someone figures it out. I have no idea what anybody could be trying to achieve here!”

I tried to process. This might not be as bad as it had seemed at first. Whatever was happening, it was bigger than Arkacite’s prototype research or anyone’s desire for custody of Liliana, and more importantly, it didn’t have anything to do with us. “Whatever’s going on, we don’t get involved,” I declared. “This is Arkacite’s debacle. We keep our heads down, maybe even use all this as cover so we can spring Warren from wherever they’ve got him, though I’m guessing that’ll just mean helping him jump bail. We keep Liliana out of sight till then, and then we send the two of them out of the country, and we’re done.” It was a more expensive resolution than I’d hoped for, but it would finish this.

Arthur turned to Checker. “You really ain’t think nothing bad could be going down with all these AIs?”

Checker waved his hands in an elaborate shrug. “Define ‘bad.’ Turning public opinion against artificial intelligence research is pretty far up on my list of execrable deeds, but if you’re asking whether riding it out will mean we fail to prevent a robot revolution—I can promise you that is not going to happen. I want to keep looking into this, because seriously, how can I not, but if you all want to make sure the girl’s safe first—”

Once Liliana’s situation was squared away, I’d have more important problems anyway, like a bloodthirsty Mafiosa. “It’s settled, then. We protect Liliana, and that’s it.”

The computer trilled, making us all jump.

Checker switched windows. “Hey, Pilar. Denise Rayal is calling you.”

Pilar jumped up and came over to join us. Arthur took her place with Liliana and started helping her clean up, ferrying the bowls back into the kitchen.

“How did you—?” Pilar asked Checker.

“I forwarded your number to VOIP along with Noah Warren’s and mine as soon as we got here, as I figured it would be bad if someone else answered our phones. As being evidenced right now—”

“Answer it!” cried Pilar.

Checker hit a key and gestured at her.

“Oh! Uh, hello?” she said.

“Pilar? It’s Denise Rayal, from Arkacite.” Rayal’s words tumbled over each other out of the computer speakers, scared and lost. “I used to work with you—”

“Of course! Are you okay?”

“Yes—no—I don’t know—I’m sorry; I didn’t know what to do. They told me you were part of all this; they were asking me where you were—I didn’t know who else to call—”

“Denise, calm down. It’s totally fine. What’s going on?”

“You know what’s been happening? That someone stole—”

“Don’t worry,” said Pilar. “The girl on the news wasn’t her.”

“What? Oh, yes, I know—it would be better if it had been; then this would be contained,” said Rayal, tense and miserable. “Arkacite knew the ’bot on the news wasn’t our prototype, I don’t know how, but that means someone else got the tech, and we have no idea what they’re using it for. And Arkacite thinks it was *me*—”

“They think what was you?” asked Checker.

“What?” said Denise, clearly thrown by a voice that wasn’t Pilar’s. “Who’s that?”

“Friends,” Pilar said hastily. “They’ve been helping your husband. Go ahead, Denise.”

“Oh, uh—okay.” She hesitated, then plunged on. “They think I’m the one who leaked everything. They think I’m working for whoever—for whoever did this—”

I crossed my arms. “Are you?”

“No! I’m not! I’m not even allowed to do any of that research. But I heard, someone from my team called, and the FBI came at them, at Arkacite. And Vikash told me the company...the company told the FBI it was me. That I must have leaked all the new technology. And I don’t know what to do.” Her voice broke. “I’m sorry, I don’t know why I’m calling; I know you probably can’t help me, but I thought, you might know more of what’s going on—”

Checker was typing on his computer at the same time. “You’re right. There’s an arrest warrant out for you. Which looks totally bogus to me; even if you did leak corporate secrets I don’t see how they can stretch this into such broad felony charges. This is...holy crap.”

“Do you think I should—should I turn myself in?” Rayal ventured. “Should I—I don’t want to make everything worse, and they’re going to find me eventually—”

“No!” said Checker, speed-reading paperwork on his laptop screen with intensity. “Under no circumstances should you turn yourself in. They’re throwing you under the bus. What I’m seeing here, talk about trumped up—you saw how this thing is blowing up on the news; I’m guessing someone thought you’d make a convenient scapegoat. The US government has no problem bringing down the hammer on people who work with technology they don’t understand, especially when the public gets scared, and they are absolutely, definitely fixing to bury you for this. Do *not* let them!”

While Rayal stuttered in response, Pilar leaned over Checker’s shoulder and clicked on the button to mute the call before turning to me. “We have to help her.”

““We?”” I asked dryly. I very much wanted to stay out of this robot-revolution-that-wasn’t. I didn’t see any benefit to adding a fugitive Denise Rayal to my list of problems.

“She hasn’t done anything wrong!” cried Pilar.

“Can she pay?” I asked.

“Cas Russell, don’t you dare,” Checker said. “She’s in trouble for doing *science*. There’s no way we’re not going to help.”

My mouth dropped open, and any response tangled in my throat in shock. People didn’t speak for me that way. Ever.

Checker wasn't paying attention to me, and had already unmuted our side of the conversation. "Where are you?"

"I ran..." Rayal said vaguely. "I know it was stupid, but I didn't know what—I drove and then I got on a bus and then I got off the bus and—I don't even know if I know where I am now. It's a, a strip mall. My phone would know, I guess—"

"Don't bother," said Checker. "Read off some street signs to me."

Pilar tugged at my sleeve. I reacted automatically, yanking away and twisting around ready to strike—I stopped myself. "Don't touch me," I said quietly. "What do you want?"

She had stumbled back a step, her hands involuntarily coming up in front of her face. "I—uh—please. Please. Denise is a really good person. She doesn't deserve this."

Sure. Lots of people didn't deserve the crap things that happened to them. Nobody seemed to be able to comprehend the fact that Denise Rayal's shitfest of a legal quagmire *wasn't my problem*. Checker could help if he wanted, but I had enough to deal with.

Of course, if I said no I'd have to explain it to Arthur.

Fuck.

Fucking moral people.

"Fine," I said. Pilar flinched back from my tone even though I was agreeing to help. I ignored her and raised my voice slightly. "Arthur?"

He came out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on a dish towel. "What do you need?"

"Can you go pick up Denise Rayal?"

"Course," he said.

"Don't let anyone follow you," I said.

"Course I won't."

I went back over to the computer and interrupted Checker's current tirade. "Rayal, a man named Arthur Tresting is coming to pick you up. African-American, six feet tall, leather jacket. Turn off your phone and take the battery out. Then find somewhere nearby where you can wait for him without looking suspicious."

"Um...okay," she said. "There's a library branch on the corner—"

“Mommy?”

We all looked around. Liliana had followed Arthur out of the kitchen. She reached up and took Pilar’s hand, gripping it in both of hers as she fastened her eyes on the computer. “Mommy? Are you there?”

“Get her out of here,” I said to Pilar.

Her eyes wide, Pilar herded Liliana back toward Miri’s bedroom, murmuring soothing platitudes as they went.

“Rayal. You still there?” I said.

“Yes,” she said after a beat. “Was that...?”

“Liliana’s here,” I said.

Silence from the computer.

Then Rayal said, “You’re the person who came to my house. The one who was working for Noah.”

“We ain’t the people responsible for what’s on the news,” put in Arthur, stepping over and talking in his trademark soothing voice. “But we can figure it out. We got some real smart people here. Let us help you, okay?”

“Okay.” The word was very small.

“Ditch your phone and wait in the library,” I said. “Go.” I leaned over Checker’s shoulder, clicked on the button to end the call, and waved at Arthur, forcing myself not to yell at him for having just volunteered us to solve the exact problem I’d been trying like hell to keep us out of. Of course, I had the sneaking suspicion he knew exactly what I was thinking anyway, but Arthur had a fantastic poker face. He slipped out and shut the door.

“That’s all I can do,” I said to the suddenly-much-emptier room. “If Rayal cuts and runs, that’s her call.”

“I hope she doesn’t,” said Checker, and his voice sounded funny. “For all our sakes.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“We’re in trouble.” He was multitasking in another window, skimming through hacked emails. “Arkacite’s throwing us under the bus, too, along with Denise Rayal. Pilar and Noah Warren are mentioned by name. Fortunately, Grant never knew your or my name, but I’m guessing that won’t stop the Feds for long, at least when it comes to me—I’m sure I’m

already on a list somewhere. This could be really bad, especially once they figure out there are other AIs out there Sloan hasn't taken apart. Whatever this conspiracy is, people are going to be blaming you and me for it, too. And they're talking about Liliana like she's some sort of patient zero. We're not going to get away from this."

Shit. I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment. "What does this have to do with Rayal?"

"Well, she might be able to help us figure out what the hell is happening. She's been working on these AIs forever; she knows their programming. I'm playing catch-up."

My head was starting to pound. "Okay. What's going on with Warren? What are they charging him with?" *Crap*, I realized, *he knows where we are*. Would his loyalty to his daughter keep him from revealing it? He'd been willing to get shot for her, but still...

We had to switch to another location anyway. Checker might have stellar security on this place, but too many people knew about it.

"He's..." Checker searched his screen for a minute. "Uh...Cas, I—it says here Noah Warren's in the hospital. It's bad. I don't—"

"What?"

He scrolled, skimming, his eyes flicking back and forth frantically across the screen. "I—I'm not a doctor, but it looks like it's serious—I don't know if it was the Tasers, or if he hit his head or something, but this seems to be saying he's in critical condition—I think—I assume they'll arrest him after he comes out of it. If he—uh—if he does. They don't know if he's going to wake up."

I closed my eyes. He'd been trying to help us escape. He hadn't realized his pointless heroism had been unnecessary.

Sixty-six and nine-elevenths days. Not that Warren's death would be my fault—it wouldn't be, I told myself. The math had said there was nothing I could do.

Nothing.

CHAPTER 24

WHEN ARTHUR arrived back at the apartment, with Denise Rayal amazingly enough in tow, Checker and I were watching Morrison Sloan reveal another android live. This one was a young man in a suit and tie who had waved jovially at the audience, cheerful and nonthreatening, until the so-called oil tycoon electrocuted him and pulled apart his skull.

“Um, hello again,” Rayal said to me, her voice subdued. “Is Pilar—is she here?”

“She’s watching Liliana in the bedroom,” I said. Pilar had remained on babysitting duty, keeping Liliana out of our hair. Miri, meanwhile, had cheerfully bid us good-bye and left. Checker had refused to let me threaten her, making me feel less secure about keeping our base here than ever. After dark, I’d work on moving us to a new location—getting our eclectic and very identifiable group under wraps somewhere else was going to be an endeavor.

Rayal’s face closed. “Oh. Oh. Okay.” She looked over to see what we were watching on the television. “Oh my God, another one?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Did Arthur fill you in?”

“Yes, and I—this is—I can’t believe it. The programming we—it’s not advanced enough for this,” she said haplessly. “That was part of the point in building our prototype as a child in the first place. That’s where we are with the technology. We can build an AI that acts like a five-year-old; we can’t build one that acts like an adult. At least, we couldn’t...” She stared at the

television. The screen had changed to news commentators making wild conjectures.

“We think they’ve been sending them out with pre-programmed speeches,” I said. “I don’t know how they think they’ll keep up the charade, or what their master plan is, but so far the ones we’ve ID’d as artificial haven’t done any very complicated adult interaction, so they might not be any more advanced than Liliana.”

“Ain’t kids even more sophisticated than adults, though?” objected Arthur. “The way children learn is damn near a miracle.”

“Yes, but you’re misunderstanding what we—that’s not what we were trying to do.” Rayal started to become more animated, her hands coming up to gesture along with her words. “Passing a Turing test momentarily is different from showing learning over time. You’re right: kids’ brains are just as complicated on the inside as adults’ brains—maybe more so, I don’t know; that’s not my area—but it’s easier to mimic how they present in the moment. It’s the whole idea of a Turing test—it’s not about true artificial intelligence or learning so much as it’s about imitation—mimicry—and getting the best imitation we can.”

“So you’re saying...you can’t build a person, but a young kid would be...I dunno, childlike?” asked Arthur. “So you can fool folks into thinking you built one?”

“Yes, exactly.”

I turned away from the television and slammed my palm against the wall next to me. “*Why?* Why did you do this in the first place?”

Rayal jerked around in shock. “What—what do you mean?”

I refused to meet her gaze. Liliana’s face swam in my mind’s eye. “Why in God’s name would you want to build a poor copy of a human child?”

Rayal flinched at my word choice, but she still sounded more shocked than offended. “How can you say that? It’s *research*. The Turing test has been a Holy Grail of AI since 1950. Once we had the breakthroughs in neural networks and NLP, well...why not?”

“I don’t know how you of all people can say that,” I said. Harshly. “This project ruined your life. You played God and you’re paying for it.”

“Stop it, Cas,” said Checker, a sharpness to the words I wasn’t used to hearing from him.

“We got a situation to worry about right now,” murmured Arthur. “No one tried to make this happen, right, Russell? We just gotta deal with it.”

“Arthur’s right,” said Checker. “We need to figure out what’s going on *now*. This is the era of the twenty-four hour news cycle, and this thing is exploding in public opinion—social media is blowing up, people are shouting at the White House do something, and McCabe is whipping his followers into a frothing mob. At least two Singularity think tanks have already had their funding suspended, and there are people demanding the government review every single research proposal that has anything to do with AI, which would include, hello, everything from search algorithms to computer games to most modern *cars*—are you grasping how insane people are getting over this?”

“Raya,” I said. “Who’s doing this?”

“I don’t—I don’t know,” she stammered. “Arkacite told them it was me—but I didn’t, I swear, I hadn’t—”

“Who else?” I said. “Who had access to the tech, or has a beef against you or Arkacite? Who was the leak?”

“I—I don’t know!” Her hands flew to her face. “I don’t; I swear—anyone on my team would have the knowledge, but they wouldn’t do this. I know them. They wouldn’t! And I don’t know who else.”

“If we want to head off whatever’s happening, we have to figure out the endgame,” I said. “Can we use Liliana some way? Do they, I don’t know, network or something?”

“No,” said Raya. “But if I had access to one of the other ones, I could look at the code—I could figure out what they’ve been programmed for already, maybe? But I don’t know how—”

“Done,” I said. “Who’s most useful? Sloan, I assume?”

“Yes,” said Checker. “So far we have five identified—the two they’ve splintered apart on camera, the two witnesses who gave interviews about the Liliana copy, and Morrison Sloan. I’m betting there will be more witnesses to this new guy’s existence, but Sloan is at the center of everything.”

“How can they afford to build so many, only to destroy them?” wondered Denise. “The funding I had to acquire just to construct a prototype was astronomical.”

Checker's eyes lit up. "Good point! Maybe I can use that in the searches I've got going. And I'm looking for some indication of who might have wanted to steal from Arkacite. Other than us."

"They were so hyper; they had to be worried about *someone*," said Pilar, coming out of the hallway into the living room. "Liliana's taking a nap. Denise! Are you okay?"

"I don't really know," she answered, with a hollow sort of laugh, but her posture relaxed a little now that Pilar was in the room. "You're right, though—um, you're right about Arkacite. They were having a serious problem with corporate espionage. They told us secrets had been leaked, but not what, and I don't know who stole them or who they were sold to."

Corporate espionage. I grabbed a clean burner and dialed.

"It's Cas Russell," I said when Harrington picked up. "I need some information. I'll pay whatever you want for it, but it's urgent."

"What information do you seek?" he asked, after a slight pause. One of Harrington's chief values was discretion. It was part of the reason I liked him.

Well, too bad. "Are you familiar with Arkacite Technologies? Professionally, I mean?"

"Yes."

"I need to know who would be stealing from them." Everyone was watching me. Rayal and Pilar were tense enough they should have been vibrating.

Harrington hesitated.

"Come on, I looked into the plutonium thing for you," I argued. "You owe me this." Of course, I'd ended up making a lot of money off acquiring the atomic batteries, but I didn't tell him that.

"If I disclose this to you," he said slowly, "we are even."

"Yeah," I said. "We're even. Who is it?"

"I am not your source for this information, you understand."

"I get it. Now *who*?"

"Arkacite...has been involved in an escalating industrial espionage battle with Funaki Industries, a Tokyo-based technology company. It began decades ago. The tactics have become vicious."

Harrington had a strong stomach, so that was saying something. “Thanks,” I said. Something inside me unclenched. Finally, a lead. “I didn’t hear it from you.”

I hung up the phone.

And then it hit me.

Tokyo.

Oh God. Ally Eight represented a bloc of Japanese companies. They’d wanted batteries identical to the ones Arkacite had. And immediately after they’d acquired them from me, the robots had hit the airwaves.

But Checker said—the amount of energy—

I dug in my pockets for the battery specs like a madwoman; I still had the papers I’d brought for Okuda the day before. I’d read them to assess the value of the amount of plutonium, but I hadn’t really *looked* at them—

“Cas,” said Checker. “Cas, what is it?”

I flattened the crumpled papers in shaking hands. I didn’t know all the engineering shorthand in the diagrams, but I could make some guesses—references to materials—equations—

The power capacity leapt and spiraled, up one order of magnitude, then two. Then *three*.

Holy crap.

Funaki Industries had stolen all of the robotics technology from Arkacite. The designs, the programming, everything—they must have. Hell, they must’ve already had the androids built, to swing into action this quickly. The only piece they’d been missing was the power sources, the ridiculous revolutionary *plutonium* power sources, and I’d gotten those for them.

I had made all this happen.

“Russell?” Arthur touched my shoulder. “What’d your guy say?”

“It’s my fault,” I said.

“What are you talking about?” asked Pilar.

I turned to Rayal. “The robots. They run on a new type of alphavoltaic nuclear battery. Don’t they.”

“Oh—uh—yes...” Her answer drew out into almost a question as it rode the tension in the room. “It was the hardest—we’d tried everything. The

material scientists at Arkacite only made the breakthrough two years ago, and—and the enormity of the technological leap—we had to be sworn not to say a thing; they’re not even being developed for commercial purposes yet because the consumer cost would be too high. Just military contracting and—and internal special projects, like us...”

“Holy shit,” said Checker. “This *is* our fault.”

CHAPTER 25

ARTHUR DROVE.

Sloan had been holding his press conferences in a small theatre downtown. At the rate he was “revealing” new ’bots, we figured if we showed up where he’d been we had a better-than-even chance at...well, kidnapping him. *When did this situation get so out of control?*

“You ain’t to blame for this,” said Arthur, as we sped down the 101.

“You’re wrong,” I said. “I am literally the one responsible.” Now I had to get Liliana, Denise Rayal, and Pilar out of it, not to mention Checker and me—if they managed to ID us. And I had no idea how.

“They was planning this for ages,” said Arthur. “Had to been. They had the whole thing set up—if you ain’t got ’em their power sources, someone else would’ve.”

“That’s awfully rationalizing of you,” I said. “Nobody had this battery technology except Arkacite. And what happened to telling me I should take more responsibility for what I do?”

His lip twitched in something like humor. “No point when you’re already beating yourself up. This is when I get all supportive instead.”

I grunted. I hate it when people are inconsistent.

Arthur, as usual, had the classical station playing on the radio, today with the ringing vibrato of an opera in some other language. I leaned forward and twiddled the search dial until I got to a news station. The way things had been going, we’d be in a robot war by the time Arthur and I reached downtown.

“—and this is just what these so-called ‘scientists’ want you to believe. Haven’t I always said it was a conspiracy? I’m telling you, this is domestic terrorism. It’s only a matter of time before...”

“Meet Reuben McCabe,” said Arthur, his hands clenching on the steering wheel. “Fearmonger extraordinaire.”

“...and if the scientists at Arkacite are the ones responsible for these imposters, then I say they deserve what’s coming to them! Treason is still punishable by death in this country! At least, last I checked we were still red-blooded men enough to say that, although with the liberal fascist conspiracy—”

“Hang on,” I said. “How does he know Arkacite was involved? Did the Feds leak it?”

Arthur frowned and spun the dial to skip stations.

“—and Morrison Sloan has now announced the source of the robotics technologies, the scientists at the tech behemoth Arkacite. There has been no comment yet from CEO Imogene Grant, and it’s unclear whether Arkacite Technologies had some plan for planting these androids in the population, or whether their technology is being used by a third party. It is now confirmed that a federal investigation is underway, and ARKT shares are expected to plummet at the opening of the market Monday—”

“Son of a bitch,” said Arthur. “This must’ve been Ally Eight’s plan all along. Rile everyone up on the other side and then leave Arkacite holding the bag. Bankrupt ’em into the toilet.”

“So that’s all this was? A way to shut down their competitor?” I thought about how much I got paid by Harrington for corporate espionage jobs and winced. I knew how far corporations would go to smash each other into oblivion.

“Guess so,” said Arthur.

“—we’re now getting reports of police activity downtown. Our correspondent Javier Alvarez was there for Morrison Sloan’s latest press conference—Javier, can you tell us what’s happening?”

“It seems like we have some mob activity forming here, Grace. I didn’t see what started it, but the crowds are beginning to riot—”

“Step on it,” I said to Arthur.

He revved the engine and shot down the last few streets. We hit a police blockade just around the corner from the address, but Arthur didn't miss a beat; he took a sharp right and then left to land us one street over, and within moments was pulling over illegally in a loading zone behind the theatre. As soon as I got out of the car the rumble of a mass of angry humanity reached me from around the front. Something was happening—

“Shit,” I said.

“We better get inside,” said Arthur.

Glass shattered nearby, and the crowd roared.

This side of the ground floor was a solid wall and shut up tight. I could get through it, but...

“Second floor,” I said, already measuring distances to the row of windows above our heads.

“I got rope in the trunk,” said Arthur.

“Get it.”

Reach and leverage. I needed a stepstool.

A cube truck was parked a little way down, against one of the locked loading doors. I raced to it, jacked my way in, and pried up the dash. Within seconds I'd pulled it away from the back of the building. I revved it and accelerated backward as fast as it would go, flooring it right into the stairs at the back of the loading dock.

The back wheels smacked up the steps with a tooth-jarring screech. I yanked the e-brake and hopped out. Arthur tossed me the rope. I looped it over my shoulder, ran up the hood of the truck, and leapt over the windshield to use the roof of the cab as a launch point, my boots pounding the metal.

I hit the slanted top of the cargo box with just enough friction to keep from tumbling off, and ran up the slope ten feet above the steps I'd mounted the truck on. The second-floor windows were just my height, and only a short gap away. Without slowing, I dove at the glass, twisting to hit across my shoulders and avoid any sharp pieces as the pane shattered. It was nice to have the luxury to avoid getting cut this time.

I rolled out onto a desk in a large office-like room and hit the floor on my feet.

And stared, feeling sick.

I thought at first the room had five bodies in it. But no, two of them were metal, the silicone and circuit boards smashed and ripped apart as if they'd been torn to pieces by wild animals, the entrails of wires and metal shards scattered across the floor. The human bodies were thankfully more intact...one of them moved slightly, and I sagged with relief.

I took an instant to loop the rope around the leg of a heavy metal desk that abutted the outside wall, one that would take Arthur's weight, and threw the ends out the broken window. Then I skidded over to the nearest person, a woman half-fallen against the wall.

It was Okuda. Her eyelashes fluttered weakly, and blood matted her hair above her left ear. "Oh, Jesus," I muttered. She had a decorative scarf around her neck; I picked apart the knot and pulled it off to press the filmy fabric against her head wound. "Okuda. Can you hear me?"

"Ms....Ms. Russell," she said faintly. "What are you doing here...?"

"Trying to find out what you were planning," I said. "I'm guessing that's a moot point now."

"It wasn't supposed to be this way," she murmured. Her eyes were glassy. "There wasn't supposed to be...any violence..."

"Inflaming the public worked too well, huh?"

"They took them..." she said.

"They took who?"

"The other models—they broke some apart and took the others, and they made us tell them where the rest were—and they took our tablets—they could program them to do anything; we made it too easy—"

With a tinkle of glass, Arthur's jacket flopped over the jagged window sill and he climbed over. As soon as he saw what was going on he hurried to the other slumped bodies, checking for pulses, cataloguing injuries.

"You call 911 yet?" he asked.

"No," I answered.

He pulled out a phone.

"Are they all right?" Okuda mustered the energy to ask.

Arthur glanced briefly toward her. "Everyone's alive. Don't know how bad the injuries are. This was the mob downstairs?"

As if in response to Arthur's question, a roar burst up through the floor. Arthur scrambled over to the door, shut it, and shoved a heavy metal desk over to block it with a screech and a bang.

"She said the crowd took some of the 'bots," I said. My eyes shied away from the metal corpses in the middle of the floor. "Did that sound like bloodlust to you just now?"

"Too much," he said.

"Okuda." I pressed down more firmly with her scarf. It looked like it was staunching the blood, thank God. "You said they made you tell them where the rest were. Where are they?"

Her eyes fuzzed in and out of focus, uncomprehending.

"If you have people there, they're in danger. Where are the other robots?"

"Our lab..." The words were thready. "Santa Clarita..."

Santa Clarita was north of the city. It would take some time for the mob's ringleaders to get there.

Unless they called their friends.

"Arthur—" I said.

"You go. I'll man the door till the cops break things up." He fished into a pocket and tossed me his keys, which I caught one-handed. "Police will be on your tail—too serious not to send them."

I nodded and shook Okuda's shoulder slightly. "Okuda. Stay with me. We need the address of your lab."

It took her a few tries, but she finally managed to tell us. I tied the scarf around her head as tightly as I could, my hands tacky with her blood. Then I left Arthur talking to the 911 dispatcher and ran out the window, vaulting off the sill with one foot since it was faster to dash down my cube truck stairway than to climb down the rope. I tore down off the hood of the cab and fell into Arthur's sedan.

It was Saturday, so I had high hopes traffic wouldn't be too bad. I left the speed limit in the dust, cut between lanes all the way up the 14, and beat the police response time to the lab.

It didn't matter. I was too late.

I sat on the floor in the middle of the wrecked laboratory, surrounded by overturned equipment and upended computers, not looking at the remains of an android skeleton on the floor, and not touching the two human bodies a few inches away from me. They were young, maybe early twenties, Japanese, and dead.

Sixty-seven days.

After a few moments I stood back up. I still had a job to do. People to protect. An artificial girl to save from being a lab specimen, a scientist who was wanted by the federal government and probably now also by a lynch mob...not to mention Checker and Pilar and myself. Plus an angry Mafia still out there waiting for us to make a mistake.

And I wasn't even getting paid.

"This job needs to be over now, please," I said. The words rang pitiful and desolate. The silence in the dead lab swallowed them up.

I found a security office in the back and yanked the video drive. I also grabbed any other intact data storage I found—a hard drive and a few flash drives, and a tablet under one of the lab tables. I still hadn't heard sirens, so, channeling Arthur, I called the police on my burner phone and tossed it on the floor. I had another clean one back at Miri's.

The dispatcher's urgent queries echoed off empty walls as I left.

CHAPTER 26

I GOT BACK to Miri's apartment to find Denise Rayal standing in the middle of the living room surrounded by more reams of printouts saying, "No, that's wrong, that's all wrong—"

"I'm *wrong*?" squawked Checker.

"Yes, go back to the beginning!"

I threw the drives from the Ally Eight lab at Checker. "Find out who's on these. And give me some sort of news update." I'd been listening to the radio the whole way back, but it had been confused, a series of disjointed this-just-ins and corrections and retractions. I gathered someone had figured out Sloan's robotic nature, but how many of the robots had been destroyed, and who'd been involved with the rioting in the first place—or whether the mob had simply formed spontaneously—the news anchors hadn't been able to tell me.

"On it," said Checker. "Are you all right? I talked to Arthur—what happened at the lab?"

My throat closed as if I wanted to vomit. "It's on there." I pointed at the drive from the security office. "News, give me news. And what's going on here?" Checker had apparently printed out another roomful of paper; he and Denise Rayal were drowning in it, along with all the laptops open and running. Liliana was asleep on the couch, Pilar curled up by her feet with her own pile of paper.

"I don't think there is much news," said Checker. "At least, not that you don't know already. There's nothing but speculation right now, though I've

at least been running IDs on any of the rioters caught on camera downtown. But we're trying to put together a search program for the 'bots. If *you* can identify one on sight, a computer should be able to, too. If we can write the algorithm, we can scan for any of the rest of them on the news or on traffic cameras or anywhere else. I'll need you to help with the math."

"That's a good idea," I said. I glanced at Liliana's sleeping form.

"Yeah, we're in her head right now," said Checker. "She's, uh... unconscious, while we work on this."

A creeping feeling of wrongness stole over me.

"She's not a child," said Checker quietly.

"I didn't say anything." We'd rescued her from people experimenting on her. We'd *rescued* her.

"We're not hurting her," said Checker. "Not that she can be hurt, but—you know what I mean."

He hadn't seen the corpses of the robots downtown, or the twisted scraps of metal my senses had recoiled away from when I'd reached the lab. What did it mean, to hurt someone? I knew what Noah Warren would say, but he'd already sacrificed himself for his daughter...while trusting us to protect her.

Christ.

I turned away from Liliana's sleeping form and tried to gather my scattered thoughts, to consider options. Ally Eight's plan was beside the point now. Instead, we had a legal mess and a lynch mob to deal with.

If the anti-robotics mob found Liliana or Denise Rayal, they'd kill them; if the government found them, Liliana would go back to a lab and Rayal would almost certainly go to jail. I could put Rayal on a plane out of the country if I paid enough money for it, which didn't make me happy, but was doable. Liliana, on the other hand...she was programmed to be *five*. She couldn't take care of herself.

"Rayal," I said.

She looked up.

"Best thing we can do right now is send you out of the country, into hiding. You and Liliana both."

She froze, her hands stilling on the papers.

“Fuck you,” I said. “You don’t want to take her, do you?”

“You don’t understand...”

“She’s your *daughter*.” My voice came out rough and jagged around the edges. I didn’t even know what I meant by that.

The papers in Denise’s hands crumpled where she was gripping them. “She’s my work,” she corrected quietly.

“Would you take her as your work, then?”

She lowered her eyes and didn’t answer.

“If the other choice is her going back to a lab?” I said. “Being dissected by government scientists?”

Her hair had fallen around her face so I couldn’t see her expression. “Maybe that’s where she belongs.”

I clenched my jaw together and breathed, fighting down rioting emotions.

“You can get her out of the country?” said Checker. “Stupid question, of course you can. Denise—we should at least get you—”

“No.” I didn’t care anymore where Liliana came from, what her code was. She still didn’t deserve to be torn to pieces or disassembled or killed or locked up crying in a laboratory to satisfy someone else’s sick voyeurism. She was still a *child*, even if she was a programmed one. “No. Not unless she’s going to take care of Liliana.”

Checker and Pilar stared at me. Rayal didn’t move.

“Cas...” said Checker.

“Didn’t you need my help with some math?” I said.

“Yes—uh, yes.” He hesitated for a moment, and I could almost see him decide to come back to this conversation shortly with better arguments. He shoved a tablet and a stack of printouts at me. “Here. The tablet’s jacked into Liliana’s programming. The hard copies are what we have so far—sorry; all the laptops are running things.”

“It’s fine,” I said. I took the stack of papers and the tablet from him and went to sit down, feeling very tired. Checker started sorting through the drives I’d dumped on him from the lab, digging adapters out of a bag next to him and plugging into his laptop.

I sat and skimmed the pages, letting my brain relax into it, the math a welcome relief from feelings I didn't want to acknowledge. I saw why Checker had given me Liliana's code: he and Rayal had built their algorithm off the way the natural language processing worked, trying to isolate characteristics unique to the 'bots. Ironic. Rayal and her team must have tried so hard to do everything right to make their creations sound human, and now we were hoping they'd done something wrong.

I began scrolling through the tablet, and the structure of Liliana's brain rose up around me, her thoughts becoming probabilistic paths. I closed my eyes momentarily. This felt like I was violating her, stampeding her privacy and exposing her—which was ridiculous, because I was an incredibly nosy person and I had never felt the slightest guilt about prying into anyone's life, but still, this felt *wrong*—

And for some reason it felt even more wrong as the structure took shape around me and I saw exactly how she worked, saw that Checker was right, that she was no more than a probabilistic Turing machine, that she *didn't* think. The probability distributions were there, in her code, flipping a thousand million coins for every action she took. Checker and Rayal kept telling me, but I didn't want to look, didn't want to see.

It doesn't matter. What could possibly justify what the mobs of rioters or Arkacite or the government would want to do to her? What could justify doing that to a child, even one who begged and cried and played according to algorithms?

I shut away the overall structure and concentrated on the natural language design. This I could isolate, pretend it belonged somewhere else, to a computer who didn't look so damn much like a five-year-old girl.

I read, and read. And blinked.

"Checker," I said.

"Yeah?"

"The natural language processing," I said. "Did you know NLP had gotten this far?"

He frowned. "I was wondering about that, too. But it must have, right? NLP isn't really my area—"

"Mine either," I said. "But...I'm pretty sure some of this research—it doesn't exist yet."

Royal and Pilar were watching our exchange. “Of course it exists,” protested Royal. “The breakthroughs we built the software off of are almost ten years old. And they weren’t Arkacite’s; I remember when they came out —”

“That’s impossible,” I said. “The math here—I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“And from the CS side, I was still under the impression we were really bad at NLP,” Checker jumped in. “Till I saw this, of course, but—natural language is *hard*. And we’re just bad at it—well, *we* aren’t, we as human beings are great at it, but we’re bad at understanding how to *program* it with any degree of understanding, or nuance, or completeness. Or, well, we were...”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” said Royal. “The project was under so much secrecy—they ordered us not to talk about even a hint of what we were doing with other researchers, because they said other companies hadn’t picked up on what the new NLP research meant. But it had to be out there in academic research, right? Nobody else was using it for industry before we were, but in academia—”

“No,” I said. “It’s not. We don’t have this. It doesn’t exist.”

“But you just said it isn’t your area,” said Royal. “Is it possible—”

“No,” I said. “We don’t have this *math*.”

“Except—except we do,” said Royal. “We used it.”

“What do you think...?” started Checker.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t like not knowing.”

Checker and Royal exchanged an uneasy glance. I scowled and went back to Liliana’s code, but I’d barely found where I’d left off when Checker made a strangled sound.

He was staring at his screen, headphones on. “Guys...” He wasn’t looking at us, and it sounded like he couldn’t get enough air. “Guys, things might...they might be worse than we thought...”

I rushed around to look over his shoulder; Royal and Pilar did, too. He was playing the security footage from Ally Eight’s lab. In the middle of the lab was a sweet-looking elderly lady, with white hair and a pastel cardigan and the symmetric features of one of the Ally Eight robots. And the

crowd...the crowd surged in around her, monstrous, tearing at her, stampeding her, and...

They literally tore her apart.

They dug fingers into her synthetic flesh, ripped her hair from her scalp, twisted her limbs back until they bent and broke inside her. She struggled and cried out, her face contorted in agony—one of the rioters found a heavy length of pipe and smashed it over and over into her skull, metal clanging dully on metal, until the animation went out of her and she collapsed, sagging into the crowd's ravenous grasp. Her eyes stared dead and sightless at the camera. The humans continued to crawl over her like savage jackals, peeling off her skin and mangling the metal skeleton inside her to leave her a mass of misshapen pieces.

Checker had turned away. "I hate people," he mumbled.

"Aren't you the one who keeps saying they're not alive?" My voice came out too harsh. I felt numb.

"Neither was the Library of Alexandria," said Checker.

Pilar made a small sound.

The screen showed the mob heaving the remains of the little old lady robot above their heads, waving broken metal limbs like they were deranged trophies.

I moved away. I didn't want to see any more. Didn't want to see what they did to the human scientists. "Get me a count of how many 'bots were there," I said. "And run your face recognition IDs on the people involved."

Checker blinked at me uncomprehendingly, and then reluctantly turned back to the computer.

"I can do it," said Pilar softly. "You've got more important things to work on, anyway. He taught me how so I could help with the other ones," she added in my direction.

Checker handed her the laptop and his headphones, and she went back over to the couch with them.

"This isn't open to question anymore." I turned to square off with Rayal. "We need to get you and Liliana out of here. No arguments. You can take care of her for now—maybe your husband will recover later or we can figure something else out. But if anyone this crazed finds out where you are—" I broke off. I couldn't protect them against a mob, not one like that.

“You’ve got to understand this. You were the inventor of these things, or as close as it gets. They’ll want your blood. They’ll burn you alive. I’m telling you, I will help you take Liliana and run, and you’re a fool if you don’t—”

Royal’s hand flew to her mouth. “Oh my God!” She dug at her pockets and came up empty. “My team, what about my team? I need a—a phone, I need a phone, right now!”

I stared at her, utterly sandbagged.

Checker was already grabbing another laptop off the table behind him. “Give me their names. We’ll get to them. Right, Cas?”

The world felt like it was tilting on its side. I was trying to save *one* little girl, and protect *one* woman—when had I become a knight in shining armor for wanted scientists? Since when was I protecting all of *Arkacite*—the people who’d been experimenting on Liliana in the first place? *I can’t save everyone! People die every day—this is not my responsibility!*

Checker was taking the names of Royal’s team and working on locating them, not waiting for my agreement. He’d just assumed I’d be in. I was simultaneously annoyed at the presumption and bizarrely flattered he would think that well of me—and ashamed that he shouldn’t have.

This wasn’t in my job description. I didn’t *want* this in my job description.

“They’re all at Arkacite,” said Checker. “I’m tracking phone GPS, and—Arkacite must be having some sort of huddle about this, which I guess makes sense, given the situation. Oh, wait, the first guy you said, Vikash Agarwal? He’s not there. But everyone else is.”

“Vikash is the one who called me,” said Royal. “He warned me—”

“Oh, God,” said Checker. “Cas, get to Arkacite.”

He’d brought up live news footage. A mob of protesters flooded around the building, shouting, throwing things—the police were already there, but too few, trying to hold back the mob—

Checker was flailing in a panic. “I can’t get room data from the GPS, and they took their video security offline after we broke in; it isn’t back up yet—”

“I’ll find them,” I said, and left.

CHAPTER 27

MY CAR from our escape that morning was a few blocks away, so I grabbed Arthur's again instead. As soon as I was on the 405, I veered onto the shoulder and floored the accelerator. The speedometer ticked up to ninety, then over a hundred. The rest of the freeway whipped by in a blur, the other cars motionless compared to me.

Jamming the pedal through the carpet also helped me take out my frustration. How had I gotten into this situation? Saving people wasn't what I *did*. You couldn't save everybody—if I tried, I would inevitably fail at some point, so the only logically consistent solution was not to try—right?

Fuck, it made sense in my head.

I was lucky; I didn't pick up the highway patrol until I was well into the Westside and almost at Venice. I led them on a merry chase down the shoulder, the lights and sirens screaming after me. An LAPD car tried to cut me off at the end of the ramp, but I popped up the wheels against the curb and was going so fast I caught air and cut the corner onto the street. The highway patrol cars slammed on their brakes behind me, gridlocking behind the stopped cop car before they managed to rearrange themselves and tear off after me with more wailing of sirens.

Having the cops on my tail was a good thing today. I was leading them to where they were needed. They'd have too much to deal with at Arkacite to worry about me.

I heard the crowd before I saw it, filling the plaza and swelling into a mass of humanity in the street, entirely blocking the throughway. I pulled

the e-brake and took Arthur's car into a skid, sliding sideways to land at the fringes of the stampeding horde of protesters before tumbling out. I ducked into the swarm of people before the cop cars could scream to a stop behind me and catch a glimpse of my face—I'd have to remember to tell Arthur to report his car stolen.

The crowd hadn't breached the police barricade, thank God, and the Arkacite security forces had come out to join their brethren in blue holding back the throng in a line across the plaza. I felt some grudging respect for them, their previous incompetencies notwithstanding—most rent-a-cops would've run rather than stand their ground against an angry mob.

I pushed around the edge of the crowd, ducking through the milling people to slip into the same alley I'd used two nights before. The small parking lot it led into was empty, the businesses shuttered—I couldn't blame them. I would have cut out and dashed for home too if my behemoth of a neighbor was about to be overrun.

The angry protesters hadn't made their way around here yet. They probably didn't know the alleyway went through, or that there might be an entrance here—well, of sorts. The wall I'd blown a hole in had been boarded over, the rubble cleared away, but it was a simple enough matter to kick out the plywood. The screws screeched and cracked as they gave way.

Denise Rayal's office had been on the seventh floor. I was betting most of her team had worked there too, though they would probably be in a conference room for whatever meeting they were having, wouldn't they? Unless they had barricaded themselves in a basement lab once the mob had surrounded the building...how would I have time to search every room? How?

All the security must have been out front, leaving the building emptier than it had been that morning. I dashed to the nearest elevator banks and almost screamed—I didn't have a keycard to call the lifts.

I kicked open the door to the stairs. All I could do was start with what I knew. I pounded up six flights, pushing my sprint until my lungs clenched and heaved.

I needn't have worried about finding them. I burst out the door onto floor seven just as a gunshot went off.

I kicked through more doors, tearing around corners toward where I had triangulated the sound—

Three more gunshots. Four. Five.

I'd drawn my P7. I smashed the butt of it into the glass door to the back offices; it shattered spectacularly—

Six. Seven. Eight.

A conference room was ahead of me.

Nine.

I burst through the door.

Morrison Sloan stood on one side of the room, his arm sticking out with a handgun as if he didn't quite know what to do with it. Except that he did. I took in six bodies on the floor in the first second, and Imogene Grant was the last one standing, backed against the wall, her face slack and uncomprehending—

Sloan's finger tightened on the trigger one more time. I thrust my fingers into my pocket and then dove in front of the gun, hand outstretched, just as he fired.

I felt the impact in my palm as my phone stopped the bullet, a punch through the metal, but the force calculation was laughably simple, and I knew the layers of casing and chips and battery had been enough. I landed heavily on my side on the conference room table and twisted back up as Sloan fired twice more, but I kept the phone in line with the barrel—it dented and buckled in my hand as each slug hit—

I thought, *shit, he fired more than ten rounds; that gun's not California legal and a Glock 17 holds seventeen rounds plus one in the pipe*—he'd been firing before I got here—maybe a lot—

My other hand gripped my own gun, but I didn't know where to shoot. How did one kill a robot? Where was the weak spot? I had no idea how the hardware was set up—whether I should just Swiss Cheese him—an inane jabber in my mind wondered if this would reset my count with Arthur—

Sloan frowned slightly. “You're not one of Satan's horde. You're not one of the ones who tried to take us over with the artificial people.” His gun hand dipped. “I don't want to hurt you.”

I had no idea what to say to that. Did he know what he was? Fuck, what even counted as “knowing” for him?

Come to that, how was he *here*? If his programming was anything like Liliana's, he didn't have the motivation, the internal drive, to decide to go

and find an illegal firearm and figure out a way in through Arkacite's security and commit *murder*—

The realization crystallized much more slowly than it should have. "Someone sent you," I said. "Who? Who was it?"

"I did it for the people," he said. He gestured vaguely at the room full of bodies. "They're the ones who unleashed the scourge..." His eyes drifted behind me, as if only just seeing what he'd done.

I wanted to shoot his silicone skin full of holes and *shake* him, demand to be told who had programmed him, what was going on, but he wouldn't know, would he? He couldn't tell me what he hadn't been programmed to.

Royal might be able to find out. She and Checker could dig into his head, see who had written the code to make him come here, who had put a weapon in his hand.

"Put the gun down," I said. I could tie him up. Take him out with me. How strong was he? Never mind; I could estimate the upper limit of tensile strength for the metal in his limbs. I wished I could knock him out, but I didn't know how without damaging him, damaging the evidence we might need.

"Are they dead?" he said. The frown between his eyes deepened.

I didn't look. I thought the answer was probably yes. Grant made a small whimpering sound behind me. "Grant, see to your people. Sloan, put the gun down. Now. Or I'll shoot you." He could understand threats, right? The AI would know how to respond. The AI would know to acquiesce.

"I killed them," he said, sounding confused. "It's wrong to kill people." He raised the Glock to his temple, pressed the barrel against the artificial skin there, and pulled the trigger.

The sound was muffled and dull, buried by metal, and the bullet didn't exit. Sloan didn't collapse immediately—he stumbled for a minute like a malfunctioning doll, his hand still holding the gun frozen at his temple and his jaw working, strange sounds coming out of his mouth that only vaguely approximated speech. Then he twitched, stopped, and toppled over like a felled tree.

I jumped down and pried the Glock out of his fingers. So that was how you killed them. As easy as with humans.

"Grant," I said, turning. "Call the paramedics—"

Imogene Grant was slumped at the base of the wall, her chest soaked with red, bubbles of blood forming on her mouth.

She'd been shot once already before I entered the room. I hadn't noticed.

I dashed over, dropping the pistols, pressing the heels of my hands down hard over the swamp of blood. The wound sucked against my palms. I got my jacket off and wadded it against her, my mind automatically calculating blood volume and loss—

Fuck the math, I thought, and pawed at her clothes one-handed for a cell phone that hadn't been crushed by bullet impacts. Medical science had come a long way; maybe they could put enough blood back in her body—

Grant clutched at my wrist. "Our fault," she whispered.

"Shut up," I said, twisting out of her weak grasp and pressing both hands back down on her chest as I scanned the room. Her mobile wasn't in her pockets—a purse, maybe? Or did one of the scientists have a phone? My gaze raked across them; they were all far too still for the paramedics to help. *Jesus...*

"No," said Grant. "Listen...we started it. We stole from them first. I didn't think...lead to this..."

"Wait. Funaki?"

Her eyes tried to focus, begging me to understand her last confession.

Holy crap. The impossible NLP. It had to have come from Funaki Industries' research—been one of *their* corporate secrets. An industrial espionage war that went back decades, Harrington had said. How much more had Arkacite stolen to built their 'bots? How many of the breakthroughs were really Funaki's?

"You aren't responsible for this," I said. "Funaki didn't send this guy against you, all right? Someone else stole him from them."

"Stole...?" she breathed.

She hadn't even known he was one of the 'bots. She'd thought he was the guy on TV railing against AIs thanks to the ones Ally Eight had built, thought he had come to put his words into violent action.

It was too much to try to explain. "I'm going to move for a minute and find a cell phone," I said. "Hang on."

"Wait," she said. "They...they took him..."

“Yes, he’s a robot and someone stole him. Now stop talking.”

I gingerly took my hands off her and scooted over to the nearest body—an Asian man, his glasses askew where he’d fallen face down and blood soaking the carpet around him. I pulled at his pockets—there, a phone, finally.

I lurched back to Grant, pressing down again on her wound as I brought the smartphone to life with my other hand—

She was still, her eyes staring sightlessly at the ceiling.

I stayed frozen for several long, long seconds. Then I released my blood-soaked jacket slowly, rocked back on my heels, and dropped the phone.

This was my fault. If I hadn’t spent so long talking down Sloan, if I’d gotten to her sooner, Grant might still be alive. I’d known there were potentially injured people behind me. I should have shot Morrison Sloan in the head and been done with it.

Mechanically, I stood up and took my blood-soaked jacket with me. I wiped off the cell phone and tossed it back to its owner, then picked up my gun and returned Sloan’s to his hand. The police would find some forensic anomalies here, but they’d probably be more concerned with the fact that they had a robot murderer.

I pushed open the door of the conference room and made my way to the front of the building to look down out the window. The crowd outside was surging against the police line, the security forces breaking.

The mob would get in to find their job already done for them.

I took the stairs back down to the ground floor and got out the way I’d come in, stopping in a washroom to do a quick scrub job on my hands—it wouldn’t do to walk outside looking like someone who had just killed the seven people inside. My jacket was a lost cause, but I swathed it in paper towels to carry out with me. I’d look weird, but not like a murderer.

Once I got back to my hole in the wall and climbed out through the rubble, I circled around to the front, skirting the fringes of the crowd and looking for a car to steal. Pushing, protesting, shouting people shoved by me. I fought my way out to a side street, away from the crowd.

I was walking in a daze, not paying attention, and by all rights I should have died in that moment.

Instead, some small part of the back of my brain that was still alert heard the rifle report.

Some small part of the back of my brain heard the rifle report and *realized the bullet hadn't beaten it.*

Some part of my brain that was *way* too good at what it did to be even close to normal heard the rifle report, realized the bullet hadn't beaten it, thought "subsonic round," and still had time to react.

Before the rest of my brain had parsed what was going on, my body was twisting and dropping. Something kicked me in the arm as I went down, *hard*, knocking the wind out of me even though it was my *arm*, it wasn't—

And then the pain hit.

Fortunately, I was moving before it had registered, and in a blind haze I continued my roll underneath the nearest car, putting the engine block between me and the direct line to where the muffled sound of a subsonic rifle round had emanated from.

Oh God. Oh God.

I struggled to breathe and not pass out, the acrid odor of engine oil clogging my senses, the pavement under my back digging into my spine. My entire right arm was an explosion of agony; the hyperawareness that usually helped me with injuries quailed away from it—I forced my senses through—

The round had shattered my right humerus, bullet lodged against the bone, oh God, it *hurt*—

Fuck, I hated being shot.

I pawed around with my left hand and found my paper-towel-bundled jacket; I smashed the whole massive ball against the entry wound and black spots immediately danced in my vision. I managed to undo my belt one-handed and get it up around my chest, binding the arm to my side with the paper-towel-and-fabric blob smashed against it like a protruding tumor.

The bundle was becoming heavy and wet, my blood adding to Grant's.

I couldn't stay here. I scooted to the other end of the car, steadied my breathing, and did some math.

Vectors. This was easy. I knew exactly where the sniper had been. I slipped out the other end of the car so that if he had stayed, waiting for me to pop up again, not a hint of my silhouette would inch into his line of sight.

I crept to the next car, biting my lip against the pain and breathing deeply. If he'd stayed put, he wouldn't see me. If he'd stayed put...

I snuck all the way around, a laborious ten minutes of inching and crawling and scooting and running—maybe he thought he'd killed me; would he go down and check? Maybe he'd taken one shot and then rabbited, worried someone had heard him, or that I could come back and track him...

Which is exactly what I was doing.

The apartment building was a few doors away. I wondered what he'd done to the tenants in the flat he'd chosen for his nest. Killed them? Tied them up? Made sure they were out of the house?

I was about to find out.

I took the stairs, the pain in my arm dragging at me as I pounded up the flights. The bullet trajectory sped backward, upward, telling me exactly which apartment, which room. I stumbled to the right door and smashed my heel into it next to the jamb, splintering the lock, exploding the door open, my gun in my left hand. My right arm dangled uselessly below the elbow from where it was buckled to my side.

A tall, gray-haired man in black whipped around from where he'd been staring through his scope out the open window. A white guy, middle-aged—probably in his fifties, though he was handsome in a grizzled sort of way, and his build was still fit and athletic, hardened sinews standing out under his tanned skin.

His hawk-like gaze took in the handgun I already had aimed at him, and he slowly raised his hands.

"Hi," I said, kicking the door shut behind me, where it banged against the broken jamb.

The sniper said nothing.

"I'm in a really bad mood," I said. "And you just shot me."

His eyes strayed to the bloody mass of towels strapped to my arm.

"I'm very hard to kill, as you can see," I said. A shiver crawled down my spine as I said it. If he'd been using a standard rifle round, I'd be dead. He must have chosen subsonic out of a noise concern—his rifle sported a large, heavy suppressor as well.

Fuck. He'd been so close.

“Who sent you?” I said.

He said nothing.

“There are a bunch of people making my life difficult right now,” I said. “So I’d appreciate a little clarity. I’m in a lot of pain, and I’m not at all opposed to putting you in the same state. So answer. My. Fucking. Question. Who sent you?”

He still didn’t answer.

I didn’t need him to. Despite what I’d said, I already knew who he worked for. The robot at Arkacite hadn’t given any sign of knowing who I was, and nobody else involved would have escalated to killing, especially not with a human sniper. (A robot would make an excellent sniper, I thought. The math...the patience...oh, fuck.)

The muscles in my legs twitched and shook. I needed to get off my feet. I needed to take care of the bleeding hole in my arm. I needed to go somewhere I could sit down and swallow an entire bottle of prescription painkillers. “Tell Mama Lorenzo she’ll have to try a lot harder than that,” I said shortly. “Now step forward and put your hands on your head.”

He blinked.

“No, I’m not going to kill you.” I should, I thought. He’d done his damndest to kill me, and how many expert snipers could Mama Lorenzo have on speed dial?

But fucking Arthur had gotten into my fucking head, and I’d just let seven other people die on my watch, plus possibly Noah Warren, and the Japanese scientists and a whole mess of robots who weren’t technically alive but still...and for some reason the decision to take one more life...

If I let him live, maybe it was all right if I didn’t reset my count. Maybe it was these choices that mattered. I didn’t fucking know.

I searched him and pulled off his sidearm, a sleek little high-quality Browning, and made him tie himself up with a cord from the curtains before I put down my gun and reinforced his job one-handed with some duct tape I found in his sniper bag. Then I looked down at the street to make sure no one was walking underneath and tipped his rifle out the window.

Gravity sucked it down and shattered it against the sidewalk. Satisfying. More satisfying if I’d been able to steal it—it was a nice rifle—but a girl can’t have everything.

“Did you kill the people who live here?” I asked. I wondered how long he’d been waiting here, patiently. The Mob had clearly realized I kept returning to Arkacite, set up shop for when I inevitably came back... “If you didn’t kill them, maybe I just leave you,” I offered. “Maybe I don’t call the cops.”

He didn’t say anything. It was becoming irritating.

“Mama Lorenzo doesn’t like innocent people getting hurt,” I said. At least, I’d thought she didn’t. I thought of Tegan and Reese and Cheryl.

My would-be killer still stayed silent, and I gave up. Someone had probably noticed the falling rifle by now anyway and called the police. Heck, the cops were all next door at Arkacite; it shouldn’t take them long.

I picked up the landline, dialed 911, and left it off the hook. Then I let myself out of the apartment.

I had to brace my hand against the wall as I made my way down the stairs. The blood loss was making me dizzy.

CHAPTER 28

I LEANED back against the wall at Miri's place and dug into my arm with a sterilized pair of tweezers from her medicine cabinet, biting down on a towel and trying not to pass out, and tuning out Arthur as he railed at me.

"Goddammit, will you please stop and let me call you a doctor!"

"Nnnn," I said through the towel. The bullet outlined itself in my mind, nestled against the bone. *HolyJesusChristfuck*.

"Russell, I'm telling you, you ain't supposed to try to get it out. You gonna hurt yourself worse. You listening?"

I eased the tweezers through my flesh and up against the slug. I anchored them, considered the lack of friction, and tightened my grip. With one quick tug the bullet was out—

—a new wave of pain slammed into me as I yanked; my throat closed and bucked and I almost threw up into the towel.

"Hey. Hey. Russell." Arthur was crouched next to me, touching my face. "Hey."

I spat out the towel. My face was cold with sweat. "Find me something to splint this thing with."

"Russell, please. You might need surgery. And if it gets infected—"

"I'll see your doctor when all this is over," I said. "Now find me something to splint it with, for fuck's sake." The words came out weaker than I wanted them to.

When I'd practically fallen through Miri's door covered in blood, Pilar had whisked Liliana—who'd been cheerfully conscious again—into the bedroom, covering her eyes. She'd popped back out to make sure I wasn't dying and there wasn't anything she could do, and then gone back to babysitting.

Royal was sitting in the corner, her face in her hands. She hadn't taken the murder of her entire team well.

Checker came back out of the kitchen with a bowl of warm water, more towels, and another first-aid kit. "Here—I'm going to go check the closets; she's got to have something better than Neosporin—"

I grunted. I didn't know why I hadn't gone back to one of my bolt holes. I had better medical supplies in all of them than Miri probably had in her whole apartment, but I'd jacked a car and driven here automatically, my mind in a fugue state. Probably from the blood loss.

"Least let me help you," begged Arthur.

"Yeah," I said. "Good. I have to set it."

"Set it?"

"Yeah." It was why I'd dug out the bullet—my physical hyperawareness had revealed how it sat exactly where I needed the stupid bone to go. I'd do a crappier job setting the break than a doctor would, probably, but math was useful for all sorts of things. "You want to help? Brace me."

"I ain't think this is a good idea, Russell—"

"Help me or fuck off." I'm eloquent when I'm in pain.

Arthur reluctantly did as I bid him, holding down my shoulders and anchoring my upper body against the wall. I grabbed above my right elbow with my left hand, did the calculations, closed my eyes, and braced myself. Two choices: slow and steady or fast and over with, and the math was the same either way.

I yanked.

I'd forgotten to bite down on something again. Checker and Pilar both rushed back into the room afraid I was dying.

I slumped against the wall, waiting for the world to stop distorting itself, and waved them off with my good hand, though even those muscles didn't seem to be working well. My whole body throbbed, as if my nervous system had given up containing the searing mangle to my right arm.

Everything felt raw and red and horrible, and I'd already taken as many of Miri's over-the-counter painkillers as I dared.

Arthur moved against me, dressing the wound and splinting my arm. Checker had piled as many medical supplies as he could find next to us, which didn't include much better options than gauze, ace bandages, a couple rudimentary first-aid kits, and some strong-smelling herbal balms Miri apparently swore by.

"Are you going to tell us what happened now?" came Checker's voice, his worry pecking at my consciousness. I'd given them the basic rundown of events when I'd come in, but not the details. I hadn't told them about the sniper.

"I got shot," I said.

"Cas!" cried Checker.

I got lucky, I didn't say.

I pushed my brain into working. "We have to find out who's moving the chess pieces." Chess. That was a pretty high-brow metaphor for me. I was proud of myself. "Ally Eight stole the tech, but then someone else stole the robots, and they're using 'em as weapons. Who?" Robots as killing machines. I wondered if Liliana could be reprogrammed that way. I didn't want to think about it.

"This is bad," said Checker. "This is really, really, really, *really* bad."

"I know it's bad," I said. "I've been shot."

"No, I mean—well, yes, of *course* it's bad that you got shot, but I mean the whole someone-using-androids-as-weapons thing. This is *really* bad. The mob rioting we've seen so far is nothing; now people are going to flip out—the government will be shutting down all AI research everywhere, just you wait, and every roboticist alive is suddenly going to be suspect; it'll be a witch hunt—"

"I think we have bigger problems right now," I said. The words were only a little slurred. I needed more pain meds.

"Bigger problems?" exclaimed Checker. "*Bigger problems?* All of AI is going to be a scapegoat for this! It'll set research back fifty years! People are going to think robotics is—is *dangerous!*"

"Seems pretty dangerous to me," said Arthur darkly.

“Yes, an extremely limited anthropomorphic robot is any sort of threat when we have *Predator drones*—”

“One thing being dangerous don’t mean they both ain’t,” said Arthur. He was threading a cutout piece of bed sheet around my arm to make a sling—gently, but every touch stabbed—and his tone was hooded.

Checker didn’t seem to notice. “But you’re talking about a threat of computerized violence! My point is that we *already* have ridiculously deadly robots! The ones like Liliana are barely more than—barely more than *toasters* in comparison. In terms of violence, I mean; obviously the natural language processing’s better than a toaster—”

“Toasters ain’t look like us,” said Arthur.

“If looking like us is the scary part, you should be more scared of other humans,” Checker argued. “All an android can do is what it’s programmed to. It can’t react to new situations, or plan a crime, or have any sort of *motivation* for violence—”

“Or have remorse or second thoughts,” said Arthur. He tightened the knot on my sling and wheeled tiredly around to face Checker. “Come on now. The thing that stops people killing each other ain’t the thought that killing might be too hard. The ’bots, they got no...no compunction. No empathy. You can’t reason with them. I get why people’ll want ’em stopped.”

I thought, briefly, of Rio.

“Well, they’re programmed to mimic empathy and reason, so you can still sort of manipulate the AI, if you know how,” said Checker. “Unless someone overrides those algorithms...but saying the technology’s at fault here is like saying internal combustion is at fault for a hit and run. You want to ban cars next?”

“Robots don’t kill people, people kill people?” I muttered sarcastically.

“Cas, I’m serious! We have to get out in front of this!”

“What do you expect me to do?” I managed to wrest my eyes around to look up at him. It was an effort. “Seriously. What do you want us to do here?”

He threw his arms wide. “I don’t know! But we have to do something!”

“He’s right.”

I rolled my eyes the other way. Rayal had come over to stand behind Arthur. Her eyes were wet, the skin below them puffy and shadowed. “Losing what Arkacite was doing—that will be enough of a blow. We can’t let everyone else be taken down, too.”

I was starting to feel very hemmed in. Wasn’t being shot supposed to make people be nice to me for a while? “I thought you hated Arkacite,” I said.

“What?” she said, taken aback. “No, not at all. I—when I left, that was about me, not them. We were doing great things there, tremendous things, and my team...” More tears leaked out over her cheeks; she sniffed and dabbed at her face with the hem of her sleeve. “Look at what we did. We built something amazing, something nobody’s ever—and we couldn’t have done that without Arkacite. They gave us free rein; they took a chance on us—they had no idea how it would turn out, and they gave us the time and the funding to figure it out, and...we did something great.”

“Yeah, Lau strikes me as an accommodating sort of boss,” I said.

“Him? He was just a manager. He liked to think he had a part to play, but he wasn’t an engineer.” She got quiet. “Universities can’t do everything. The world needs more companies like Arkacite. More of the research we were doing. There are so few industry labs left that do real research.”

I thought about Grant’s deathbed confession about stealing Funaki’s secrets to base the company’s work on. Rayal was probably happier not knowing that.

“I kind of agree,” said Pilar. I hadn’t realized she was still hovering. I wrenched myself around to look at her, and she twitched under the scrutiny but didn’t back down. “I mean, I—I hated working there—they were awful to me—but that was mostly because of, um, certain people. The technology, it was fascinating, like they were building the future. They were working on things like self-driving cars and 3D cameras and honest-to-God invisibility stuff—and they were trying for inventions that would help police, like a frequency thingamajiggy that would help break up mobs in situations just like what happened today, and brain interfacing machines for people who’ve been injured. And Liliana...I dunno, I’ve been spending a lot of time with her, and she’s something. Really something.” A smile tugged at her face, and she shrugged self-consciously. “I guess I’m just trying to say, in a lot of ways they might’ve sucked, but Denise is right. What they were

doing—it was like working in *Back to the Future* or something. Except with a miserable boss.”

“I still don’t know what you all want me to do about it,” I said. “We don’t even know who’s weaponizing the ’bots.”

“So we find another one and kidnap it, like we were planning to do with Sloan,” said Checker. “Cas, with your help I’m sure we can get the recognition algorithm to work. We find any other ’bots out there, and Denise can figure out who’s using them as weapons, and then we can stop them.”

“No,” I said. Nobody else was getting hurt on my watch. Maybe later there would be breathing room for investigating and fighting back, but there was a time to play detective and a time to get innocent people who couldn’t even handle a gun out of the fucking crosshairs. “No. We run.”

In the silence, one of the laptops trilled.

Checker grabbed at it and looked up at Denise. “It’s Vikash Agarwal calling back.”

Agarwal—the one scientist on her team who hadn’t been at Arkacite.

“Answer it!” said Rayal, rushing over.

“You can tell him Arthur will pick *him* up, too,” I muttered. “Seeing as we’re now an inn for wayward scientists.” We’d get him out with Denise. The mob and whoever was behind Sloan’s assassinations would have no one left to come after.

Checker hit a key.

“Vikash?” cried Denise. “Vikash, tell me you’re all right. Did you hear what—did you hear?” Her voice cracked.

“Yeah,” he said. “I did. Denise, did you manage to find those people you told me about? The ones who stole our Liliana?”

“Yes, they’re—it’s a long story, but yes.”

“Oh,” he said. “Good. I need her.”

Rayal blinked. “What are you talking about? Vikash, someone is targeting us, all of us. You have to—”

“I don’t *have to* do anything,” he snapped. “Not anymore.”

Arthur stood up slowly and went to stand next to Denise.

“I just meant...Vikash, where are you? We can help—”

“You always tried to be so helpful.” He sighed. “You were a good project leader. You can come with me if you want.”

“I don’t understand,” said Rayal. “You have a plan?”

“Of course I have a plan. I always have a plan. I have ten thousand contingency plans for every event, every branching. Exponential preparedness. It’s why you liked me, isn’t it? Every time one of the others fucked up, I had a plan. Me.”

“Vikash—don’t, not now—they’re *dead*.” Her voice shook, and her eyes overflowed again.

“Yes,” he said coldly. “Truth value, correct. They are.”

She winced. “Can’t you leave the past...”

“Do you know what I think is one of the only unforgivable sins?” said Agarwal conversationally. “Plagiarism. Plagiarism and censorship. Those are inexcusable. People can have a reason for murder, you know.”

“Vikash, we *dealt* with this—”

“It was Arkacite’s culture, wasn’t it? They encouraged it. Publish or perish—but in our case, it was *develop* or perish, and steal from your colleagues if you have to. You and I, we were ninety-nine percent of the innovation, but no, other people wanted some credit, too, they said it was *fair*—they didn’t like me, did they? So no problem to put their names on my work. Except you, of course, but you were always smarter than they were. Were you smart enough to figure out how much Arkacite stole, I wonder? How much we worked off the backs of other people’s property? You were always so innocent, with your dreams of a better future.”

Rayal straightened up, very slowly. “Or maybe I think all research should be shared anyway.”

“Without *credit*?” Agarwal roared. A bang sounded from the speaker. “Don’t try to play a hippie liberal copyleft card here; you *know* the difference! You’re smarter than that! You’re smart enough to understand the truth!”

“Yes,” said Rayal, and my breath caught at the coldness in her voice. I hadn’t known she was capable of that tone. “Yes, I am smart enough.”

Agarwal was silent.

“I think I understand a lot of things,” said Rayal, with that same harsh frigidity. “I think Funaki Industries offered you a job on the condition that

you brought Liliana and all the behavioral research we'd put into her. I think *you* were the leak, that you've been feeding them our research for years as retaliation for what you see as the moral wrong of us stealing theirs." Her voice held the slightest tremor on those last words—I was right; she hadn't realized, not until now. "I think you knew about their plans to cause mass AI hysteria in the United States, and maybe you even helped them out—or maybe they didn't need you; their roboticists are just as good as ours. I think their goal was to get AI research shut down in the States so they could corner the market, and their methods weren't extreme enough for you. I think you told the rabid McCabe-followers exactly who was artificial and used the mobs to cover up your crime, and I think you killed people you'd worked with for over a decade in a fit of petty jealousy."

"*Jealousy?*" cried Agarwal. "Me, jealous of them? This wasn't *jealousy*, it was *justice*—"

He stopped.

Royal's voice rose. "You commit murder and you gut the support for science funding in the US just so you can—what, *win*? Funaki isn't going to want you anymore after this, no matter how much they hated us at Arkacite—you turned your technology into a killing machine; you're insane; you don't deserve to be called a scientist!"

There was a beat of total silence.

Then we heard an angry rustling, and everyone jerked back as a large video window appeared with a close-up of Agarwal's face, his eyes wild, his skin smudged with dirt and sweat, his wiry black hair in disarray. "Can you see me? Do you see me, Denise? *I* am the future of humanity. I am! You know what it is to look at everyone else, at their stupid, *meaningless* little lives, at their petty problems and logical fallacies, and know that it all means nothing, that *they're* nothing—less than nothing! I will rebuild this world—I will—and I will do a better job than any politician, any bureaucrat, any two-faced, lying Wall Street CEO or schmuck born into a trust fund, and the people will love me for it!"

"I'm not giving you Liliana," said Denise. "Whatever you want her for—I'm not giving her to you."

Agarwal started to laugh, the sound building, slow and malicious. "Well, what did we say, about me always having a backup plan?"

He moved aside and adjusted the camera to focus on a wilted, bleeding figure tied to a chair.

Lau.

They took him, Grant had said. She hadn't been talking about the Sloan robot.

"You think humanity is worth something?" ranted Agarwal. "Then I dare you to a trade. I want our 'bot; you get him back. You never liked him much, did you? None of us did. Would you like to see his brain matter spattered all over the floor? If the answer is yes, then join the new regime with me." He grinned broadly, the smile all too-wide angles. "If not, then give me our work, and you'll get him in return. Not a very fair trade, I admit, but let's see what you think."

The video blinked out.

CHAPTER 29

“WE CAN’T do it,” said Pilar. She sounded like she was near tears. “She’s a scared little girl—”

Checker was pressing a hand to his eyes. “No,” he said. “She isn’t.”

“Here’s a thought,” said Arthur. “How about we call the cops? We just got video of him kidnapping someone.”

“The cops are after both Liliana and Rayal in the first place,” I said tiredly.

“It doesn’t matter.” Denise’s voice was muffled. She had sunk into one of Miri’s chairs after the phone interview, hunched over, her face in her hands again, but this time her hands were shaking. She slowly raised her head and spoke to us. “Vikash is—he’s one of the smartest people I ever—no matter what we try, he’ll have a plan. If we call the police, he’ll have a plan. If we try to double-cross him, he’ll have a plan.”

“I’m pretty smart, too,” I said.

“But you’re also injured, and—” Arthur took a shuddering breath. “I think we got an elephant in the room here. Liliana, she ain’t...you all tell me she ain’t human. The guy he got is.”

None of us said anything. Pilar found something riveting to study on the floor.

“She’s just a kid,” I whispered. Checker didn’t correct me this time.

“I dunno nothing about this stuff,” said Arthur. “I gotta trust what you guys say. Russell, you tell me honestly—you think this girl got a—a soul?”

My throat was dry, and the pain in my arm was making it difficult to think. “I don’t even know what that means,” I said.

“She’s not sentient. You know that.” Checker still hadn’t looked up, but I knew he was talking to me. “Ye gods, she’s not even the most advanced computer we have today; it’s only that she *looks* human, that she’s been programmed to interact with us—Cas, you *know* that.”

“He’s right,” said Rayal.

Pilar made a small, unhappy noise.

“I don’t want to be the bad guy here,” said Checker, “but this—I’m sorry; I don’t see how this is even a question. I know Lau’s an ass—I do—but he’s a person.”

“And if we could prove she were conscious? Would you still say that?” I wanted the words to be ornery, argumentative, but they came out weak and tight. “That just because she’s not built like us, she deserves to die?”

Checker recoiled as if I’d slapped him. “That’s not what this is,” he pleaded. “This isn’t—*she* isn’t, she isn’t what you’re talking about.”

“How do we know? If the programming is sufficiently advanced, how can we say it’s any different from conscious thought?”

“Because you know the math!” Checker said. “You know how she works.”

“And why does that mean anything?” I countered bitterly. “What if some higher intelligence understood the science behind human beings? All *we* are is very sophisticated slot machines, only biological ones!”

“Are you telling me if she were a smartphone, or a tablet—with all the same programming—would we honestly still be having this discussion?” Checker sounded anguished. “I don’t want to turn her over to him—I don’t—she’s an amazing piece of technology, and it tears me up to think of her dissected or destroyed, but—you can’t tell me that she’s worth a human life!”

I imagined Noah Warren’s reaction.

If he ever woke up, I couldn’t help but think we were trading Lau’s life for his.

“I’ll take her,” I said.



PILAR AND I went back to the bedroom so she could say good-bye to Liliana.

“Be a good girl, okay?” said Pilar, crouching to be on eye level with her and smiling through tears.

“Where am I going?” asked Liliana.

Pilar just hugged her. Liliana hugged back, tightly. “I don’t want to leave,” she said when they pulled back, her lip starting to tremble. “I want to stay here with you and Mommy. Where’s my dad? Am I going to see my dad?”

Pilar didn’t answer, a wrecked expression on her face.

“Yeah,” I said. “We’re going to find your dad.”

Liliana’s face lit up. Pilar lowered her head and her shoulders tensed. I wondered if she was about to stand up and sock me. “Come on,” I said, holding out a hand.

Liliana took it. Trusting.

Pilar didn’t follow us back to the living room.

Liliana insisted on saying good-bye to everyone, speaking very gravely and holding out a hand to shake and thank them for having her. She was very polite. Rayal had gone over by the windows, as far away as possible, and when Liliana approached her she turned away.

“Denise,” I said sharply.

I didn’t know if it was my tone or the use of her first name that got her, but her gaze flicked to me and then she turned to Liliana and crouched down.

“Will you come and meet us?” asked Liliana. “I want to be a family again.”

“I—I don’t know,” said Denise. Her voice was a peculiar mix of stiffness and longing, as if she were fighting to hold herself back. “You—you’re going to be fine, sweetie.”

“*Mommy,*” cried Liliana, and threw her arms around Rayal’s neck.

For a moment I thought Rayal was going to throw her off and flinch away, but then she slid her arms around Liliana and embraced her, squeezing hard, her eyes closed.

They let go, and Denise brushed past me and out of the room without turning back.

“I’m going with you,” said Arthur at my shoulder. “You need backup.”

“It’s an exchange,” I said, not making eye contact. “There won’t be a fight.”

“This ain’t a discussion.”

I waved at him impatiently. “Whatever. Checker, did he send a location?”

“Got it. It’s out in the middle of the desert. I’m sending it to your—”

“I broke the phone I was using,” I said. I’d run out of burners again.

“I’m sending it to Arthur’s, then. Cas—” He reached out and caught my sleeve as I headed for the door. “Be careful, all right?”

I didn’t answer.

Arthur and I headed out to the street. I let Arthur take Liliana’s hand this time, and made sure to bump into him slightly on the way out.

Arthur, being honest, had gotten a rental car. “I’m driving,” I said.

“Your arm—”

“I said you could come,” I said, a trifle too loudly. “I didn’t say you could tell me what to do.”

He squinted at me but tossed me the keys, then opened up the back and got Liliana settled in. I glanced at his face in the mirror as I swung into the driver’s seat and started the engine—his expression was tight and stiff as he helped Liliana buckle her seatbelt.

Arthur liked kids. Despite what he’d said inside, he wasn’t sure about this either.

He slammed the door to the back, and just as he reached to open the front door I floored the accelerator.

Liliana screamed and covered her eyes; the seatbelt yanked her back as the car lurched and I went zero to sixty gobbling the pavement. A rapidly shrinking version of Arthur chased after me in my mirrors, shouting. I ignored him. The tires squealed as I careened around the corner.

Less than a minute later, the cell phone I’d pickpocketed from Arthur rang. I tucked it onto my shoulder and went back to driving one-handed. “I’m saving them both,” I said.

Arthur's voice came over the line, frantic. "Russell, you ain't—"

"Don't come after me unless you want to interfere and endanger everyone."

"Stop! Think here—Denise says he's too dangerous—says he's too smart!"

"Oh, yeah?" I said. "Well, so am I."

I hung up and steered with my elbow as I checked the phone's texts. As Checker had promised, the location was far to the north, out in the empty desert.

I memorized it and chucked the phone out the window.

CHAPTER 30

EVENING WAS descending over the desert, the twilight staining the sky purple behind the distant mountains.

Only this morning we'd had a nice, civilized deal with Arkacite. Less than a day ago.

I stopped at the coordinates Agarwal had provided. I'd pulled off a few miles before to untie the sling Arthur had rigged, preferring not to look obviously weak in front of an enemy. Arthur had left his leather jacket in the car; I'd slid it gingerly over my arm—it was about ten sizes too big, but at least it covered the splint and my bloodstained shirt. I also had my P7 and the Mob sniper's Browning in my belt and a tire iron I'd grabbed from the spare bay in the trunk thrust through a belt loop.

I got out of the car, the soil hard-packed and dusty under my boots, and pulled open the back door. "Come with me, okay?" I said to Liliana, keeping my eyes on the stillness around us. The desert stretched vast and empty to the horizon, marred only by jagged rocks and dry scrub.

Liliana undid her seatbelt and climbed out obediently, the party dress and patent leather shoes entirely incongruous out here in the twilit nowhere.

We waited.

A distant humming buzzed against my ears, and I had my P7 up and aimed before I identified a small UAV zipping toward us. It did a pass a short distance away and then veered off.

Again we waited.

In the distance, a tiny dust cloud kicked up. It grew as it came closer, and eventually resolved into a red ATV with two figures perched inside, the driver a dark and fierce silhouette and the other man listing to the side, almost collapsing. “Take my hand,” I said to Liliana, “and stay behind me.” My arm twinged in pain as she reached up and gripped my useless right hand where it dangled at my side. I still had the gun in my left one.

The ATV stopped about twenty feet away, and the driver jumped out. He went around to the other side and hustled Lau down, hauling him back up by his ripped suit when he stumbled. Lau had his hands tied behind him and a gag pulled tight over his mouth, and half-dried blood painted his temple from a scalp wound. The dressing from where I’d pistol whipped him the other day had partly torn off.

Agarwal kept his hand fisted in the lapel of Lau’s suit jacket and dragged him toward us. They closed the distance about halfway and stopped.

“You’re not Denise,” he said.

“And you’re not Agarwal,” I replied.

His face bent into that too-angular smile. “You can understand why. But how did you know?”

It was brilliant, really—particularly if we’d called the police. Agarwal would have had a fall guy and perfect plausible deniability for everything. *Officers, someone built a robot that looks like me! I’m innocent!*

“I’m surprised you’re self-aware,” I said. None of the other ’bots had known what they were.

“Oh, I’m not aware at all,” said the robot. He tapped the side of his head. “Different model. One I can speak through in real time, but he’s just a shell. Not nearly the advancement our Liliana is, of course, but very convenient.” He stretched his face in mock suspense. “Am I really Vikash Agarwal, even? Well, it’s true no one else would be smart enough for this. But maybe not. Maybe I’m dead! Tell Denise that; see if it keeps her up at night.”

“Bullshit,” I said. “You were human on the video link.”

His features elongated with surprise, and he squinted at me. “Well, well! Curiouser and curiouser. Denise, what *have* you been up to?”

“Give me Lau,” I said.

“On the count of three?” asked Agarwal, in the same gleeful tone.

“What’s to keep me from shooting you and taking them both?”

He wagged his artificial eyebrows at me. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

So he had a contingency, as I’d expected. The desert held no cover for snipers, robotic or otherwise, but the ATV might hold a bomb—or a chemical weapon, something that would kill people but not destroy the ’bots. He wanted Liliana intact, after all. Agarwal wasn’t a chemist, though; he was a roboticist...I thought of the UAV. “Death from the skies?”

Agarwal touched the side of his nose and pointed at me. “Our little secret.”

Some sort of targeted missiles, I thought. Something precise and deadly that he’d programmed himself.

I squatted down to be at eye level with Liliana, and pitched my voice low enough that a human wouldn’t be able to hear it. The Agarwal ’bot might, but it didn’t matter. “Liliana, I need you to go with that man right now. Okay?”

“I don’t want to,” said Liliana, her eyes wide. “He scares me.”

“I know, honey,” I said. “Will you trust me?”

“You saved me,” she said, the words like a punch to the gut. “I trust you.”

I stood up and would have given her a gentle push with my right hand, except it wasn’t working well enough. “Go ahead.”

She took a hesitant step forward.

Agarwal shoved Lau in the back, and he fell into a stumble. He shuffled toward me, casting a horrified glance at Liliana as he passed her, an expression that changed to a mixture of revulsion and relief as he reached me. His face was crusted with dried sweat and blood and dirt behind the gag, and swollen pinkishness rimmed his wild eyes.

I slid the P7 back in my belt and pulled out a knife to slice the zipties around his hands. “Stay close to me,” I said, redrawing the gun.

Lau jerked back, clawing at the gag, horror and hatred contorting his features as the realization hit him that I was about to risk his life for a very expensive toy. Agarwal’s doppelgänger had a hand around Liliana’s shoulders as he led her toward the ATV; she looked back at me, her eyes so

wide and scared I could see the whites all the way around, and I lifted the P7 and shot the Agarwal robot through the back of the head.

Liliana tore back toward me at four point two three meters per second, Lau grabbed at me hysterically, screeching in my ear, and four missiles the size of my fist shrieked out of the sky directly at Lau and me.

I dropped the gun and drew the tire iron, mathematics exploding through my senses. As the tiny devices whistled down, I jumped and kicked off Lau like he was a wall—he collapsed coughing to the ground below me, where I could cover him nicely—and I pivoted in the air, bringing around the tire iron like a baseball bat. I whipped it in rapid arcs, the impacts vibrating solidly down the metal as I made contact: one, two, three, four.

My boots smacked the dust as I landed on the ground again to stand over Liliana and Lau.

One of the missiles slammed into the desert fifteen feet away and stilled. The other three tumbled away from me and then turned in mid-air, homing back in. The numbers for their recovery distance, the speed they needed to keep lift, the necessary altitude for them to correct all slammed into place in my head—slow them enough and they'd fall out of the sky, get them low enough and they'd bury themselves in the desert before they could reacquire their targets.

I pivoted, raising the tire iron. And swung.

Bam. A second missile hit the dust. *Bam.* The last two missiles impacted each other in mid-air, a perfect transfer of momentum; they floated weightless and still for a graceful instant before they fell to the earth.

“Well, well, *well* done!”

Agarwal's robot twin had gotten back up and was clapping slowly, the deranged smile still on his face as though stuck. One of his eyes was gone, bits of metal jagged through the synthetic flesh.

Shit. Unlike Sloan, this 'bot hadn't had his brain in his head. Apparently.

“I can do this all day,” I called. “I can do this until you run out of missiles.” Best to move, though—the car or the ATV? The ATV would allow me to keep protecting us while we drove...

“Why, this is brilliant!” cried Agarwal, like a child on Christmas morning. “Denise! You built a better model! How delightful!”

I didn't know what he was talking about for one long, long moment. And then it hit me.

He thought I was a robot.

Holy fuck.

"This is truly remarkable. How did you get the hardware to respond so precisely? The lag in the interface—it's gone, I can see it. Simply wonderful! I *must* see what it can do!"

He snapped his fingers.

And suddenly sixteen missiles were tearing out of the sky. Then thirty-two.

Jesus—

There was no more time to think. I whirled around Lau and Liliana, a spinning cage of iron. *Bam, bam, bam*. One of the missiles exploded as it came in close, trying to tag me in the blast radius, but I was right about that radius being small, and it barely singed me. I added the danger zone to my calculations.

Holy shit, how were there so *many*—

Agarwal whooped. "This is wonderful! It looks damaged, though. What have you been up to, Denise? Are you listening through it right now? Talk to me!"

"Fuck you!" I shouted.

"Spicy! Who's been using such language around you?"

I didn't have time for a retort; my hand was slipping on the tire iron. What if I missed one, just one? My brain kept effortless track of how many were left in the air. Twenty. Nineteen. Seventeen...Despite my big words to Agarwal, I was, unbelievably, getting tired, and my whole right side was on fire, but he could only have so many of these; they had to be expensive to make—

Fifteen. Fourteen. No new wave of missiles; the rest of the sky was silent. He'd wanted to see what I could do—he'd been excited about it, *greedy*—had he sent every last weapon he had against me already?

Thirteen. Twelve.

I started telling myself we might make it.

Another one of the missiles exploded, not close enough, but almost, singeing Lau's hair where he crouched on the ground. He screamed and lurched to his feet.

"Get back *down!*" I yelled. I didn't have another hand to grab him—
Eleven.

Another one went off, so close to us that Lau shrieked as the heat flared against his face. Irrational panic contorted his features, and he broke toward the car.

I shouted, but he didn't hear me, or wouldn't—I wheeled to dash after him, to tackle him if I had to—

Liliana was on the other side of me, but she was screaming and crying too, and as I turned away she reached up in terror and grabbed my hand.

My right arm jerked in its socket, and the world exploded in pain, fireworks going off behind my eyes, my equilibrium deserting me for a precious quarter second. I managed to tear myself out of Liliana's grasp and reorient just as four guided personal missiles streaked through my vision in slow motion and slammed into Lau.

He tried to scream. The explosion was too fast.

As he went down, the remaining missiles crashed into the car, going off as they hit. I thought at first that they had missed, that they'd been too close to the vehicle to re-home themselves on me—I thought Agarwal had miscalculated—

But he hadn't. I only thought he had because it took five missiles before the secondary explosion went off.

The back of the car went up in a fireball usually confined to movies. The shockwave slammed into me, and the world and sky flipped places.

The sky.

The sky...

The sky was a very pretty purple. The first stars pricked through the dusk, far above me.

Pretty.

Something was burning next to me, stinging my nostrils, making my eyes water. I wanted to get away from it. It was making it hard to breathe,

the smoke harsh and acrid against my lungs. Move, I thought, I should move. Moving felt like an abstract fancy right now.

My vision tilted, the stars above blurring into streaks of light, and the rest of my senses fuzzed in and out, my surroundings smearing and bleeding into each other.

A gangly man with metal edges where his right eye should have been limped into view above me. He wasn't moving very well. It didn't matter, because I couldn't move at all.

In the man's right hand he held a gun. My gun. Where had he gotten that? In the desert, I thought. I'd dropped it. Why had I dropped it?

Agarwal's robot stared down at me with his one good eye and pointed the gun at my head.

Then he laughed and pitched it into the dirt. "I can't do it. I can't destroy it. This is too good. Wreak some havoc with it, Denise. My gift to you." He saluted and shuffled backward out of my field of view, then returned, his silhouette backlit by the deepening twilight. "So good, Denise. I mean it. If you ever want to join me, you know where to find me."

CHAPTER 31

SENSE RETURNED slowly.

Full night had swallowed the desert by the time I managed to hitch myself up on my left elbow and look around. The world wheeled again as I shifted, and all my muscles seized. My throat slammed shut and I stopped breathing and almost threw up. Or passed out. I wasn't sure.

I unclenched myself. Breathed. Pain—some internal injuries. Lungs damaged from the smoke.

Concussion. Bad one.

I didn't even try to think about my right arm.

The car fire had burned itself out. Liliana was gone. Agarwal must have taken her. The ATV was gone, too. I had no idea whether Liliana had been injured by the explosion—I hadn't seen.

A distorted shape lay about ten feet away from me. It was too dark to see what condition Lau's body had ended up in.

I was glad I couldn't see, and felt like a coward for it.

A sound crunched across the desert—wheels, with headlights swooping through the empty darkness. I pushed myself to sit up all the way, and managed it on the third try. Standing seemed like too much to ask, but at least sitting freed up my left hand. I slid it around the back of my waist where I still had the Mob sniper's sleek little Browning stowed, now with a matching Browning-shaped bruise in the flesh of my back. I eased it out gingerly.

The headlights stopped. "Russell?" called a voice.

The adrenaline poured out of me so fast that I didn't realize I had fallen down again until my head smacked against the dirt and I had a face full of stars. "Here," I said weakly.

Footsteps crunched on the gravel and debris, and a penlight sliced through the darkness. It crossed my eyes and I squinted away.

"Russell—oh, God. Russell." Arthur was next to me, crouching down, hands reaching out. "Where you injured?"

"Everywhere," I said.

"I can call—a doctor, or—Russell, maybe you need an ambulance—"

"No," I said. "I'm okay. Just help me up."

"I ain't think you should—"

"*Arthur*," I said, and something in my tone shut him up. He came around to my left side, and I hitched myself up onto my elbow again as he eased an arm around my back. Half-collapsing into Arthur, I managed to get to my feet, though I was pretty sure my legs were going to liquefy under me at any second.

"Easy," murmured Arthur, the way one might soothe a startled calf. "Easy..."

He helped me to the car. Helped me in. Another rental, I noticed.

"Sorry about your car," I said.

"It's okay. I got the insurance."

"The police will want to know—"

"Someone involved in this mess keeps stealing my cars," he said casually. "Not implausible. I am a PI investigating the android situation, after all. I'll take care of it." He made sure I was inside and shut the passenger door gently, leaning on the open window. "Lau?" His voice had gone grave.

"He's dead." I stared straight ahead, through the windshield, the stars a vast diamond-crusted panoply over the desert.

Because Arthur was Arthur, he went to check. Then he came back and got in, starting the engine without comment.

"I fucked up," I said.

"I know," said Arthur, driving us quietly away from the scene.

"Lau's dead because of me."

“Yeah,” said Arthur softly. “Maybe.”

I would have preferred it if he’d yelled. Said “I told you so.” Left me injured in the desert.

“Agarwal got Liliana,” I said.

“I figured.”

The car bumped over the rocky terrain, the desert scrub scraping against the sides like bad chalk on a blackboard. Arthur reached the road and eased onto it, picking up speed.

“How did you know to come?” I asked.

“Was going to anyway,” he said. “But Vikash called Denise.” He cleared his throat. “He was...complimentary. Told her to come pick up her tech, in case she ain’t had eyes already.” His voice was very neutral. “Real courteous, he was. She played it, fortunately.”

Courteous. Of course he was. Rayal was one of the few people in the world Agarwal had any respect for. One of the few human beings he saw as on his level.

My mind replayed the ’bot’s demented smile as he’d held the gun in my face and then discarded it. He’d had less compunction about killing human beings than he’d had about destroying what he thought was his fellow scientist’s technology. I wondered briefly why he hadn’t taken me to dissect along with Liliana...but no, I thought, that would be *stealing*. He regarded Liliana as his own work, at least in large part, but plagiarizing Denise’s personal advancements was apparently a bridge too far.

Arrogance, I thought. I should be able to use that against him.

Against him? He already won.

Agarwal was smart. I had no doubt that if he didn’t want us to find him again, he was long gone. Along with Liliana.

Liliana. I didn’t care what Checker and Rayal said—I’d handed a scared five-year-old girl over to a murderer. A man who probably planned to cut her open and tinker with her brain.

A little girl.

And we still had to deal with the FBI coming after Denise and Pilar, and probably after the rest of us too, eventually. “We need to send Rayal and Pilar into hiding,” I mumbled. “Send their pictures over to Tegan. Tell him it’s a rush job.”

“Will do,” said Arthur.

The desert night sped past.

“I’ve got a hole in the wall in Sylmar,” I said. “You can drop me there.” I’d have medical supplies stashed there. And I couldn’t face Checker, Pilar, and Denise right now.

“Then you gotta let me stay with you,” said Arthur, in his I’m-trying-to-be-reasonable voice. “Help patch you up. Ain’t gonna leave you alone.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said. “You need to watch everyone else’s backs.”

He hesitated.

“Arthur,” I said, and my voice sounded brittle in my ears. “Please.”

A few more miles of empty highway went by, the breeze from the open windows soothing my rioting equilibrium.

“Swear to me you’ll be okay without seeing a doc tonight,” said Arthur.

“For sufficiently broad values of ‘okay,’” I said tiredly. “Yes.”

Arthur had a vague idea of how well I knew my own body, and trusted me on it, thank God. “All right,” he said. He pulled out another burner phone and passed it to me. “You call me if you need anything though, right? Anything at all.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Thanks.”

By the time we pulled up at my bolt hole in Sylmar, my equilibrium had stabilized enough for me to get out of the car on my own. I only wobbled a little. “Take care of them,” I told Arthur through the still-open passenger window. I tried to be subtle about leaning heavily on the car as I did so.

“That sounded too dramatic for my taste,” said Arthur. “Promise me all you’re going to do tonight is patch yourself up and get some sleep.”

“I promise,” I said. “No suicide runs in the offing. Just rest and meds. I’ll come by Miri’s in the morning.”

“I’ll pick you up,” he corrected.

“Okay,” I said.

“Russell...”

I turned back.

“You was trying to do a good thing tonight.”

“Does it matter?” Something in my throat made the words scratch.

He didn't have a ready answer. I turned and went inside.

I sat on the floor of the kitchenette area, the cheap linoleum blessedly cool, and swallowed a fistful of painkillers and another one of antibiotics. The wound in my arm was already getting infected; I could tell. The pain had become a constant beat against my senses, an ugly rawness clawing at me until I couldn't ignore it.

I picked up the phone Arthur had given me and texted everyone relevant the new number. Maybe that would help keep Arthur from thinking I was about to go on some revenge crusade.

Not that I wouldn't have, if I'd known where to go.

A vivid image unfolded in my imagination, Liliana on a table in a lab, her skull cracked open, Agarwal giggling as he manipulated the wires inside—

I tried to remind myself that I'd seen her code. That I *knew* she wasn't conscious. Wasn't a person.

I tried to reassure myself that Agarwal had seemed to care about her, in his own twisted way. That it was possible he would treat her well. She was his work, after all.

I tried to force my attention back to the problems I could still deal with. The people who were still alive.

Agarwal would disappear with Liliana, maybe to Japan. He'd live out his sociopathic tendencies and probably commit a few more murders before he finally met someone smarter than he was. I didn't think him likely to come back and bother us. He'd gotten what he wanted.

Denise and Pilar I'd send out of the country. They could find new lives for themselves outside the reach of US authorities. Since nobody had ID'd Checker and me yet, maybe he could squash that side of the FBI investigation.

The lynch mob would find something new to focus on within the next few days, as the twenty-four hour news cycle steamrolled forward. The government would probably do as Checker feared and cripple AI research in the United States, just as Okuda and Ally Eight had wanted, but that was out of my hands, and to be honest, I couldn't bring myself to care very much.

Both the government and the public would probably scapegoat Denise for all the murders, and everything would go away.

It would be over.

I'd move on to the next contract. Write this one off.

My stomach curdled, and my throat closed without warning—I swallowed against it, fighting back the nausea, trying to breathe.

Fuck.

I had never screwed up a job so monumentally in my life. Every single person who'd come to me on this case, every single person I'd tried to protect, was either dead, comatose, a prisoner, or a fugitive.

Liliana's cheerful face rose in my memory. Petting the cats. Playing with oobleck. Drawing her picture. Holding my hand like she fucking trusted me.

I was a royal fuck-up.

My phone rang. I pawed around on the linoleum for it with my left hand. "Hello?"

"Russell?" A woman's voice.

"Who's this?"

"It's Cheryl Maddox."

Adrenaline flooded me. "Are you okay? The Lorenzos didn't—"

"No. I'm tight. Mama Lorenzo's been chill."

I deciphered the slang to mean she was both unharmed and unendangered, and slowly let my bruised body relax back against the wall. "Uh. Good."

"Yeah."

Dead air swallowed the connection.

"Was there some reason you called me?" I struggled to keep the impatience out of my tone.

She hesitated. "Word on the street. The Lorenzos have a price out on you."

"Oh," I said. "Thanks." I supposed Mama Lorenzo had gotten sick of me beating up her family and decided to go out-of-house. Chalk up one more problem to the list.

Cheryl didn't say anything.

“What else?”

“It’s high,” she said. “Real high. They want you bad, hon. Pro killers’ll be flying in from other continents for this one.”

I tried to feel flattered by that, but it didn’t come. Shit. “Thanks,” I said again, with more sincerity. “Really. Thanks, Cheryl.”

“Well, I gotta admit, I thought about collecting myself, but I’m still so fucking pissed at them. You watch your back, okay? Hate to give up all that money for nothing.”

“I owe you,” I said, and meant it.

“No, you don’t. I told you, I ain’t taking sides here. You didn’t hear this from me. I’m out.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Right. Of course.”

She hesitated, then added a gruff, “Good luck” and hung up.

I sat with the phone in my lap and my eyes closed. Cheryl had warned me, but empty pessimism had hollowed every word. She didn’t expect me to last a day. Maybe two if I was very, very lucky.

And once I was taken care of, Mama Lorenzo’s enforcers would come after Checker and break his fingers—or possibly just kill him at this point, if I’d gotten her pissed enough—and drive Arthur’s business into the ground and generally ruin their lives as thoroughly as she knew how. Of course, I wouldn’t care, because I’d be dead.

The floor felt very comfortable right now. I didn’t want to get up.

God, the Los Angeles Mafia’s assassination resources might be bad enough on their own, but with that many pros looking for me...I’d had the luck of the devil to dodge one sniper shot. I wouldn’t be able to dodge them all. The probabilities multiplied and dwindled...disjunction, multiplication, trending toward zero.

“I just want to go to sleep,” I said forlornly to the ceiling, leaning my head back against the wall. “I’ve had a really bad day.”

Zero. And then on to Checker and Arthur. Unless I did something.

I’d fucked up everything else. Maybe, just maybe, I could take care of this one thing. Save the only two people in my life who weren’t yet dead or on the run.

Self-pity doesn’t suit you, Cas. Get a hold of yourself.

No maneuvering room left anymore to implement any of my half-started plans, to try to beat Mama Lorenzo at her own game. She'd ratcheted up too fast, escalating while I was distracted by Arkacite and the 'bots, changing tactics before I could catch up with her. In retrospect...well. I'd underestimated her.

Time to go all in.

I picked up my phone. If I fucked this up too, at least I'd go out swinging. The thought gave me a small spark of satisfaction, in a grim sort of way.

First I texted Arthur and told him I'd be out of touch because I was going to sleep. No reason to make him worried when he couldn't reach me, and I was about to burn this phone.

I dialed Benito Lorenzo.

"Hullo!" Club music reverberated through the connection, louder than the first time I'd called him. I winced away from it.

"Benito? Benito!"

"Yes? This is Benito! Come on down!" He drew out the last word like a game show host and capped it with a whoop. A woman shrieked happily in the background.

"Benito, it's Cas Russell!"

"Ca—oh!" He exchanged quick words with someone else that I didn't catch, and after a rustling and several bangs and one more satisfied whoop from the woman, the music and loudness cut off, leaving only a dull thump of bass vibrating the cell phone. My ear rang.

"Hi, Benito," I said. "I want to take you up on your offer."

"My offer? Oh, right, my, uh, my offer!" he stuttered. "You asked, uh—you asked me about those details; I still need to—"

"Too late," I said. "We're just going to have to go with what we've got. I need you to set up your mother somewhere where she doesn't want anyone to know where she's going, okay? I want as few witnesses as possible, and nobody in your family." Of course, *he* would know, and he'd probably blab the first time he was drunk. I'd deal with that later.

"I'll, uh, I'll work on it—"

"No. I need you to figure this out now. Tonight. Or the deal's off."

“Tonight? The timing, it’s not so good, you see—”

“You can get high and laid another night. Did you hear your mother is sending bounty hunters after me?”

“My stepmama...and, eh, I might’ve heard something, but it’s not—”

“These aren’t the dregs of society kind of bounty hunters, and let me speak plainly: I am going to take her out before they can start looking for me. If you don’t help me, I’ll shoot her in her bed, witnesses be damned, because at this point even having the Mafia after me for revenge will buy me time if it shakes people’s faith in the bounty. But I’d much rather you set her up in a nice witness-free way that’ll allow you to step into the power vacuum. Do you hear me? Can you handle that?” I didn’t have much hope. But I also had nothing to lose.

“Aw, Cas,” drawled Benito, his slick confidence back in place, “I can do it. You don’t trust me, do you? The Madre likes me. Wrapped around my pinky fi—”

“You have until seven a.m.,” I said. “If you don’t have it set up by then, I’m going after her anyway, but I’ll come visit you first.”

“Cas! Why do you say such things? We are friends!”

“For now,” I said. “Until seven a.m., at least. And once it’s done, I expect the hits on us to be called off immediately, or I’ll tell the rest of your family who set up their Godmother.”

“You hurt me. In my heart. So scary, all the time—”

I hung up on him.

Then I popped the battery out of the phone and dragged myself over to the bed. I flopped down half on my left side and half on my stomach, the parts of my body that hurt the least. If I didn’t get some sleep, it really would be the death of me.

CHAPTER 32

I WOKE a little before six, and everything hurt.

My muscles had stiffened into one position like they'd been poured into a cake tin and overcooked. I slowly unkinked my joints and unsnarled myself into a sitting position, each movement hitching and stabbing like someone was hacking me up with a rusty meat cleaver. My right arm burned, and the rest of me was being very insistent about the fact that I'd recently gone toe-to-toe with a mountain, a sniper, thirty-six guided missiles, and a vehicle explosion, and been thoroughly owned by all of them.

I don't like lessons in humility. I try very hard not to experience them.

I'd never had one of my failures cost so many other people's lives, though.

I stretched the sticky muscles until I could move in something other than a hunching limp, and at six-thirty I put my phone back together and called Benito.

"Cas! Good morning!"

"I hope so," I said, trying for ominous. Unfortunately it just came out tired.

"You, ah...what we spoke of last night, eh..."

Like he was such a delicate flower. What an ass. "Don't tell me. You couldn't manage it."

"What? No, no, we're, uh—we're good to go!"

Until that moment, I honestly hadn't thought he'd had the balls.
“Really?”

“Yes, yes! The Madre, she is having a...very important...uh, appointment, she thinks, with perhaps a member of the police department —”

“I didn't think Mama Lorenzo would be one to hop when the police said —” My brain caught up. “Oh. They're all in her pocket, aren't they.”

“She'll be at La Café Bijet, for a breakfast meet, she thinks. Very important things happening. The FBI is in town, did you know?”

“I did know,” I said, only a little ironically.

Benito breezed on blithely. “Eight o'clock sharp, so she thinks. The restaurant will be empty for the meeting, no customers, orders for no disturbances. The Madre, she can do that. You make it look like an accident, yes? I take care of the rest. Bzzt! No more bounty.”

Well, well, well. Benito might be smarter than I gave him credit for. “Got it,” I said. I had an hour and a half to plan a way to make it look like Mama Lorenzo died accidentally while waiting for a mysterious breakfast partner who would never come. I'd have to do it fast, before she realized she'd been stood up.

I wanted to yell at Benito for not calling me with the plan earlier, but really, it was my own fault. I'd dismantled my phone and then waited till the morning to check in with him—I hadn't had any great faith even an entire night would be enough time for him to pull something together. Apparently Benito Lorenzo worked best with a deadline. Something to keep in mind, especially if he ended up patriarch of the Los Angeles Family after this, God help us all.

I debated a moment, then decided to leave the phone on in case Benito needed to reach me with any changes—if he was planning a double-cross, he'd be far more likely to do it at the café rather than track down my phone. I swallowed a breakfast of cold painkillers and antibiotics, redressed my various open wounds with the rest of the medical supplies in my stash, and put my right arm back in a makeshift sling, wincing as I tightened it. I couldn't move very well, and I couldn't help but feel there was a very good chance I was pressing the button on my own execution. What did I think would happen if I killed Mama Lorenzo? Did I really think Benito had the clout to get the heat off me? Did I really think it unlikely that he wouldn't

spill the details of his coup to someone, or that anyone with half a brain wouldn't put two and two together and arrive at the extremely obvious answer of four?

Did I really trust that he wasn't setting me up to walk right into his stepmother's sights?

It didn't matter. Go down swinging, I reminded myself. Take her out even if it meant her people got me in return. At least there was a possibility Checker and Arthur might be spared in that case, once Mama Lorenzo's personal vendetta was out of the picture.

I stole a truck off the street and stopped by one of my storage units. Poison was probably the best way to keep this more questionable as an assassination, I figured. Well, setting off a gas explosion in the kitchen might have been easier and more my style, but the café would have staff still there whether or not Mama Lorenzo had cleared it of other patrons. Even without Arthur's influence, wiping out innocent bystanders had never been my bag.

I'd stockpiled a few good toxins that mimicked death by natural causes. At least, I thought so—I wasn't a chemist. But any of them would be less suspicious than shooting her, not to mention that even if everyone cottoned on that it was murder, fewer people might assume I was the killer—my MO tended to be kicking people in the head. I did consider grabbing some bigger guns as well, just in case, but my right hand wasn't closing properly, and my joints all felt like they'd gone through a meat grinder. The Mob sniper's Browning was a high-quality piece, despite only being nine-mil, and truthfully right now it was about all I wanted to handle.

I didn't have much time to spare if I wanted to be at Café Bijet by eight a.m. sharp, but I needed to make one stop first. Fortunately, Miri's was on the way.

"Thought I was going to pick you up," said Arthur in a hushed voice when he answered the door. Armed, I was happy to see.

"Turns out I have an errand to run," I said. "Where's everybody else?"

"Asleep. Was a long night. Oh, 'cept Checker; he had some sort of errand, too, he said. Wouldn't say what."

"He's not here?" A twinging pain spiked in me that didn't have to do with my injuries. I hadn't realized how much I'd wanted to see Checker one more time, just in case this blew up on me.

“No,” said Arthur. “‘Fraid it’s something...he wouldn’t talk to me. He’s been ten kinds of upset about this case. I worry, you know?”

God, I knew. “Everyone else is okay, right?”

“Yeah. Neither of ’em want to leave, though. Pilar got a lot of family here, and Denise wants to stay and find some way to take down Agarwal. Avenge her team.”

Shit, I couldn’t blame her. “Well, make them go. Whatever it takes.”

“Where you gonna be?”

“Dealing with some other crap. Arthur, will you promise me something?”

“Depends what it is.”

“If you don’t hear from me within a couple hours or so, make Checker go with them.”

“Don’t know that I could ever make that boy do anything,” said Arthur with some affection. “‘Specially if they ain’t named him in the warrants yet —”

“Arthur,” I said. “This is important. *Make him go.*”

The fond expression faded from Arthur’s face, leaving the penetrating stare of a very intelligent PI. “Russell. What’s going on? What happens in two hours?”

“Just do it. Promise me.”

“What’s going on? Where you going?”

“It’s not important,” I said.

“Oh Lord,” he said. “Is Checker in some sort of trouble outside of this?”

I had no idea how he’d made that leap. I wasn’t *that* bad a liar. But now the slack-jawed confirmation showed on my face for sure.

“You tell me what’s going on right now,” said Arthur, crowding forward and looming above me, his face pinching inward, closed and terrified and panicking—except Arthur didn’t panic. “You tell me what—!”

“Ask *him!*” I snapped. “Now I have to go—I’m not just saying that; I honestly and truly have to go right now or things could be very bad—”

“Then I’m coming—”

“Arthur, listen to me! There is nothing you can do, okay? I don’t need backup on this.” *I’m not going to get you killed, too.* “The one thing you

can do is make sure Checker leaves if things go sideways. Do you hear me? Make sure he leaves. Now *I have to go.*”

Arthur reached out to stop me but hesitated, remembering my injuries; I ducked out of his reach and back toward the courtyard. “Russell!” he called after me, frustrated and helpless.

“Thanks, Arthur.” My voice caught. “For everything. Thanks.”

I turned away and ran. Behind me, what sounded suspiciously like a fist slamming into a wall echoed down the hallway.



I ARRIVED at La Café Bijet at 7:40. It was one of those fancy places nestled in the mountains, just far back enough from the road to make it feel like it was on acres of lush woodlands well outside LA. Well, as long as it was Sunday, and there wasn’t traffic noise to destroy the illusion.

Still, it was private, and perfect for a clandestine meeting between the head of the Los Angeles Mafia and a two-timing cop. If that had been what this was.

I crept down through the woods, keeping my senses alert for a double-cross. If Benito had warned his stepmother, this would be the best time for someone to hit, from a distance with none of their own in danger. But the woods stayed quiet. Miracle of miracles, Benito seemed to have come through.

I sidled up to the back of the restaurant and peeked in the windows to see a few people in crisp white aprons active in the kitchen. I debated moving then, spiking a teacup or a water glass, but it wasn’t certain enough. If I screwed this up I’d get another innocent person killed, and I’d had enough of that this week.

Mama Lorenzo arrived at 7:55. She glided in and sat down at a table in the corner, her back to the wall. The wait staff immediately materialized, served her some tea and pastries, and disappeared back into the kitchens.

Oh. This would be easy. Mama Lorenzo couldn’t look everywhere at once, no matter how she’d positioned herself. I’d slip in the front door and toss a little tablet into her drink at the exact moment her eyes strayed away and wouldn’t see me. The mathematics played out the edges of her field of

vision, blanking out what her eyes could see, highlighting the blind spots, drawing the arc of a parabola for me to target her cup.

I crept down to the front entrance and put an eye to the decorative, slightly distorted panes set in the double doors. Mama Lorenzo glanced down at her pastries to take a delicate bite, and I slipped inside. I crouched against the wall below her normal line of sight and slid my left hand into my pocket.

The doors burst open.

Before they had banged back halfway, through the glass I'd recognized the tall, lean form of the sniper who had shot me, with a really, really big gun silhouetted in his hands.

I cursed Benito in my head—*she was supposed to be alone!*—as I sprang into the air, kicking out with both feet to slam one of the doors against him so he fell into the room and dropped his weapon. The blow was weaker than I'd meant it to be, and he was still conscious. I plunged after him but he managed to roll away, lashing out with a kick; I saw it coming but my body wasn't responding fast enough and my leg went out from under me. I managed to twist so I only landed half on my bad shoulder—

The world whited out in pain, every nerve ending shrieking, my senses kaleidoscoping.

I kicked out blindly. My muscle memory worked even when the rest of me wasn't, automatically aiming where I knew my enemy would be, and my boot impacted something hard. I regained my equilibrium in time to see him collapse back to the floor, out cold this time. I rolled onto my feet.

Only to find Mama Lorenzo pointing a sleek little chrome .32 at me.

Mama Lorenzo wasn't one to waste time talking to someone she wanted dead. Her finger tightened on the trigger, but her gaze slipped down to her sniper buddy for a split second, making sure he was out of her line of fire, and in that split second I kicked a table at her.

She fired as she dove away, but the shot went wild, and the table caught her on the shoulder and spun her into the wall before smashing through her breakfast with a terrific crash. I ran laterally, toward the back of the restaurant, my left hand digging for the Browning. Mama Lorenzo fired twice more, but she couldn't track me fast enough; I got the gun in my hand and spun to bring it across her before she could target me again, but in that moment something in one of my legs gave out and...I stumbled.

Some moments are crucial. I stumbled, and knew that I was about to die, that in this tiny fraction of an instant, Mama Lorenzo had the opportunity—if her aim was good enough, if her reaction time was fast enough, she had the window.

Instead of my life flashing before my eyes, or thoughts of friends, or any final revelation, my mind entirely blanked out. The math converged around me and couldn't save me, and time seemed to slow...

"Stop!"

A girl's voice rang through the room, and Mama Lorenzo's finger hesitated on the trigger.

The world sped back up and I reacted immediately, recovering, finishing my spin, bringing the Browning up to center her in my sights—

"Cas! Stop!" came Checker's voice.

My finger eased up a millisecond before I would have fired. For a long instant, I thought I *had* fired.

"Put the guns down!" Checker yelled at us, his voice going high and uncomfortable.

Mama Lorenzo hadn't lowered her weapon, and I didn't want to lower mine either.

"Now!" snapped the girl, and Mama Lorenzo shocked me then by letting her gun hand drop, letting the little chrome .32 dangle at her side.

I hesitated a moment longer, then did the same with the Browning. Keeping Mama Lorenzo in my peripheral vision, I took a shaking breath and glanced over toward the door.

Checker had materialized just inside, and with him was a young woman who appeared to be about twenty or twenty-one. She was built athletically, like a swimmer maybe, and was extremely Italian-looking, with dark olive skin and black hair that she had pulled back into a ponytail. She wore jeans and no makeup and exactly fit the image of a normal American college student, except that she was staring daggers at Mama Lorenzo, and I didn't know anybody who did that.

She crossed her arms. "We need to talk, Auntie."

Holy crap. The niece.

"This is not your concern, Isabella," said Mama Lorenzo, drawing herself up.

Isabella's mouth dropped open. "Not my—of course it's my concern! It's my life! You need to stop meddling!"

Meddling?

Mama Lorenzo picked her way through the restaurant toward her niece, reaching out a supplicating hand. "My child. You are still too young to be aware of this, but when a man takes advantage of his position—"

"Takes advantage?" No, Auntie—we took advantage of each other, okay?" Isabella's cheeks darkened. "We had a good time. And now you're swooping in and interfering in my love life? *Again?* You agreed you wouldn't do this!"

"I've seen the error of my ways," Checker spoke up. "I should've quit tutoring her first, message received—"

"Shut up!" snapped both Mama Lorenzo and her niece, neither of them looking at him. Checker wisely shut up.

Isabella's tough veneer was cracking; her arms had gone from being crossed in anger to hugging herself. "Auntie. I know you want to protect me, but..." Her voice trembled. "I got to be able to make my own decisions, right? And my own mistakes? I got to be able to go out with a guy without being afraid you'll go all vengeance on his family if he doesn't call me the next day." She paused, then tried to smile. "If he cheats on me though, he's totally fair game."

"Oh, my child," said Mama Lorenzo. She put down the gun on a nearby table and stepped forward the rest of the way, reaching out to touch Isabella's cheek. "Oh, my dear. This world will take such advantage of a young woman. I only want to protect you—when you are older you will understand—"

Isabella jerked back from her aunt's hand. "No! I'm telling you, you can't do this, okay? I'm an adult. You're trying to go out and—and what, avenge my honor or something? Without even talking to me about it first? Do you even hear how ridiculous that sounds?"

Mama Lorenzo stood very straight and very stiff. "Our world is not equal. You may think it is now, but the way people will treat you just because of your sex—"

"Exactly like you're doing right now?" said Isabella bitterly.

Mama Lorenzo flinched as if her niece had hit her. The slightest flush rose up into her white neck and sculpted cheekbones.

It was the first time I had seen her perfect serenity slip.

“I can’t do this,” said Isabella. “I can’t have—*this*—in my life. I love you, Auntie, but...” She sniffed hard and swiped impatiently at her face with her sleeve. “You got to respect what I want, or else we...I just can’t.”

The heat in Mama Lorenzo’s face had deepened, and when she spoke, it was barely audible. “Perhaps I erred.”

Holy *shit*.

Isabella’s face came up, teary and hopeful.

“Isabella, please believe—I only ever wanted the best for you...”

“I know,” Isabella said. “But look what you *did*.”

Mama Lorenzo lowered her eyes, and her chin dropped in a fractional nod. I took a cautious breath, wondering if we might be out of the woods—

I’m stupidly optimistic sometimes.

Mama Lorenzo straightened back up and reached out tentatively again. “I—I am sorry, Isabella, and I promise in the future I will not—but in this case the question has become much larger. It involves family honor. Politics. I cannot simply end this. Our family must be seen to be strong—can you understand that?”

Isabella stepped back, still avoiding her touch. “So you can’t ever admit you’re wrong, then. Is that what you’re saying?”

Mama Lorenzo lowered her hand and folded it in her other one. The gesture might have been meant to look demure, but her fingers gripped each other too tightly. “You will learn—sometimes—it is true. The appearance of strength can be more important than anything, because no matter what I might have done differently, or—or better, in the end all we have is family, and the strength and unity we have in each other. Beside that any other consideration pales. It must, no matter what we want for ourselves.”

Isabella took a breath. Shifted. Blinked at the ground. Then she said, “I know, Auntie. I do know that.”

Oh, Jesus. She had drunk the Kool-Aid.

I let my hand twitch closer to retrieving the Browning.

Then Isabella swallowed and looked back up at her aunt, and her eyes flashed fire again. “What if I marry him?”

“What?” yelled Checker.

“My dear—!” cried Mama Lorenzo.

“Honor would be satisfied, wouldn’t it?” challenged Isabella, ignoring her potential fiancé, whose face currently looked like a good impersonation of a blowfish. “It’s the old-school kind of thing. You can tell everyone he stepped up and is doing the honorable thing, that he truly loves me, blah blah blah—you can spin it, Auntie, I know you can. You satisfy the political crap, the family’s safe, you’re covered. And nobody has to die.”

“Isabella, don’t take this the wrong way, but—” started Checker.

“Oh, shut up, I don’t want to marry you either,” said Isabella. “What of it, Auntie, would it work?”

Mama Lorenzo drew herself up, resettling composure across her body like a cloak. She tilted her head at her niece. “You would do this. To protect him.”

“If it’s the only way to save the family from a total mess, then—yeah, I would. We can get an amicable divorce in a few years or something. It’s what you said a minute ago, right? It doesn’t matter what we want for ourselves.”

Mama Lorenzo took a slow breath. Then she turned toward Checker, who quailed under the weight of her scrutiny. “Young man, are you Catholic?”

“No,” Checker got out in a strangled voice.

“You have never been baptized?”

“He’s Jewish,” said Isabella.

Ethnically if not religiously, but Checker did not seem inclined to be pedantic. He licked his lips. “Would I—need to convert...?”

Mama Lorenzo shuddered. “Good heavens, no, it’s much better if you do not. Isabella marrying an unbaptized man would not be counted as a legitimate marriage in the Church, so could easily be considered null and void later on. An indiscretion of her youth.”

Checker was starting to look a little green.

“You would, of course, have to live together for appearances’ sake,” said Mama Lorenzo, her mouth pinching inward. “And young man, if I hear one word of you taking advantage of your position to pressure my niece into anything untoward—”

“Celibate marriage, I got it,” said Checker, so fast the words ran together.

Mama Lorenzo refocused on her niece. “Isabella, I do not think this a prudent sacrifice on your part. I am unsure of the wisdom of allowing it.”

“I have responsibilities to our family too, Auntie. You taught me that.”

“You cannot let this go?”

Isabella lifted her chin. “I cannot let you ruin a man’s life for the crime of being with me. You taught me about honor, too.”

Mama Lorenzo’s expression crumpled, half anguish and half fierce pride. “Oh, my child,” she said, holding out her arms. Isabella’s lip trembled, and this time she threw herself into her aunt’s embrace. They buried their faces against each other and didn’t let go.

Holy crap. It was over.

I couldn’t believe it was over.

The adrenaline rushed out of me, leaving my legs like jelly. I leaned one hip against a table to keep from falling over while I stuck the Browning back into my belt.

“So, we’re, uh, we’re doing this, then, huh?” Checker was shifting a lot in his chair, his expression twitching. He threw me a look I could only describe as begging for help.

I sidled up next to him, stepping around the still-embracing-slash-weeping aunt and niece. Now that we were in the clear, I thought it was more than my due to take the mickey out of him a bit. “I think you’re getting off easy,” I said, *sotto voce*. “Isabella seems like a nice girl.”

He grabbed at my sleeve. “I’ll be living with a college student,” he moaned. “College students throw parties. With frat boys. I hate frat boys. And I’ll be under the Mafia’s microscope, for years. I’ll be living with a wife I’m too afraid to flirt with and won’t be able to date anyone else because they’d kill me. For years! Help me!”

I thought this might be a fine time to reveal I’d almost bit the big one for his little screw-up at least three times now, but I didn’t have the heart.

“She’s giving up a lot, too,” I pointed out instead. “It’s awfully nice of her to stick her neck out for you.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I know. I’ll buy her very expensive gifts on our anniversaries.”

“In all seriousness, you are getting off easy.”

“I know. I know.”

I stood with him and contemplated Mama Lorenzo and her niece for a moment. Something tickled the back of my brain, the germ of a thought—she might not go for it, but maybe it was worth asking? And a different conclusion here would make both Checker and Isabella—and, by extension, Mama Lorenzo—a lot happier about the way this turned out...

“As a matter of fact,” I said to Checker. “I might have another idea.”

He sat up spastically, grabbing at my arm again. “Seriously, I will owe you forever if you—”

I shook him off. “You *already* owe me forever. Just think about who you’re sleeping with next time, okay?”

“I promise, seriously, lesson learned, I’m already a better person.”

“Madame Lorenzo,” I called. “It’s possible I have a preferable solution.”

CHAPTER 33

I STOOD on Mama Lorenzo's right hand in a room at her estate, slightly behind her. She'd changed into a very severe black dress, its harsh lines emphasizing the angles of her body, and wore her usual stiletto heels, meaning my eye line was at the back of her upper arm. It didn't matter: the men in the room still shifted and avoided making eye contact with me. I'd achieved the status of a legend.

The sniper was the only one to glance at me, the ghost of a grin twitching his lips. He lounged on the arm of a chair, an ice pack held to his head where I'd kicked him. I'd learned his name was Malcolm; once Mama Lorenzo had pulled away from comforting her niece, she'd been quite concerned with making sure he was all right.

I was glad I hadn't killed him. This wouldn't really have worked if I had.

Mama Lorenzo clasped her hands behind her back and began pacing the carpet, her heels making no sound in its richness. Every eye followed her. "Gentlemen. I believe most of you have met Cas Russell."

Feet shuffled. I saw several frowns of confusion, but no whispering. No one would disrespect Mama Lorenzo that way.

"To those of you who have always been loyal to me, I apologize for the deception. Miss Russell has been helping me run a test. Distasteful, but it had to be done." She stopped pacing, lifting her head to look down at them. "Those of you who have always been one hundred percent loyal to this family may leave the room at this time."

Malcolm stood lazily and went to let himself out. Another man, one I hadn't seen before, paused for a breath, glanced at his brethren, and then followed.

A small smile touched Mama Lorenzo's mouth. "Telling."

"It's not that we..." started one of the men who had remained, wetting his lips. "We're loyal. All of us. You gotta believe us."

I recognized him. He was the overweight man with the greasy hair from Grealy's. He'd told me a whole hell of a lot. Which I had in turn told Mama Lorenzo.

"If your loyalty is as you claim, then find the door," said Mama Lorenzo, her voice as unthreatening as a knife against a whetstone.

The man shifted from foot to foot. "I don't know what she's told you—"

"A wise choice, Mr. Paretti. If you had tried to exit you would already be dead."

The room went silent. I picked Weasel Face out of the crowd too, and the young guy who'd been with them, the one who'd reminded me of Benito. And, of course, Benito himself, whose eyes were darting in panic and who looked like he was about to break and start running any minute now. Probably a lot of the other people here were some of the ones who had been fingered in the Grealy's trio's little confessional to me as working against the Family, or implicated by their SIM cards, or men I hadn't had anything on but who simply didn't know if or how their guilt might have been ferreted out.

"I have seen into your souls," said Mama Lorenzo. "I know your desires. You all love this family. But that love must come before anything. Before everything. The Family will always protect you. And you must always protect it."

Silence.

"Miss Russell," Mama Lorenzo said without looking at me, "I thank you for your services to my family. I am sure we shall speak again."

I recognized a dismissal when I heard one. I nodded at the room in what I hoped was an authoritative sort of way and pushed out the door. Behind me, Mama Lorenzo's clear contralto started to address her people again.

I found my way through the maze of an estate, out the front door, and up the curving driveway to the gate. Malcolm was leaning against the

stonework next to it, dragging on a cigarette.

“Smoke?” he asked.

“No, thanks.” I stood for a minute. I felt like I should say something to him, but “You were the competent one of the bunch, sorry for kicking you in the head except not really because you were trying to kill me” seemed a touch too silly.

“Mighty fine spinner, the Madre,” he murmured.

I squinted at him. He’d been unconscious when I’d first broached the idea for this plan, and when Mama Lorenzo and I had hashed out the details back at the estate, he hadn’t been in the room. “What are you talking about?”

“Nothing.” He flashed me a quick smile and took another long drag, blowing the smoke into the sky.

“You don’t believe she was running a loyalty test?” I tried to keep my tone indifferent.

“I know how the Family works,” he said, with an enigmatic smile.

I gave up on trying to get a straight answer out of him. “Is there going to be a lot of carnage from this?”

“Nah. They’re all family. Family gets second chances with the Madre. Not thirds, though—it’s what makes her so good.” He took one last drag and stubbed out his cigarette on the stonework behind him. Then he pushed off the wall and looked down at me. “I owe you. I’d prefer to clear the debt sooner rather than later.”

“What?” I said, startled. “I kick your ass twice, and you owe me? How does that work?”

“You didn’t kill me,” he said. “If some future circumstance puts us on opposite sides, I’ll want the ledger to be even.”

“Oh, come on, not killing you wasn’t—I’ve got this friend who—and I’d had a really bad—” I gave up. “You don’t owe me.”

“Unfortunately, you saying so doesn’t make it true.” He gave me a nod and started past me, heading back toward the house, then paused. “The Madre will feel the same, you realize. She may not tell you so, but if she caused you some insult—and what happened here leads me to believe she may feel she did—you will mistreat her greatly if you do not ask her some favor that evens the scales.”

“Wait,” I said. My head spun, and it wasn’t from all my recent injuries. “You’re saying that—she thinks she owes me a favor? And she’ll get mad at me if I don’t ask her for something?”

He lifted one shoulder slightly and let it fall. “The Madre does not often feel regret. When she does, it is in everyone’s best interests to make sure she does not feel it for long.”

“Ah—I’ll keep that in mind,” I said. “Thanks.”

He loped back toward the house, and I stared after him. Mama Lorenzo owed me a favor. I had no idea what to make of that.

Gravel crunched outside the gate, and Arthur pulled up. He must’ve talked to Checker, I thought, who had gone to drive Isabella back to her campus. Apparently Checker had scooped her up the instant she’d set foot back in LA, and had received Arthur’s frantic call just in time to draw the right conclusions and come save us all from a point of no return.

I hit the inside button to open the gate, and the iron bars slid slowly open to let me out. I left my stolen truck parked on the road and got into Arthur’s passenger seat. “How long have you been waiting?”

He grunted, guiding the car away and starting down the twisting slope.

“Are you mad?” I asked.

“What do you think? You go in there injured, you almost get yourself killed—if Checker wasn’t a phone-tracking genius who ran a zillion lights trying to get to you—”

“Hey, it’s him you should be angry at,” I protested. “This whole thing was his fault.”

“Can be mad at both of you at once,” Arthur retorted. “But Jesus and Mary, Russell, you could’ve talked to us. Told us what was happening. Maybe we could’ve gotten Isabella back here sooner or something. You got people who’ll help you.”

I supposed that once Checker had asked me to look into this, I hadn’t even told *him* much of anything about the escalating danger. I wasn’t used to having...people. “Sorry.”

“Turned out okay, luckily for you. And Checker.” He sighed. “You two gonna give me a heart attack someday. And speaking of, in the future you gotta tell me if Checker gets into any sort of trouble, okay? It’s important.”

I tried to get comfortable in the seat with my many, many bruises and the goddamn broken arm, which throbbed like—well, like I'd been shot. "I didn't think it would go this far," I admitted. "He asked me not to mention it, and I thought—"

"Just trust me on this one," said Arthur. "Checker, he got a history. Sometimes he needs protecting. From himself."

"He's an adult," I said. "You're not his dad."

Arthur twitched at my word choice. "Ain't mean I can't look out for him."

He drove us back to Miri's place. The day had lapsed into afternoon, and Denise, Pilar, and Checker were all busy on laptops.

"I want them out of LA by tomorrow," I said, pointing at the two women. "What's the word from Tegan?"

"Yeah, we're not going," said Pilar, not looking up.

"This isn't a discussion," I said.

"You're right." Her head popped up from her laptop. "It's not. If they arrest me, I'd rather fight it here than run somewhere where I'd never be able to get back in touch with anyone ever again. My folks are too important to me, and—and we didn't do anything wrong, either of us. Well, maybe I did a little bit wrong by talking to you and running that program for you at Arkacite, but we're not the people responsible for everything else."

"I'm glad *you* have such a well-developed sense of your own innocence, but the authorities—"

"I'll take my chances," said Pilar.

I turned to Denise. "And what about you?"

She was slower in answering. "Why should I run? I haven't done anything wrong, either."

"Like that means a damn thing!" I said. "If they want to find something, they'll find it. People are looking for someone to blame right now, and you're the one who created the robots—you're right at the top of everyone's shit list!"

"And maybe I should be!" retorted Denise. "Maybe I should have turned myself in from the beginning. I—maybe this *was* partly my fault; my hard drive was stolen right before all this started, and..."

Oops.

“...and maybe that was Funaki or Vikash. But I couldn’t have been the original leak; there wasn’t time. I should have known right away, but I was afraid—and Vikash was telling me—” She sniffed hard. “And I believed him! He was the one who warned me away. I should have turned myself in then, and maybe this all would have been avoided. Vikash wanted me to run, because it matched *his* plans!”

“He was *right!*” I said. “He told you to run because in his twisted mind you’re the only person he thinks deserves to get out of this. No matter what else he did, he was right about that!”

“Hitler liked sugar,” Checker piped up.

“Well, if he thinks I’m smart enough to—to spare, maybe I’m smart enough to stop him.” Denise lifted her chin stubbornly. “He has to answer for what he did. My team deserves justice. I can’t leave.”

I sank down on one of Miri’s chairs. God save me from stupid, headstrong civilians. Not that I wouldn’t have gone after Liliana with everything I had if I’d known where she was, but why did everyone else have to be as much of a moron as I was? “I don’t know what you want us to do,” I said.

“Find Vikash,” answered Denise promptly. “Turn him over to the authorities. I’ll be able to decipher his programming and testify against him.”

“If you go in to testify, they’ll still probably be scared enough to bury you, too,” I said.

“I know,” she answered, after only a slight hesitation. “It’s—okay.”

“Can hook you up with a good lawyer,” offered Arthur in a murmur.

“Thank you,” said Denise.

“Idiots,” I said at the room, but the word wasn’t as vehement as I’d meant it to be. “Look, I don’t disagree with you. I’d like nothing better than to bash Agarwal’s head in.” And take back Liliana, and give her back to her father, and let at least one person in this bullshit mess of a case live out a peaceful, happy life. “But you might be asking the impossible here. How do you even expect us to locate him?”

“Well, there’s the ’bot-recognition program,” said Checker. “If you take a look at the math—”

“I can do that,” I said tiredly. I reached out my left hand for a laptop... and paused. “Wait a second. Denise.”

“Yes?”

The Agarwal robot’s words floated back to me, stunning me that I’d forgotten them. I supposed I’d been busy. “Agarwal, he said—he said you’d know how to find him.”

She glanced around at the rest of us as if seeking help. “But I don’t.”

“No, wait.” I searched my memory. “Not *how*. Where. He said you’d know *where* to find him.”

“I—I have no idea,” she said unhappily. “I’m sorry, but I think it must have been a joke. He used to say that to me when we were working, all the time, if he was frustrated, or if he was annoyed at the rest of the team. ‘If you need me, you know where to find me—on top of an active volcano.’ And I’d always say something like, ‘Yes, I’d rather be hiking in Hawaii, too.’ But that was sarcastic, obvious—”

“What if it wasn’t?” I said. “Agarwal is an arrogant son of a bitch and likes knowing he’s smarter than everyone else. What if he literally was building himself a base on top of—” I pointed at Checker. “Active volcanoes in Southern California. Talk to me!”

Pilar spoke up first, typing rapidly. “There are some off Route 66, up north in the Mojave Desert. It looks like they’re a tourist attraction—”

Checker and Denise were also scrambling at their laptops. “Coso Volcanic Field,” said Checker. “It’s far, though, up past Bakersfield—”

“Oh, God,” said Denise, staring in shock and horror at her screen. “Mammoth.”

Pilar frowned. “The ski mountain?”

“It’s in the caldera of a supervolcano. I never, I never knew that...” She sounded stunned.

“You mean like Yellowstone?” said Pilar.

“I’ve got it, too,” said Checker. “It says here it’s one of the highest potential seismic threats in California, and if it erupts it’ll be a thousand times more powerful than Mount St. Helens. Holy—holy crap.”

“That’s where he is,” said Denise.

“That’s a hike, too, though,” objected Checker. “If he’s been building some supervillain base—”

“It’s not that far,” said Denise. “I take weekend skiing trips there all the time. Lots of LA people do.”

“That’s true,” Pilar put in. “I don’t even ski, and I know that if you ask anyone what the best place to ski around here is they’ll say Mammoth. It’s really a volcano?”

“Supervolcano,” said Checker. “It looks like the last eruption buried thousands of square miles. The entire western United States.”

“You gotta be kidding me,” said Arthur.

“Well, it’s not a serious worry or anything; it hasn’t erupted in the better part of a million years and probably won’t erupt for a million more, at least not...not left to its own devices...”

“You don’t think he’s able to trigger an eruption!” cried Pilar. “He’s not that crazy, is he?”

Nobody answered her. The question rang in the air.

“Shit,” said Denise weakly. I didn’t think I’d heard her curse before. “Vikash and I used to talk about going up to Mammoth. I remember now. And later I found out he didn’t ski, and I said, ‘What on earth do you go up there for, then?’ and he just laughed and said it was beautiful, and I—I agreed...”

I snapped my fingers at Checker. “You. Numbers. Now. I need every single possible piece of numerical information related to either supervolcanoes in general or this one in particular.”

“On it,” said Checker.

“Me, too,” piped up Pilar, her head dipping over her laptop.

“Mammoth’s a big place,” said Arthur. “We know where he could be holed up?”

“Big is an understatement,” said Checker, his fingers not slowing as he talked. “The caldera is like two hundred square miles, and that’s if we assume he’s hiding out somewhere in there and not caldera-adjacent.”

“I suspect I could find him.” Denise was sitting very still, like she’d disconnected from the world. “Or he would find me. He invited me, didn’t he? If I drove up there—”

“Not happening,” said Arthur. “You ain’t going in. This guy’s way too dangerous.”

Denise turned her head to face him. “I’m sorry, but this is my decision.”

“She won’t be going alone,” I said. “She’ll have her robot friend with her. Namely, me.” I grinned at Arthur. He didn’t grin back. I turned back to Denise, something almost like hope tugging at me. “Do you think we might be able to get to him before he dissects Liliana?”

“I don’t—I don’t know.”

“Russell,” said Arthur. “This guy *beat* you last time. And now it’s a chance he rigged a volcano to blow? You need a better plan. Heck, you need a plan.”

He was right.

I’d fucked up this job from minute one, and it had snapped back on me with several good beatings, a dozen people murdered, and a little girl in the hands of a mad scientist.

But I wasn’t the only one in this room. I didn’t know why it was so hard to remember I wasn’t in things alone.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m open to ideas.”

CHAPTER 34

THE PROBLEM with soliciting other people's opinions, I reflected, was that they all disagreed. Vehemently.

"You're not listening to me," Denise insisted, the better part of an hour later. When she raised her voice it wasn't loud, but it sounded uncharacteristic enough that it made you pay attention. "This isn't a BattleBots competition—I need more information! I can't take one look at what he's got and then MacGyver a solution in seconds without any time or, or materials—no scientist could!"

A flash of memory, a thin black girl tossing off an acerbic remark—I shook the image away. The pain in my arm was making me tired. "I thought you were as smart as he is," I said.

"Robotics, yes, but I'm not—I'm not *tactical*. I need to know what he's working on, what he has, before I can figure out a weakness. We need to know more."

"Maybe tech ain't the answer, then," said Arthur. "Maybe we don't fight tech with tech."

"Then what?" I asked. "What's orthogonal to technology?"

Pilar looked up from where she was still furiously researching on a laptop. "What about psychology?"

"That's not exactly my forte," I said, thinking of Dawna Polk.

Pilar ignored me. "Vikash has an ego the size of a hot air balloon. And filled with the same stuff. I had to *handle* him just to get routine paperwork

out of him. Sometimes that involved ‘accidentally’ putting a hold on his paycheck.”

“It did take finesse to oversee him,” admitted Denise.

“Why? He respects you,” I said.

“Yes. Yes, that’s true; that had to be true. But to get him there—despite the way he talks, the rest of the team wasn’t—” She cleared her throat.

“They were all good. Sanjay was more creative than Vikash, and Esther was quicker, and—” She stopped. “He’s brilliant; I’m not denying that. But Pilar is right. He needed handling.”

“I don’t know how this helps us,” I said tiredly.

“Maybe...” Denise folded her lips together. “Maybe I can convince him I’m going to join him. He—he’s just arrogant enough to believe that could be possible.”

“You’re talking undercover,” said Arthur, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Maybe deep. Maybe for a long time, before you know enough to move against him. Ain’t easy, something like that.”

“And Cas sucks at it, assuming she’d be going with,” said Checker, not looking up from his computer.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Well, it’s true,” Checker responded without hesitation. “Plus Agarwal would want to take you apart eventually, and he’d see you bleed when he pricks you, and it would all be over.”

He had a point.

“On that note, quick interrupt,” said Checker. “We’ve got some volcano numbers for you. Pilar, send me the—there it is, thanks.”

I went to look over his shoulder; he minimized a chat window with Pilar, tiled the research on the laptop screen, and handed it up to me.

I sat down and skimmed, the numbers slotting into my brain, forming a picture, eliminating possibilities one by one by one. I could feel everyone else’s eyes on me, quiet, tense—the awkward, surreal wait of finding out if we were at the end of the world.

We were lucky, in a way. The region was so seismically active and prone to earthquakes that it had been under monitoring for some time, especially since a swarm of thirty thousand quakes in one year had hit a few decades ago. Add that to the eruption risk, and the caldera had been under a

fair amount of study. I ran seismic indicators, estimated explosive outputs, buried my mind in the vast magma cavern beneath California, the overwhelming size of it dwarfing any puny efforts of humanity...

I blinked and looked up, something loosening deep in my chest. "He can't do it." The words felt almost fragile, hopeful rather than true, about to shatter even as I spoke them. "He can't—he can't. Nobody could. To trigger an eruption—it's too big."

"You sure?" said Arthur. "Some of the bombs we can make—and he might've built—"

"No. You don't understand. It's...the amount of destabilization he would need to make it happen...saying one man could manage that is like saying he could manage to knock the Earth askew in its orbit. Or lower the level of the oceans. Or break a continent in half. Well. Not quite. But what I mean is, this is too big. It's too big a problem."

"You telling me—ain't no possible tech way?" said Arthur. "The man built a kid. You ain't think he—"

"That's nothing," I said. "When I say it's too big a problem, I don't just mean intellectually. It's too *physically* big."

"I actually have no problem believing that," said Checker. "We as humans are terrible at perceiving scale. The caldera's huge."

"Why else would he be there, though?" asked Pilar.

"It *is* pretty up there," murmured Denise. "Maybe that's all."

"Wait—wait," said Arthur. "Russell. You saying it's no chance at all of this?"

"Well, sure, there's a *finite* chance," I said. "Just like there's a finite chance the thing'll erupt tomorrow naturally. But I'd rather play the lottery."

Checker snorted a laugh, and the tension seeped out of the room. Pilar took a deep breath, grinning, and Arthur turned away, scrubbing his hands over his face.

"Hey," said Pilar into the almost giddy silence, "I have a crazy thought."

"What is it?" said Checker.

"Well—okay, this might be totally nuts—but we were just talking about handling Vikash, and...if he's not blowing up the mountain, what if we do it?"

“Uh, because I just said it’s *impossible*,” I said. “Not to mention *why would you want to do that*—”

“No no no, that’s not what I meant!” she cried. “I don’t mean we really blow it up. What if we tell him we can?”

“You mean bluff?” asked Checker.

“Yes! He’s the kind of guy—you can’t reason with him. You either have to manipulate him into thinking he wants what you want him to want, or you have to outdo him by so much you flatten him right out of the gate.”

“You agree?” Arthur asked Denise.

“Well—yes, I—I suppose so. I was his supervisor, so it was a little, a little different—ego stroking, mostly—”

“Making him think he wants what you want,” agreed Pilar, nodding.

“But there was one time—he had some grudge against Dana, and I told Vikash if he didn’t stop making snide comments about his code, I’d have Arkacite stop ordering Mountain Dew for the office fridges.”

I stared at her.

“It was his version of a nuclear threat,” she said. “But yes—Pilar’s right. There’s no ramping up. If you do, he’ll have a contingency plan at every step. So if you do have to threaten him...”

“Go big or go home?” said Checker.

“Yes,” said Denise. “At least, I—I think so.”

“Then why not plant, I don’t know, an *actual* explosive device?” I demanded. “Something we wouldn’t have to bluff our way through?”

“He’d be on the lookout for that,” said Denise. “Any sort of normal double-cross, he’s going to see coming. I don’t know if this is a good idea, but it has the advantage of being outside the box.”

“So far outside the box that it’s something literally impossible!” I objected. “He’s going to know—”

“*We* didn’t,” pointed out Checker. “We thought there was a chance he was up there being a supervillain and had rigged the whole thing to blow.”

“But even to make this plausible, it would be a ridiculous endeavor!” I argued. “Remember when I said this was *big*? To be even remotely believable, you’re talking about mining the entire caldera, or at least pretending to, and even to fake that we’d need an army—”

I stopped.

I knew someone with a private army who owed me a favor. Or at least thought she did.

“Cas?” said Checker.

“Hypothetically,” I said slowly, “say I can get us manpower. What then?”

“Could fake some geological survey,” suggested Arthur. “It’s a volcano, right? Can have someone play a volcanologist, make local folk believe we’re out planting sensors. Agarwal won’t worry till you tell him it was for something else.” He paused. “Not that I like this plan. What if he calls the bluff?”

“He seems too egotistical to want to die,” said Checker, though his voice held a thread of doubt.

“More than that—it’s his work,” said Denise softly. “His work will be threatened.”

We all looked at each other for a moment.

“This is the craziest plan ever,” said Checker. “If you had said to me, ‘Come up with a plan so crazy no one would ever think of it,’ this plan wouldn’t even be on *that* list, it’s so crazy.”

“So crazy he won’t expect it’s fake?” I asked.

No one answered.

I turned to Denise. “You know him best, and you’re the one who’s going to need to sell this. And you’re the one who’ll be in his sights if he doesn’t believe you. Be honest. You think this’ll work?”

“I...I think it has a chance. And I think we have to try.” She swallowed. “It will—we’ll need some time to prepare, right? We can try to figure out—if we think of something better—but if we don’t...he might be fleeing the country any day. He might already have done. If this is our best shot, I want to take it.”

“I’ll be there with you,” I said. “But I might not be able to protect you.” The words sounded hollow, an admission I’d never thought I’d have to make.

“I understand.” She squared her shoulders. “I want to do this.”

Jesus Christ. I'd never understand self-sacrificing people. "Okay," I said. "Checker, Pilar, get on figuring out how to fake this, and stat. I want to head up there as soon as humanly possible. Arthur...I think maybe call your doctor friend now."

CHAPTER 35

WE RELOCATED back to Checker's place now that the Mafia wasn't after him anymore. Checker and Pilar buried themselves out in the Hole to figure out the best way to fake a geological survey, and Arthur's doctor friend swooped into the house, berated me for getting shot again—I vaguely recognized her from the last time—and proceeded to fix me up very briskly and with absolutely no sympathy. I had no idea where Arthur found these people.

She did also leave me some highly illegal prescription painkillers, which made me inclined to feel a bit more charitable toward her.

Arthur made a run for supplies, and Denise—who had picked up welding somewhere along the line in her robotics education—seared together an overlapping metal casing to go over my cast. It might already strain Agarwal's credulity that my arm hadn't been fixed up as good as new; we wanted him to see what he expected to see as much as possible. A robot with a temporary metal arm might not ring any alarm bells. We hoped.

I'd been wearing the same shirt since the day before, and it was stiff with dried blood. Checker gave me a very loud patterned button-down he said he'd used to cosplay Wash—whatever that meant—and an unlikely purple blazer, since I'd given Arthur his coat back. I had to cut my T-shirt off to change, and with the slightly large, mismatching garments and only one arm through the jacket and the other encased in metal, I looked rather absurd. Which I supposed worked to my advantage.

By the next morning, Checker and Denise had figured out what they wanted the fake volcanic sensors-slash-explosive-devices to look like. Arthur went on another supply run while I made a terribly uncomfortable call to Mama Lorenzo.

“Don’t tell her she owes you a favor,” Pilar instructed me, completely unsolicited. “*Ask* her, like you’re in a tough spot and you know you’re really putting her out. You want her to feel all magnanimous when she says yes.”

“Malcolm’s the one who told me she feels like she owes me,” I pointed out.

“Yes, but *she* didn’t,” said Pilar. “You want her to feel like she’s in the position of power on this one. Trust me. It’s all about making her feel good about it.”

“What are you, my public relations advisor?”

She shrugged in her exaggerated fashion. “Well, you kinda need one.”

So I called Mama Lorenzo and rather woodenly begged her for help. The conversation was excessively awkward on both sides, but she conditionally agreed to the favor and set up a meeting with me to discuss details. In probably the sanest move I could have made, I told her I’d be sending Arthur. Pilar was right about my public relations ability.

By the time night fell again, Checker’s living room had been transformed into a soldering lab. Checker and Denise were already pros, and Pilar tentatively offered to learn. “I mean, don’t take the time if it’d be quicker to do it yourself, but I want to help—”

Checker snorted. “A trained monkey could learn to solder. It’s easy. Come on over.”

Pilar’s face lit up as she joined him at his workstation.

“Get a room,” I muttered from where I sat paging one-handed through maps of Mammoth Lakes, memorizing the terrain.

Checker closed his eyes for a moment. “Cas, that was highly inappropriate.”

“It’s okay,” said Pilar blithely. “I’ve learned when I should ignore her.”

“Hey!” I protested.

“Knowing that’s a useful skill,” Checker said to Pilar, as if I hadn’t spoken. “Ignorance is bliss. Especially as I really was hoping to ask you if

you wanted to grab a drink with me after this, although now I'm afraid it'll just seem creepy."

Pilar laughed. "I'm flattered. But you know, the last girl you dated got you in trouble with the Mob, so I think I'm going to pass."

"Shot down," I mocked.

Checker rolled his eyes at me. "For Zarquon's sake, Cas, I am perfectly capable of accepting it when a woman says no." He handed Pilar a soldering iron.

"I do want to come see your band sometime, though," said Pilar. "You should let me know when you're playing. I'm super into indie music."

"Oh—wow, uh, cool," said Checker. "Sure, I'll let you know."

"You're in a band?" I said.

Checker took a moment to stare at the ceiling, as if appealing to the heavens. "You really are a horrible friend. Though you did save my life, so maybe you're all right."

Fortunately, Arthur chose that moment to come back from the meeting with Mama Lorenzo, saving me from the risk of descending into sentimentality. "Went well," he said right away. "She's marshalling people to go up by tomorrow morning. Got the sense this'll even the scales 'tween you. And her pet sniper wants to help back you up." He transferred his attention from me to Checker. "Think I got her to do something for you, too, though don't count your chickens yet."

"For me?" Checker froze. "Arthur—I'm really okay; I don't want—"

"Worse if she feels like she owes you, right?" said Arthur, the slightest touch of teasing in his tone.

"I suppose..." said Checker unhappily.

"I've got technobabble for you to memorize," I said to Arthur. "You're the best one of us undercover; you play lead volcanologist on this. Interact with the town. Let the Mob guys refer people to you. That sort of thing."

"That means I ain't backing you up," said Arthur with a frown. "Was thinking your sniper buddy and I could watch your back. Can't do that if I'm play-acting the scientist."

"I can be the volcanologist," offered Checker. "All it takes is being able to jabber out a whole lot of scientific jargon at people, right? It's not like I'll be in danger of coming face to face with Agarwal—he's not going to risk

being high-profile by nosing around too much. He'll get the gossip through the grapevine."

"I was thinking you would coordinate with Mama Lorenzo here in LA," I said. "We need someone on this end."

"Oh, God, not me." Checker blanched. "I'm really not the right person for that. She terrifies me. I'd screw it all up. And probably she would end up shooting me."

Pilar raised a hand. "Put me on that."

I squinted at her. "You realize we're talking about the woman who basically runs the Los Angeles Mafia, right?"

"So what?" she said. "You need an admin, and I'm a really, really good one. I can't do anything up in Mammoth because Vikash knows me. But I can do this."

"It would make the most sense," agreed Checker thoughtfully. "I'm not good undercover like Arthur, but I'm *really* good at handwaving through bullshit science, so a lead volcanologist is one role I can do. And then Arthur can back up you and Denise."

"Are you sure about this?" I asked Pilar. "She's a dangerous woman. You'd be better off not being on her radar."

"I knew you cared!" said Pilar, a smile breaking out on her face.

"If you're not taking this seriously—"

"No, no—I am, I am!" she insisted, sobering her features immediately. "But the thing is...I can't just do nothing, can I?"

"Yeah, I get that," said Checker.

I didn't. Most people were perfectly content to do nothing, particularly when doing *something* might put them in the sights of some very dangerous enemies. Hell, *I* would've rather been doing nothing. But someone had to fix my screw-ups, and Liliana...Denise and I were the only chance Liliana had left.

If she was still alive. If she was still intact.

"Hey, maybe the Mob will be so impressed they'll end up wanting to hire me," said Pilar. "I do need a job, and they probably pay pretty well, right?"

Checker made a strangled sort of sound.

“I didn’t mean it!” Pilar assured him hastily. “It would just be nice to, you know, have rent money by...what day is it?”

“Monday,” I said. “For a few more hours.”

“Oh. Then by tomorrow. I guess that ship’s already sailed. At least if I get evicted and don’t have an address, the FBI will have more trouble finding me.” She cocked her head to the side. “Wow, that is one sentence I definitely never thought I would say. I’m glad my mother doesn’t know all this.”

“That reminds me,” I said. “We said seventeen an hour, right?” I dug in my pocket and came up with a handful of hundreds. “How much time have you spent on this?”

Pilar’s mouth dropped open, and she blinked at me. “I don’t—I don’t know?”

“Well, I’ll estimate, then. And start keeping track better.” She was supposed to be the admin, for Christ’s sake. I counted out the bills and tossed them on the table next to me. “That should cover up through today.”

Pilar stared at the money and then slowly came over and picked it up. “Thanks. That’s, uh. That’s really nice of you.”

“It’s not nice,” I said. “It’s what we agreed. I don’t welch on people.”

“Wait wait wait,” cut in Checker. “Cas’s bizarre non-generosity aside, are you seriously that strapped? Oh my God, why didn’t you say something? I can totally spot you some cash to get you through after this. Hell, scratch that—come work for Arthur and me.”

“What—really?” Pilar’s face got tense, like a starving person who didn’t want to be rude by stuffing her face. “You honestly need someone? You’re not just saying that?”

“Nope, we could definitely use someone,” said Checker. “Arthur spends way too long on paperwork and filing because he’s Mr. Neat Freak Perfectionist, and I don’t do hard copies. It’s been getting out of hand. And we like you, so, done.”

I expected Arthur to jump in and defend himself, but he’d disappeared—only Denise was soldering quietly in the corner. I got up and checked the kitchen. No Arthur.

Pilar was thanking Checker behind me. “This is amazing. You guys are saving my life; I could kiss you.”

Checker coughed. “Not that I’d object, usually, but I’m technically your boss now, and if there’s one thing I learned from the whole sleeping-with-a-student thing—”

Pilar laughed.

I poked my head into Checker’s bedroom, but Arthur wasn’t there, either. I went back into the living room and crossed to the back door to step out onto the patio. The night air was still warm, though a breeze had picked up now.

Arthur stood by the grill, his hands shoved in his pockets, his shadow long and thin in the light shining out from the house.

“Hey,” I said. “What’s up?”

“This whole thing,” he said. “It’s all gone too fast. Ain’t a solid plan.”

“Nothing’s ever a solid plan,” I said. “Denise and Pilar know this guy. They think this’ll work.”

“And if it don’t? If he calls your bluff?”

“Then we run,” I said. “And if necessary, you and Malcolm can shoot him in the head.”

“Russell.”

“Okay, Malcolm can shoot him in the head.”

He didn’t smile. “You’re so young. All of you.”

“Stop worrying.” I thought of Pilar and Checker chatting nonchalantly in the living room with a twist of concern. I could see what Arthur meant. They *were* young. “The only ones who are going to be in danger are me and Denise,” I said. “Checker and Pilar and everyone else, even all the Mob guys we’re getting to help us—they’ll be well out of the way.” It sounded convincing. Not like Checker wouldn’t be up in Mammoth, too. Not like Arthur and Malcolm wouldn’t end up in the line of fire with us if something went wrong. Not like I wasn’t sending Pilar to meet with a Mafia leader.

“Just you and Denise, huh,” said Arthur, a bite in the words.

My guilt spiked into annoyance. Worrying about Checker and Pilar I could understand, but I was different. “I know the risk,” I said. “This is what I do, and you know it. And you try stopping Denise. Good luck with that.”

He shrugged, still unhappy. “That’s the thing. Feel like I shouldn’t be helping you. But you all are going in anyway, so...I guess I’ll be there to back you up. But it’s too many ways this can go wrong.”

“Thanks for the rousing vote of confidence.”

CHAPTER 36

BY THE FOLLOWING afternoon, we had built two hundred fake sensors—or “explosive devices,” depending on the person we were planning to tell about them. Checker, Denise, and Pilar had done a good job: the clunky metal cylinders had visible wiring and LEDs fancying them up to look suitably intimidating, and Arthur had assured us the Mob guys had strict instructions about not letting anyone get a close look. Considering that they were Mafia men rather than geologists, I didn’t think they’d have any trouble chasing gawkers away.

After memorizing the terrain, I’d spent most of the night and morning putting together a fake mathematical paper on exactly how we were going to blow up the volcano.

“You’re asking the impossible,” I’d grouched, when the others had pushed me to do it. “If the math were real, I could write it. I can’t write fake math!”

“Sure you can,” said Checker. “Just make a purposeful tiny numerical error that will propagate through the whole thing. He won’t be able to catch it on first glance.”

“How do you know?” Something like that would feel so obvious. At least to me.

“The people building the Hubble telescope messed it up the first time around, and nobody caught it,” said Pilar. “Really smart people miss stuff. It’s the trappings you want. The show. I’m with Checker; Vikash will respond to math.”

“Especially as he’ll think Denise wrote it,” Checker pointed out. “He’ll be predisposed to think it’s right.”

“Write it,” Denise put in. “I’ll look at it. If I can’t catch your mistake quickly, Vikash won’t be able to, either.”

So I sat down at one of Checker’s computers and wrote forty-six pages of dense LaTeX regarding the problem of volcanic eruption, with numbers that were orders of magnitude off. Denise gave it her approval and then edited a few paragraphs to better match her own style and made a bunch of notes on it in longhand, scribbling calculations as if she were using the information in the paper for explosives construction. It would have looked pretty good except for the glaring errors in it.

Meanwhile, Arthur swallowed maps of the area as well and then coordinated on the phone with Malcolm about their backup plan. He was remarkably sanguine about working with a professional assassin.

“Just want to make sure you kids all get out alive,” he said softly when I needled him about it.

“Keep condescending to me and I won’t come save *your* ass the next time you need it,” I said, but I surprised myself by saying it lightly instead of angrily. Hopefully we wouldn’t be calling on Arthur and Malcolm, but since Denise would be alongside me in the hot seat, knowing I’d have additional hands around if things went south was...nice.

“Even the best call in backup sometimes,” Arthur said gravely, and I felt oddly complimented.

We couldn’t put Arthur and Malcolm in any position where Agarwal might see them, so Arthur gave me a tiny GPS chip to slip into my boot and a gadget something like a modified personal emergency beacon that Checker had built him for a prior job.

“We’ll try to keep line of sight,” he assured me. “Long as it won’t tip him off. But I’d count on us losing visual, so if trouble starts, hit the button and we’re there.”

“Okay,” I said.

Checker caught a flight to Mammoth that evening, and Arthur rented a large moving truck to transport all the fake sensors up overnight. Mama Lorenzo had been sending people to Mammoth all day, some by car and some by air, and by the next morning her men would be crawling the

caldera with GPSs and planting our cooked-up props. Pilar claimed she and Mama Lorenzo were already getting along famously.

“In fact, she’s a lot better to work for than Mr. Lau,” she said, and then bunched up her face. “Sorry. I shouldn’t say that, now that he’s...you know.”

Dead because I had screwed up?

Denise and I couldn’t do anything till the next day when our fake explosives were in place, so I brought her to one of my bolt holes for the night, under strict orders from Arthur for us both to get some sleep. I found the key and led Denise up the dark steps of the cramped building to room 269, where I shoved my shoulder against the door to open it when the warped wood stuck.

“You live here?” she asked, following me inside and gazing at the stained carpeting and flaking paint of the tiny, saggy apartment. I didn’t think she heard the frank shock in her own voice.

“No,” I said shortly. It was true; I was using one of my other holes-in-the-wall as my main base at present. I didn’t tell her it was almost as dingy as this one.

We started for Mammoth the next morning by car. Tegan had already delivered us new IDs for Denise, but I didn’t want to risk burning them by flying, just in case she did end up having to run.

The long drive was mostly silent. While I tried to remember to avoid speeding, Denise stared out the passenger window for most of the way, watching the scenery change from city to desert to mountains. She looked tired. Worn. A little old.

The highway that twisted up toward Mammoth Lakes curved through lush greenery and towering cliffs that dropped away into pristine canyons. Not many other vehicles were on the road. I could see why Agarwal had called it beautiful.

“Are you ready?” I asked Denise after several hours of silence, as I forced the sedan Arthur had rented up the grade.

“No,” she admitted, the word hitching into a nervous laugh.

“This all depends on you,” I said. “If you can’t play this, we’re toast.”

“I know.”

I thought about what Arthur had been saying, about how worried he had been. Maybe he was right. Denise was a scientist and project manager; she'd never been in danger of her life before. She'd never had to bluff her way through a sadistic maniac. And if she missed the mark, I'd be going down with her. "Don't fuck this up," I said.

She didn't answer.

Checker had used his online-fu to find out all the local dive bars and hangouts in Mammoth Lakes. There weren't all that many of them. We figured if Agarwal was keeping a finger on the pulse of local news—and he'd be a fool not to—he'd have to be tapped in somehow.

We arrived in the middle of the afternoon, just as happy hour was starting. The first pub we stepped into was all thick wooden rafters and cheap beer, with friendly, forthright bartenders who looked like real people instead of the models LA dives usually had, and only a couple of older local men in evidence who slouched at the bar and flirted with the waitresses. We claimed a table and I ordered us a plate of appetizers and some of the cheap beer, which neither of us drank. Denise nibbled nervously around the edge of a deep-fried jalapeño as we sat and watched the people.

"Y'all here to hike?" asked our server brightly, a robust and sun-dark young woman with a tumble of blonde curls.

"Yes," I said, at the same time Denise said, "No." The waitress looked between us, confused.

"Uh, she is," Denise covered quickly, gesturing at me. "I'm just visiting a friend."

"Who's your friend?" asked the waitress with interest. "There ain't all that many of us locals; I might know her."

"He's not local," said Denise. "He's just visiting, too. We're meeting up, is all."

"Well, you couldn't have picked a purtier place," the waitress said with a smile. "Can I get you anything else?"

"No, thanks," said Denise.

"The check," I added.

Denise gave the waitress a weak smile. "We were just killing time for a few minutes. We've got to be going."

"No prob," said the waitress, and sallied off to ring us up.

“Do you think he’s watching?” asked Denise anxiously.

“I hope so,” I said.

The next pub we tried was dimmer and louder, with a sports game playing on a TV mounted above the bar and painfully metallic music that competed with the announcers. The surface of the bar was a bit grimy and the wait staff didn’t seem to have any interest in conversing with us, only taking our money.

And this time, one of the locals lounging at the bar was a robot.

We’d called it.

The ’bot was an overweight white man, middle-aged and jowly, exactly the type who blended in at a bar in the midafternoon. The type who would quickly become invisible. Who could listen, watch, and report back on anything unusual popping up in town.

I tapped Denise’s elbow and jerked my head at him. She followed my lead as I hopped up on the next stool over.

“Hi,” I said.

The ’bot turned slowly.

“We want to see Agarwal,” I said. “He invited us.”

The robot took a sip of his beer. I wondered briefly how that worked; Liliana hadn’t eaten at all. Did he excrete the liquid later somehow? “I know who you are,” he said. “Wait here.”

He took out a wallet, left some money on the bar, and left. I debated the wisdom of following him, but antagonizing Agarwal would be the height of stupidity until he knew we had an edge.

“Do we wait?” asked Denise tensely.

“Yeah,” I said. A skinny bartender with a scraggly beard came over; I ordered two beers. “You’d better take over when he arrives,” I added to Denise.

She nodded only a little too fast.

We took the beers over to a table in the quietest corner we could find and sat not drinking them. Denise kept shifting in her chair. Jesus, I hoped she was up for this. It was too late to back out now.

A little over an hour later, Agarwal—or rather, someone who looked just like him—pushed open the door to the bar.

He gazed around, flicking his overgrown hair out of his eyes, and spotted us almost immediately. He strode over and pulled up a chair backward to fold his gangly frame onto it, straddling it and leaning on the seat back. "You came," he said to Denise with a broad smile.

I shook my head at her slightly.

"But you didn't," she said to Agarwal.

The 'bot's angular eyebrows popped up and down. "Your new model can tell; I remember. I'd love to get a look—" He made a movement toward me.

"No," said Denise. "Vikash can, if I tell him so. Not you."

"I am Vikash," protested the Agarwal robot. "This isn't one of our AIs, you know. I'm in its head. Right here." He tapped his forehead.

"I want to see you in person," said Denise. Her voice was tight with tension, but she didn't break eye contact with him.

Agarwal drummed his fingertips on the table. "See, that's a problem. You seem so insistent on it, and I must admit, I fear you may have just a tad bit of bad feeling toward me. Your new 'bot there did try very hard to wrench up my plans. You programmed it to screw with me, Denise. Why would you have done that?" He almost pouted.

"Why did you invite me here if you think I only want to kill you?" countered Denise.

"Well, because I always did find your brain an irresistible colleague. I'm weak that way. But not stupid. Come work with me, and eventually we'll learn to trust each other again."

"And until then I'm interacting with the robotics version of you?"

Agarwal lifted one arm and gave her a grand, elaborate shrug. "It cannot be helped."

"That's too bad," said Denise. "I wanted to see his face."

"Whatever do you mean?"

She hesitated, a muscle by her mouth twitching, and then she said, "I'm going to set off the volcano."

Agarwal laughed, a long, riotous belly laugh.

"I will," insisted Denise. Her face folded in on itself in cold fury, though I didn't know if she was acting or if she was genuinely angry he wasn't

taking her seriously. “I’ll do it.”

The robot wiped at tearing eyes. “Thank you; I needed that.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“Set off the volcano?” he sputtered. “That’s pure science fiction. You can’t drop some TNT into a volcano and make it erupt!”

“I know,” said Denise. “That’s why I’m not doing that.”

Agarwal hesitated, squinting, as if he couldn’t figure out why the joke was going on this long. “How would you do it, then?”

Denise pulled out the paper I’d written and laid it in front of him. “I thought you’d want to know. All those men the past few days who said they’re from the USGS? They work for me.”

Agarwal’s face wrinkled in confusion as he skimmed the equations. “How could you have—the science...” He trailed off, turning the page.

“My ’bot is useful for many things,” said Denise obliquely. Hey, it was sort of true.

Agarwal looked up, his face a picture of hurt and betrayal. “But even if I believe you—and, Denise, come on, this is just too fantastic, but even if I believe it—*why*? Why would you want to kill millions of people? An eruption this size might even cause drastic climate change, wipe out the entire population. You can’t even kill spiders!”

“As to your first objection, science fiction is only fictional until someone figures out a way to do it. You know that as well as I,” said Denise. She nodded at the paper in his hands. “Keep reading. As to your second objection...” She took a deep breath, and what I was sure was very real sorrow unfolded on her face. “I’m taking revenge. For Dana, Adrian, Sanjay, Esther, Su Lin, and Jason. And for Imogene Grant and Albert Lau.”

Agarwal’s features contorted, still more confused and hurt than angry. “You can’t...but...” He blinked down at the paper in his hands again, turned a few more pages. He’d begun to go pale. “I think you’re bluffing,” he murmured, but his attention was on the math, and the words lacked his former confidence. “Even if you—even if this all checks out, this was too fast. Your ’bot’s help notwithstanding, how could you have figured out—and where did you get the manpower?”

“That doesn’t concern you,” said Denise. “Everything’s in motion already. But I’m here to negotiate. I’ll stop it if you agree to my

conditions.”

Agarwal’s gaze shot back up to us, his mouth dropping open slightly. I felt a vindictive spike of glee. Denise and Pilar had been right about going big—the man who always had a contingency plan didn’t have one for the end of the world.

“Are you willing to risk that I’m not bluffing?” asked Denise. “Or will you hear my proposal face to face?”

Agarwal’s eyes flicked to me. “You’ve obviously been doing...quite a bit...of work off-book,” he said, almost to himself. “Congratulations, Denise; I underestimated you. Such an innocent persona. You’re as ambitious as I am.”

“Yes,” said Denise.

The ’bot set down the paper and leaned back, studying us as he drummed his fingers on the table again. “I’ll give you your meeting. But if I don’t like what you have to say, I’ll kill you.”

“That’s okay,” said Denise. “I’ll die when the volcano goes anyway.”

Agarwal squinted at her, uncertainty taking over his artificial features. Denise didn’t flinch.

“Come with me,” said the robot.

We got up and followed him out.

The air had been crisp and chilly when we got there, but now it had turned cold, the wind biting through Checker’s purple blazer. I shivered before I remembered I was supposed to be a robot. Fortunately, Agarwal was leading the way and hadn’t seen.

He brought us to a Jeep and gestured us inside. Denise got in the front; I climbed in the back.

Agarwal took a small black box out of his pocket and set it on the dash. “Frequency jammer,” he declared. “Just in case you’re planning something else, or you’ve become friends with all those nice policemen who are after you. I’ll always be one step ahead, remember that.”

Well, there went our backup, unless Arthur and Malcolm could follow us manually. But so far, Denise and Pilar were right: despite his big words, Agarwal didn’t seem to have an answer for the apocalypse. The one thing he wouldn’t have planned for, because it was impossible.

“I’m not afraid of you,” said Denise quietly.

“That seems unwise,” said Agarwal. The words had crept back to being singsong, mocking. “Even if you can do what you say. I have killed an awful lot of people, after all.” He glanced back at me. “Though I suppose you do have a rather effective bodyguard. What happened to its arm?”

“Someone got me angry,” said Denise.

I clenched my jaw, wondering if she was going too far, but Agarwal didn’t seem to notice. In fact, he seemed to look at Denise with a little more respect in his eyes.

Maybe she did know how to manage him.

We drove for a long time. As I’d expected, Agarwal headed northeast into the caldera, taking twisty mountain roads that probably snowed out within minutes in the winter months. Right now the slopes were still lush with greenery, however, spectacular blue lakes and vistas of majestic pine trees unfolding on either side of us. The evening hadn’t drawn on very late yet, but the mountains meant we drove in and out of shadow, the setting sun alternately ducking behind the peaks. I kept careful track in my head of the distance and direction, our GPS coordinates ticking past in my head.

The ’bot eventually turned off onto a near-invisible track through the woods, the Jeep bumping over rocks and branches as it pushed through the trees. He stopped on the bank of a creek and turned off the engine. “We’re here.”

We all got out. The woods were deeply quiet for someone used to city sounds—I registered the whisper of tree boughs and a susurrations of insects, but compared to Los Angeles, the silence was so complete it was thunderous.

I had a sudden frisson of foreboding, as if Agarwal were about to drop a bomb on us right then. If he believed us about setting off the volcano and was vindictive enough...if he thought he could stop the eruption on his own...

But the woods stayed undisturbed.

“It’s a tad bit of a hike,” said Agarwal. “Follow me.”

Twilight had dimmed the slope and Denise was breathing hard by the time Agarwal stopped us again. He reached down into the forest floor, digging his hand through pine needles and natural detritus, and hauled. A

trapdoor heaved open, revealing a narrow stairway leading down into the mountain.

“Welcome to my kingdom,” said the Agarwal ’bot. “After you.” He bowed, gesturing expansively with one hand.

Denise shot me a nervous glance, but she climbed inside. I stepped down after her, moving sideways, keeping half my attention on Agarwal and half forward.

He followed us in and dragged the door shut. We had an instant of darkness—my other senses leapt to alertness, the mathematics outlining the stairs, Agarwal, Denise, even when I couldn’t see them—

Lights flicked to life, illuminating metal stairs leading down, down, down into the mountain.

“Follow me,” said Agarwal, squeezing past us.

The narrow stairs led down to a narrow hallway. As we reached it we apparently walked through a sensor, because Agarwal stopped, turned to Denise, and said, “Please have your ’bot disarm itself.”

Denise looked at me, her eyes wide. I took Malcolm’s Browning out of the back of my belt and put it on the floor.

Malcolm would probably want that back at some point. Though if Agarwal buried us down here, he and Arthur would likely never find us or the gun at all.

We continued on.

At last, the Agarwal robot led us through a thick metal door, one that opened with a clang that echoed down the hallway. We found ourselves on the threshold of a huge cavern, half naked rock and half fantastic machinery, crystalline stalactites spearing downward across vast towers of robot arms and computer interfaces. A number of anthropomorphic ’bots sat or stood around the periphery of the underground lab, some shaped like Agarwal and some not, all of them with their eyes fastened on us. And standing in the middle of the grandeur was the human version of Vikash Agarwal himself, Liliana next to him in her party dress and shiny black shoes, and some sort of very large, unrecognizably alien weapon in his hands pointed straight at us.

CHAPTER 37

WE STOPPED. Denise's gaze flickered to me, and I gave her a fractional nod.

"Hello, Vikash," she said.

"Hello, Denise," said Agarwal. The 'bot who had led us down had gone silent and inert; I guessed the live version had to be controlling one of his clones for it to animate.

"I have a proposal for you," Denise said. Her voice echoed in the cavernous space.

"I'm thinking about killing you," said Agarwal.

Denise flinched. *For God's sake, don't let him rattle you!* I glared at her back, willing her to understand, but she wasn't looking my way.

"I built this for fun," Agarwal said, hoisting the absurdly large, silvery gun he held. It reminded me of something out of one of Checker's science fiction films. "It's a ray gun. At least, I like to call it that. I'm a mad scientist with a secret lab; I figured I needed a ray gun." He grinned, all teeth. "I've got other security measures aimed at you, too, so you and your spectacular 'bot should stay just about there."

We stayed.

"Now," said Agarwal. "I believe you were about to offer me something."

Denise swallowed. "I'm offering you to live."

"And your condition for this?"

“You come with me and surrender to the authorities.” Denise wet her lips and spoke faster. “If they lock you up, you’re probably smart enough to break out eventually, go back to whatever scheme you have going. Or I destroy all your work today. And us.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Agarwal. “About this volcano thing. I’m scanning for the USGS sensors. I think I’m going to find out they’re just sensors. I think you piggybacked on a geological survey and you’re expecting I’m gullible enough to fall for this. Ballsy, I admit.”

“You saw the math,” said Denise.

Agarwal scoffed. “Theory. A fascinating one, I’ll admit, and one I’ll be studying; thank you for that. But theory is a far cry from a practical application.”

I let out a quiet breath. He’d believed my paper.

“Are you willing to risk it?” asked Denise. “The clock is ticking down.”

Agarwal narrowed his eyes.

“Look into the environmental permitting. Contact the USGS if you like,” said Denise. “Everything got pushed through in the last couple of days. If you dig deep enough, it will all fall apart. The survey is fake. We staged everything.”

“We?” Agarwal pounced on the word, his eyebrows jumping.

Denise hesitated. *You’re talking too much*, I thought at her. *Shut up. Shut up!*

As if she’d heard me, she only shifted her weight, not answering.

“Well, well, well,” said Agarwal. “Still waters run deep. Perhaps you are not only a worthy colleague, but a worthy adversary.”

“I wasn’t your colleague,” said Denise quietly. “I was your supervisor.”

Agarwal tilted his head at her, evaluating.

“I know how you work,” Denise continued. “I know you always have a plan. I know I can’t beat you with a bluff. And I know nothing can stop you except the end of the world.”

Liliana reached up and tugged at the hem of Agarwal’s shirt. “Is this when we kill all the stupid people?” she asked.

Denise’s eyes widened, and an anvil of emotion slammed into me, so strong I was dizzy from it. I had to stop myself from lunging forward and

trying to kill Agarwal right then. My nails dug into my left palm, my blood running hot, buzzing in my ears, and I hoped my skin was dark enough to hide the flush of fury I felt rising...

"You rewrote her ethical axioms," said Denise, a funny tremble in her voice.

"Well, yes," Agarwal said. He looked down at Liliana. "No, my dear. That's *our* end of the world. This is a different one. A bad one."

"When do we get ours?" said Liliana. "I want to help."

My throat constricted and I tasted bile.

"Soon," said Agarwal. "Real soon. But not today." He raised his voice slightly. "I have a counter-proposal."

"What is it?" managed Denise.

"This place can destroy itself if anyone intrudes. I'm sure you don't want that—more of your precious human lives lost, you see. I'll come with you, this one time—I'll even let the court system decide if they can find me guilty, in their supreme incompetence—under one condition. You leave this place be." He straightened his posture and gazed at her imperiously.

"Because you're right. One way or another, I'll be free eventually, and I'll want my work to return to." His lips bent back into his angular smile. "And I suspect that by then I'll have discovered you *were* bluffing, and you won't be able to stop me. But I'll fold this hand, Denise; I'll bow to your poker skills—if you'll spare my work. One scientist to another."

I didn't want to take him in anymore. I wanted to kill him. But he was agreeing, he was walking into our trap, and Denise had to take it.

Instead, however, she thought for a moment, her face blank. "I hold all the cards," she said.

Agarwal blinked at her, apparently surprised by the response, and then his face slid into an unhappy grimace. "Come on. Even if you aren't bluffing, will you kill yourself? And will you destroy all this technology? Our work, your 'bot, everything I've done here—can you end all of that?"

She hesitated for one breath more, then said, "I'll agree to your condition."

She'd kept up the gambit till the very end, I realized. She did know how to play him. And she was much, much better at this than I was.

I didn't care what she'd promised, however. Agarwal's security measures be damned, I was going to find a way back in, and I was going to rescue Liliana, and Denise was going to fix her. Once Agarwal was in custody, I'd have time to figure out a way.

"Put down the weapon," said Denise. "And let my 'bot restrain you. Once we're out of range of your security, I'll disable the countdown."

Agarwal folded his lips together, and I thought for a moment his pride would get the best of him, that he wouldn't be able to surrender even though he'd said he would. But then he lowered his ridiculously large ray gun to a nearby counter, typed something into one of his interfaces, and raised his hands. "You win this round, Denise." A hint of his smile flickered.

The air rumbled.

The sound started low, almost beyond hearing. But before any of us had done more than look up in bewilderment, it rose, faster and louder and louder and faster like the roar of an oncoming freight train—the floor began to vibrate—Denise whipped around to me in consternation, and Agarwal tried to shout something, but the ground interrupted by bucking up beneath our feet.

I dove for Denise and caught her before she cracked her head open against the wall. The floor was heaving like a living thing, Agarwal's equipment and lab counters rippling and buckling. Agarwal himself had been thrown to the ground and was struggling back upright while Liliana clung to a support pillar. The various Agarwal 'bots were sprawled bonelessly, the other robots trying to balance, shock and confusion on their artificial features. The walls of the cavern were falling inward, metal screeching and crunching and a great groaning *roar* reverberating in our skulls—

My brain scrambled through every incorrect conclusion in the first instant. Agarwal had said he had other security measures, but were they going wrong, destroying his lab? And we'd only planted fake explosives, *fake* ones, not real ones, it couldn't be—and then I remembered the topography maps, the seismic studies, the coordinates we were at, and the truth hit me, terrifying and absolute. *Agarwal the genius had built his underground base right next to a fault line.*

Holy crap, the numbers Checker had shown me—the caldera was a hotbed for tectonic activity. This was an earthquake—a big one—a strong one—and we were underground—

The floor buckled and lurched again; I held onto Denise in a one-armed bear hug and cushioned her body as we slid against the rock. Chunks of equipment and stone screeched loose and crashed down—one of the 'bots screamed, the sound cutting off as a boulder plunged from the ceiling and crushed him.

Agarwal managed to claw his way to his feet with the help of a tilting lab counter, and he whirled on us, his features contorted with hatred. “You said you’d stop it!” he shrieked at Denise. “You said if I came with you you’d stop it!”

I felt Denise take a breath to try to speak, but at that moment the mountain bucked again, breaking my one-arm hold on her and flinging us both to the floor several meters apart. I struggled up to crawl back toward her; Denise was coughing, the wind knocked out of her.

Agarwal grabbed for his so-called ray gun as it slid across the slanting countertop.

“It’s an earthquake!” I yelled at him, the words tearing out of me, all thought of role-playing gone. “It’s just an earthquake!”

But either he couldn’t hear me or wouldn’t, and he swung toward Denise, his eyes filled with hate, with fury at her betrayal, as he raised the ridiculous ray gun and pulled the trigger.

Electricity arced out like living lightning, beautiful and lethal and as showy as it was deadly. Denise, still struggling for purchase on the heaving floor, saw it coming, and had time for her whole face to go rigid with fear.

Right in that instant, as Agarwal turned and fired, in a sound I wouldn’t register until long after the fact, Liliana shouted, “*Mommy! No!*” and flung herself forward, in between them, her arms wide and waving, her face screwed up in fright. The blue fire of the ray gun lit her up like a halo, suspending her in time and space, its light falling on Agarwal’s expression of pure horror.

She fell.

Blackened. Inert. The acrid stench of burned silicone stung my senses, somehow more overwhelming than the thunder of the collapsing cavern, the

cries of the other 'bots, or Agarwal's scream of guilt and denial.

I harnessed every bit of mathematics I could, found a shred of purchase to launch myself off, and threw myself at Agarwal.

I tackled him back into a crumpling wall of equipment, his enormous gun flying out of his hands as we crashed to the floor. I managed to make the casing on my right arm take the brunt of the fall for me, metal clanging on metal.

The ground pitched again, and Agarwal squirmed away, scrambling for the door with the speed of a panicking animal. If he thought the volcano was going up, I didn't know how he thought he might escape—perhaps he hoped the eruption would have a delta, some amount of seismic activity before it burst through the crust and extinguished us all. Or perhaps he wasn't thinking at all anymore.

I lurched into the hallway after him, the math changing faster than I could track it as the walls and floor decided not to be where I thought they were. The whole corridor shifted a foot to the right and the wall slammed into my shoulder. I battled to find my footing again.

I should have been worried about rescuing Denise. I should have been trying to get us both out of there alive.

Instead I plunged after Agarwal, the floor alternately catapulting me forward and sending me to the ground. We were nearly at the stairs when I caught up; I plowed into him in another full-body tackle, and this one cracked his head against the wall as we went down. Without sparing a moment, I smashed my metal-cased arm against his temple.

He collapsed, bleeding, his body contorting in pain.

The tremors in the earth were lessening, not obviously, but I could see it in the mathematics. One knocked me down again; my hip landed on a hard edge that slammed through my flesh and bruised me to the bone. The pain dazed me for an instant, and then I realized I'd fallen on Malcolm's gun, the sleek little Browning I'd left in the corridor. I scooped it up in my left hand.

Agarwal was twitching on the still-shivering floor, his unruly hair matted with red. I kicked him in the face.

His nose crunched as it broke. He tried to scream, but choked on his own blood.

I got up, my body smacking against the wall as the earth lurched one more time. Then I stepped over, put one boot on Agarwal's neck, and aimed the Browning at his skull.

"I killed the last person I saw murder a child," I said.

He moaned. The quake gave a last murmur, loud and at the same time more felt than heard, as the earth settled. I didn't think Agarwal was aware of me.

My finger rested lightly on the trigger, my heel on his throat. It would be so easy. It would feel so good.

He and Denise were right that he'd be able to break out of prison. Pointing it out had been a bargaining chip for his surrender, but in truth, he was smart enough. He would escape, and he'd hurt people again, kill people again, destroy human lives with his technology, all with his mocking, insane, sociopathic smile. And we'd made ourselves his targets now—he'd have reason to come after Denise, after us.

Killing him was the smart thing to do. Killing him was the right thing to do.

If I let him live, I might be signing our own death warrants.

CHAPTER 38

I CLIMBED back down into the lab, my eyes flicking around the creaking structure as I measured the mathematics for any danger of collapse, and found Denise kneeling next to Liliana's remains.

It hadn't been right for me to leave her earlier, but I didn't have any emotion left for guilt. "Are you injured?" I asked.

She shook her head. Her arms were wrapped around herself, her expression numb. "Vikash. Did you—did he—"

"He's in custody," I said shortly. *I should have killed him.* "I left him with Arthur and Malcolm."

She took a shaking breath.

I slumped down beside her, next to Liliana's tiny, charred body. The blue party dress was seared with black now, half turned to ashes. I felt like I should reach out, should check—check what, check how, I didn't know—but my fingers recoiled away from touching her.

"Is she dead?" I said.

Denise didn't answer. Her hands were fisted in her clothing, her body corded with tension, her eyes unfocused.

"Denise."

She flinched. "She was never alive," she said flatly. "You know she was never alive."

I wanted to hit her. "You still say that after she saved—after she sacrificed—you saw what she did. I know you did!"

Denise sniffed, very deliberately. “She saw me as a mother. We told her to, programmed in the—we taught her, it, to act out love—”

“How can you say that?” I cried. “How can you not be upset?”

Her eyes flashed in anger, the first sign of energy I’d seen from her since coming back down. “Of course I—! She was over a decade of my life, and a year of behavioral—of course I care! But if you think this compares in even the smallest way to losing a *child*—”

She turned away abruptly.

“Is she repairable?” I asked quietly.

Denise stayed facing away from me, and her voice was muffled. “You could build another one. The learned processes, the current state, they would be gone.”

In other words, the new Liliana would be a blank slate, with no memory of her father, and no affection for him, real or mimicked.

Noah Warren’s daughter was dead. Part of me thought he’d be happier if he never woke up to hear the news.



AGARWAL’S CLONES were all inert, but some of his Liliana-style ’bots were still moving, dazed and frightened. Denise tried to find an interface to shut them down from, but the screens that still worked were all locked, and too well for her to crack quickly. Knowing the ’bots might have been programmed to attack anyone who came down later, we didn’t dare leave them here still animated, so I shot them all in the head. The too-humanlike bodies fell one by one, surprise and fear mixing on their features. The last one tried to run, but my aim was too good.

Denise turned away, unable to watch.

“You’re the one who said they aren’t alive,” I said, the words pinched and ugly.

She didn’t answer.

Whatever Agarwal’s security measures were, they’d either been broken by the quake or he’d planned to re-enact them before leaving and never gotten the chance. Denise and I climbed back through the hallway, stepping

over pitched flooring and chunks of rubble, and scaled a metal stairway twisted in on itself until we pushed out into the pine-scented night.

Arthur was waiting. “Was getting worried,” he said with relief. “Thought the ceiling might’ve fallen on you.”

I hadn’t allowed him back down with me in case of aftershocks or structural collapse. “No,” I said. “Just dealing with the ’bots. Everything up here okay?”

“Agarwal’s tied up and passed out, but your sniper buddy still ain’t took his gun off him. Not a real trusting guy.”

“Good,” I said.

“You two okay?”

“Yeah,” I said.

Denise nodded.

“Go with Arthur,” I ordered her, not entirely kindly. I turned to him. “You can handle this bit, right? Take her in, hook her up with a lawyer, make sure she’s set up to make a case against Agarwal so she’s got a bargaining position.”

“Course,” said Arthur. He’d probably already assumed he’d be the one doing it.

“Make sure the cops don’t underestimate Agarwal,” I said. “They will, but try to pound it into their heads.”

“Got it.” He put a protective hand on Denise’s elbow and added to me, “We’re a ways out from civilization. Let us drop you, at least.”

“No.” I didn’t feel like human company right now.

Dawn was just breaking when I arrived back in LA, though the day was already too warm, promising a late-summer scorcher. I ditched the car I’d stolen in Mammoth and made my way to one of my bolt holes, where I collapsed and slept for over fourteen hours. When I woke up night had fallen again, though my skin was damp with sweat, itchy under my metal-encased cast, and the city was still too warm for comfort.

The urge to go find a drink was swelling in me, a deep and compelling need, but I still had loose ends to tie up on this clusterfuck of a job—I had to check in with Arthur and make sure Agarwal was safely in police custody and Denise wasn’t getting screwed over by the system, find out

from Checker if we were still on the run from the law, and get an update on Warren's condition.

In the last case, I didn't know whether I wanted good news or bad.

I drove to Checker's house. The light was still on in the Hole; I opened the door without knocking.

"Hey, I—oh my God, you look terrible. Are you all right? Arthur didn't —"

"She's dead." I hadn't realized I'd needed to say the words until I'd already spat them, jagged and accusing.

"What—who?"

"Liliana," I said. "She sacrificed herself to save her mother."

"Oh, uh—yeah, Arthur told me what—"

"I know you say she wasn't a real person, but to Warren she was." My voice was cold. Part of me knew that this wasn't Checker's fault, but I couldn't seem to stop. "And he just lost his child. Again."

"Hang on—"

"Even if we rebuilt her, there'd be no way to make every single minute of her experience the same, and even if we could, there's no way we could make every coin flip in every probability distribution match, no way to ensure the exact same learning—"

"Cas!"

"Which means she's *gone*! She was unique! And I don't know, maybe that makes her as alive as anything else! We can't tell if she's self-aware, so what's the difference, really? What makes her death any less tragic? Tell me!"

"I backed her up!" cried Checker.

I tried to speak, but my brain wasn't linking up to my mouth correctly. My tongue made a sputtering noise.

"Thank you, Checker, how brilliant of you, you are ever so prepared.' That's what you're trying to say, isn't it?"

"I—you backed her up?"

"Yes."

"Everything? Everything that made her who she is?"

"If you mean all her state variables, yes. I essentially imaged her."

“Why didn’t you mention this?”

“Sorry—sorry! I just, I didn’t think it had worked! Denise thought it was impossible—they’d never been able to run backups successfully; that was why we couldn’t duplicate her in the first place back when we were talking to Arkacite. But, you know, my specialties are pretty completely opposite to Denise’s, and if there’s one thing I’m good at it’s getting around bitrate problems. Only I didn’t actually think it had worked at the time—but I double-checked the cloud when I got back from Mammoth, since, well, *you* know, and I wasn’t really hoping for anything, but it turned out—”

“When? When did you do this?”

“When we were trying to figure out how to write the ’bot recognition program. Which I still want you to look at, by the way.”

“So she’ll revert back to that moment.”

“Yes, if we build her a new body, which from your reaction I can only assume we will, she’ll be at that instant and then go on from there.”

“You backed her up,” I repeated, dazed.

“Yes, Cas.”

“We can rebuild her.” The words felt disconnected from reality. Alien. Absurdly, my brain wasn’t sure whether to leap in elation or rail at having been sandbagged. What did it mean, that her loss could end up so utterly meaningless?

“We can rebuild as many of her as you want,” answered Checker. “Do you think Warren would be into having some extra daughters? More is better, right? We could even copy her into a few different models. How bizarre would that be?”

“I think...I think just one will do.” I leaned heavily against the door, trying to process.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” The world was starting to turn right side up. Make sense again. “Yeah.” *We can rebuild her.* That was all that mattered.

Who cared about the existential questions? They could wait. The corner of my mouth involuntarily twitched toward a smile.

“There’s more good news, if you think you can handle it,” said Checker. “Noah Warren came out of his coma—he’s still in the hospital indefinitely, but he’s going to be okay. Of course, he’s under arrest, but Arthur hooked

him up with a good lawyer, and considering the circumstances he can probably get off light. Speaking of Arthur's lawyer contacts, Pilar's already off the hook—nobody from Arkacite's around anymore to press charges, and Denise's testimony absolves Pilar of any involvement with the 'bots. We still don't know how Denise is going to fare herself, but the authorities seem pretty excited she can give them Agarwal's head on a platter."

"He's going to go down for all the murders?"

"It looks like it. They salvaged enough of the 'bot who did the killing at Arkacite for Denise to recover most of the programming, and I'm sure Agarwal's mountain lair will provide a lot more evidence once it's deemed safe to enter and they can get Denise to comb through the code. It looks like the government is publicly scapegoating Agarwal for everything, in fact, which is fantastic—if people can point to a human villain they won't be clamoring against the AI so much, though of course there'll still be some anti-science fallout from this. Though Arthur..."

"Arthur what?" I asked.

He cleared his throat. "He got Mama Lorenzo to lean on some media companies they've got influence in, and in particular on Reuben McCabe, of all people. She's forcing them to be vocal in a backlash against the anti-AI people. Arthur told her it was, uh, a favor to me." He fidgeted slightly.

"It's a good thing, you know," I said. "Like Malcolm said. If she felt like she owed you, that might be more dangerous. Now she can forget you exist."

"I very, very much hope for that," said Checker fervently.

CHAPTER 39

I DROVE back to Mammoth that night and slipped through the police tape to retrieve a plutonium battery from one of the 'bots I'd executed—fortunately, I managed to pull one that was still undamaged. Since Denise was in government custody, I tracked down Okuda the next day—she had managed to duck FBI notice and disappear back to Japan with her remaining people as soon as she was out of the hospital—and got her to commission Funaki to build a new version of Liliana's body. They already had all the specs, after all; the first 'bot they'd built had looked like Liliana precisely because it had been so easy to work from the stolen Arkacite plans.

They balked at first, but large sums of money are good at eroding objections. Luckily hoarding cash had always been part of my MO.

Of course, all this meant I'd lost a *ridiculous* amount on Warren's case. I'd never ended up in the red on a job before; I guess I decided to go big my first time out. I told Arthur I never owed him a Christmas present ever again.

At least I had made a little back on the batteries. Even if I'd given it all to Cheryl.

We waited to activate Liliana's clone until Warren was discharged from the hospital. Her programming wasn't aware anything had happened, and we didn't tell her. We didn't tell Warren what had happened either, only that she'd had a memory glitch Denise had fixed before she turned herself in. Warren had ended up with the charges against him dropped for much the

same reasons Pilar had; we ignored the subpoenas listing him as a material witness in several pending cases, and I paid Tegan to forge some very pretty passports for him and Liliana. Then I set them up with a way out of the country.

“You’re being downright charitable, Cas Russell,” Checker teased.

“The authorities would figure out he has her eventually,” I said. “You know they’d come for her. And *he* may be an incompetent welcher, but she’s just a kid.”

He gave me a measured sort of look but didn’t correct me.

Checker and I saw them off. Liliana came up very formally and shook our hands—well, with me she shook the left one, since my right arm was still in a sling. “Thank you for helping us,” she said to each of us, with perfect eye contact. The intonation was exactly the same both times she said it.

“Yes,” added Warren. “Thank you.”

His gratitude was heartfelt, but I liked hers better. “I didn’t do it for you,” I said to him.

He nodded. I knew he didn’t care.

“Daddy says we have to go,” Liliana chirped. “Good-bye.”

“Bye,” I said.

Warren reached out and took her hand. Liliana looked up at him, her face glowing with childlike joy.

They walked off down the street together to the white van waiting at the corner. Warren gently helped boost his daughter inside and climbed in after her. The van rumbled away.

“I wonder what kind of life they’ll have now,” mused Checker.

“I don’t know,” I said. “But I guess they get to find out.”

I had client meetings lined up so I could jump onto my next job, but I hadn’t scheduled them till evening. I returned to the apartment I was currently using, feeling oddly good about the way this case had turned out, to find a tall Asian man in a long tan duster leaning next to the door.

“Oh,” I said. “I didn’t know you were in town. Hi.”

“Grab a bite?” asked Rio.

“Sure.”

We headed back out to the street, where I led the way to a nearby café with outdoor seating. Rio's coat made him stand out among Angelenos still dressed for the ongoing fall heat wave, but he paid no notice. He probably preferred its weapons-hiding capabilities to being comfortable.

We settled with some iced coffee and generic pastries at a table a ways away from any other customers. I'd barely seen Rio a handful of times in the past year, since he had saved my life and my sanity from Dawna Polk and then refused to tell me why.

"Are you still keeping your promise to Dawna?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "I am certain you would know if I were not."

Because she would come after me. She'd agreed to ignore me only because he'd set aside his private war against her.

I wasn't sure whether I was more furious at Rio for trying to protect me or more terrified of what would happen if he stopped.

"I heard Los Angeles had some excitement," said Rio, his eyes briefly going to my broken arm.

I sighed and allowed the change of subject. "Yeah. We were right in the middle of it."

He raised one eyebrow. "We?"

"Oh," I said. "You remember Arthur and Checker, right?"

"I remember." His tone was entirely neutral.

"They're not bad people," I protested.

"I don't doubt it."

"And they're good in a pinch. Smart. You know, competent. I mean, not on your level, but..."

Rio tilted his head fractionally, studying me. "It seems you've made some friends."

I wasn't sure why, but I felt my face heating. "I didn't do it on purpose."

"No, it's...good," said Rio, as if the words didn't quite fit together right in his mouth. "So I'm told."

I swallowed. "Yeah. It is good."

"You seem well."

"Yeah," I said. "I guess I am."

He gave a sharp nod as if to say, *Well, that's all right then*, and stood, reaching into his coat to pull out a few bills in American currency, which he tossed on the table next to his untouched food.

"Wait," I said.

He waited.

I struggled, but the words wouldn't come. Literally. "Help me out here," I groused.

I wasn't sure if I expected him to get it, but he did. "You want to ask me about Pithica."

"I can neither confirm nor deny that statement." Dawna's mental prohibition made my tongue woolen in my mouth.

"Stop fighting it, Cas. This is the better way."

The old resentment against him flared. "Says you."

"Please. Leave it."

Please. Rio never said "please."

"There's another shoe," I said finally.

Rio did the one-eyebrow thing. "Pardon?"

"The saying, about another shoe dropping. Pithica isn't done with us. There's going to be another shoe."

"Perhaps," said Rio. "If so, we shall deal with it."

"You mean you'll deal with it."

He inclined his head to the side, as if to say, *Well, yes.*

"You're not helping me by leaving me in the dark."

"If not, that is between God and me," said Rio calmly.

"I don't get a say?"

Rio's stare was penetrating. "No."

I felt a chill, even through the warmth of the Southern California day. It was so easy to forget, sometimes: Rio didn't care about me personally, and never would, not in any way beyond the abstract requirements of his religion.

The reminder was uncomfortable in a way it never had been before. I didn't know why it should be. I had known Rio for years, and he'd never pretended to be my friend.

“Be well, Cas,” said Rio, and strode away, his coat flaring behind him.

I slumped in my seat and stared at our uneaten pastries. A drink would have been nice, but was out of the question because of the client meetings. I had a few hours to kill, a suddenly-deflated mood, and nothing to do.

I thought about going back to my flat and reading some papers on natural language processing. But instead I ended up at Arthur’s office, a nicely-stenciled door in a less-than-nice part of town. I knocked, wondering if he was even there.

The door opened, spilling out laughter.

“Russell!” said Arthur, delight lighting his features. “Come on in.”

I came in. Checker was there too, grinning, and Pilar was perched in one of the office chairs, her feet tucked up to sit cross-legged. They all looked relaxed. Happy.

“Heard you helped a certain father skip out on his legal responsibilities this morning,” said Arthur, but he sounded more amused than disapproving.

“You don’t mind?” I said.

He shrugged. “Exceptions for dads.”

Exceptions for kids. I hitched myself up one-handed to sit on his desk. “Think we’ll ever hear from them again?”

“Not if Warren’s got the least iota of common sense,” said Checker. “Best if they stay far, far outside the United States.”

“Is Funaki going to keep making more robots, do you think?” asked Pilar. “They could still sell them in Japan or something, right?”

“Eh, even if they do, I suspect ‘proceed with caution’ will be a mantra,” answered Checker. “They didn’t expect the bad press here to extend to the level of supervillainy, after all. I’m guessing they don’t want to pick up that mantle, even an ocean away.”

Pilar wrinkled her nose. “Robots that look like people. Can you even believe it?”

“Damn near ridiculous,” agreed Arthur.

“Welcome to the future,” said Checker. “Early last century it sounded ridiculous to talk about human beings walking on the moon. And before that it sounded ridiculous to talk about flying to the other side of the world in big metal machines. And before that—”

“Yeah, I can print out an assault rifle on a 3D printer these days,” I said. “How’s that for living in the future? Of course, it’s usually easier just to steal one.”

Checker put a hand to his eyes. “You are not normal.”

Pilar laughed.

After coffee with Rio, the banter was somehow both comforting and jarring. I found myself wanting to say something meaningful, but I had no idea what. I cleared my throat. “Hey. Arthur. Eighty-eight days and counting.”

He grinned at me like a proud father, and a warm feeling spread through my chest as I lounged on Arthur’s desk and listened to Checker and Pilar argue over whether they should get a 3D printer for the office.

Maybe another shoe was coming. But right now things were pretty okay.

THE END

Cas Russell will return in

ROOT OF UNITY

And if you’re wondering what Rio was up to during this book, check out the short story [RIO ADOPTS A PUPPY](#)

THANK YOU FOR READING

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[Ladies' Day Out](#) – coming 2015

Other Works

[Hunting Monsters](#) [Book Smugglers Publishing]

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SL HUANG majored in mathematics at MIT. The program did not include training to become a superpowered assassin-type. Sadly.

You can find out more about SL Huang than you ever wanted to know by visiting www.slhuang.com or by following [@sl_huang](https://twitter.com/sl_huang) on Twitter.