



Knot Innocent

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Description: Birdie isn't who everyone thinks she is, a shy, smart, loyal intelligence genius. She hides a secret sin, one that drives her to risk her life over and over again to pay penance for a life she failed to protect.

Bastien makes no effort to hide the monster he's sure to become. It's in his blood. He was born of a man that used his fists too many times on Bastien's mother, and every day is a battle to rein in the temper so much like his father's. Determined to outrun his father's legacy, he joins the Navy, hoping the intense training of the SEALs will tame his demons. The demons win out when an officer in the navy harasses a female sailor in front of the volatile protector. Bash's control slips in defense of the woman, costing him his career in the SEALs. Picked up by Knot, Bastien settles into his new role as a private military contractor, determined to cage his demons once and for all. Even though it means locking away his heart from any woman.

He won't risk hurting anyone the way his father did, especially the quiet intel analyst who bandages his hands after taking out his rage on a tree.

Birdie's and Bash's secret lives cross paths again one night when Bash has to step in to save her from some grabby jerk. Startled by Birdie's suspicious behavior and appearance, Bastien determines to find out what she's gotten herself into. Fighting off his interest in Birdie proves difficult, even after learning her secret. Instead of writing her off, Bastien vows to help Birdie hunt the monsters that killed her friend.

Soon, they'll both find out how hard it is to battle three fronts at one time, Birdie's obsession, Bastien's fears, and a ghost from Birdie's past.

Total Pages (Source): 83

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

Birdie Crenshaw

The second hand of my penis clock—a gift from Sadie—ticks past the twelve for the hundredth time since I climbed into bed. It's now two a.m. on another sleepless night. I could continue to lie here and pretend I'd eventually pass out, but I've lived with my demons long enough to know that won't happen. Not once in the last thirteen years.

Resigned to another wasted night, I kick out of my covers like a toddler throwing a tantrum and sit up to reach for my glasses. My feet shove into my Grogue slippers, and I push off the bed.

The night is far from peaceful. Outside, the wind whips through the old oak trees lining the street, a sign of an approaching storm. If not for the howling wind, tonight would be another quiet one on the idyllic street in the historic district outside Norfolk.

The light from the gas street lamps flickers across the hardwood floor as I shuffle toward my office in the dark. A nice touch but a total waste of energy and resources if you ask me. I'm sure the dying polar bears would enjoy the ambiance, though.

I flip on the light in the high-tech room and collapse into my chair, ready to relive my nightmare all over again.

14 years ago

“So, what's this big secret, Meals?”

My best friend, Amelia Quarles, dances at her desk, causing her computer to shake. The image on my screen wobbles, and I join in with moves of my own, though I don't know what we're celebrating. Amelia eventually settles down and leans forward to whisper into the microphone. The move makes her face appear huge on my Skype screen. "I have a boyfriend."

"No way!" I squeal. "Who is it?"

"His name is Milo. He's 17."

Meals wiggles in her chair again as I rack my brain to place the name. "We don't have a Milo."

Amelia rolls her eyes. "He doesn't go to Morgan Park. He's a junior at Hinsdale. He plays football."

She's squealing now, and I join her because everyone knows what that means. Muscles. Morgan Park has baseball, basketball, and swimming like many other prep schools, but our guys are all brains. Any football team we had would get killed in the season's first game. "Tell me everything! And I want pictures."

"We met through the art shop's event forum and have been messaging for the last couple of weeks. He sent me his football picture, and I sent him the one of us at the dance last month. I told him he could guess which one I was."

"You're so bad. I know which one he'll hope you are. That dress you wore was fire! I still looked like a twelve-year-old, but whatever. You still haven't told me what he looks like."

"Ohhh. Milo is hot, Birdie, and he asked me out yesterday. He wants to meet."

Now, it's my computer screen that's shaking. My dancing ends when I realize one small problem. "Your parents aren't going to let you go on a date with a seventeen-year-old. What if he thinks that's lame?"

"He says it's cool. We'll just meet and hang out in a group. He does want our first meeting to be private, though. I just sent you Milo's picture."

The message comes through with a ding, and I open the attachment. Uh. Drool. "You're so lucky, Meals."

"I know," she shrieks. "Holy crap! I just got a message. He's asking to meet tonight!"

"Tonight? But it's already after eight on a school night. And last time I checked, you can't fly."

"Ha ha," she replies.

Meals goes quiet, the only sound coming from her keyboard as she messages her new boyfriend back. A few seconds pass, and her system dings with a new message. "He says he'll come to me."

"Oh, your parents will love that," I say sarcastically.

Amelia rolls her eyes. "I've got an idea."

She's now pecking furiously at her keyboard, wearing a smug grin. Trying to sound stern, I ask, "What are you doing, Meals?"

With a flourish, she taps enter to send her message and leans back in her chair. "I told Milo to meet me at the park by my house in thirty minutes. I can sneak out and back without anyone knowing."

“Um...” Her plan leaves a bad feeling in my stomach, but I don’t want to sound like a wuss. “Are you sure this is such a good idea?”

“Oh, come on, Birdie. I can see my house from there.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

The sickish feeling in my stomach doesn't get any better. "I don't know. Maybe it would be better if you did meet in a group first."

"You're just jealous. Milo is seventeen. He won't want to go out with a baby, so I don't plan to act like one. I've got to get ready. I'll see you at school tomorrow."

"K, bye," I say weakly.

Meals is right. I can't help but be a little envious. Milo is hot. I could probably get a boyfriend like that if I didn't act like such a baby all the time. Since I don't expect to hear from Amelia again tonight, I shut down my computer and visit the kitchen for a snack. I can't wait to hear all about Milo in the morning. I just wish I understood what this bad feeling is. Maybe I am just jealous.

My mom pulls a pan of cookies from the oven right as I walk in. "The smell gets them every time," she says with a smile.

I pour a glass of milk and sit at the bar, still thinking about Amelia. Mom serves up a fresh cookie onto a napkin and slides it over to me. I don't reach for it right away, and my mom gets that motherly look on her face. "Something on your mind, kiddo?"

Picking at a chocolate chip, I really want to tell her about Amelia's date, but I don't want to be a bad friend. "Nothing. Just thinking about the science test tomorrow."

"I'm sure you'll do fine, Honey."

I pinch off part of the cookie but don't take a bite. "Hey, Mom."

Her brow furrows, and she reaches for my hand, concern making her eyebrows pinch.
“Yes, Birdie?”

After a massive internal debate, I shake my head. “Never mind.”

I climb down from the bar and return to my room upstairs, abandoning the milk and cookie.

The next morning, I’m up and ready for school early, wanting to have plenty of time to get the juicy details from Meals before our first class. I bound down the stairs, expecting to see my mom and dad in the kitchen with my little brother Benji.

Benji is in his usual spot, munching on a pop tart, but my parents aren’t there.
“Where’s mom and dad?” I ask him.

“Living room,” he answers with crumbs all over his mouth.

I hang my backpack over a barstool and step through the archway into the next room. Mom’s face is blotchy from crying, and she stands up from the sofa when she notices me. “Oh, Honey.”

She wraps me in a tight hug, and my father joins her, placing a hand on my back.
“What’s going on?”

“It’s Amelia. Her mom just called. Amelia... passed away last night.”

Present Day

“I’m going to need caffeine.”

I walk to the kitchen to make an ill-advised cup of iced coffee. I’m a few sips in and

decide to grab an oatmeal pie to go with it before returning to my office. With the high-octane brew flooding my system, I shuffle back to my desk, pausing just long enough to inspect the blooms of my Naked Man Orchid. It's in a dick-shaped pot—another gift from Sadie.

Picking up a spray bottle loaded with water and plant food, I give the orchid a quick spritz and finally quit stalling. I flop inelegantly into my chair, and sigh. I'd rather be in bed dreaming about a certain stoic, muscled, paramilitary operative, but I guess I won't get that chance, just like Amelia didn't get the chance to see her fifteenth birthday.

With the push of a button, my whole system comes to life. My computer and multiple monitors flicker on, and a screen lowers over the windows, displaying a host of maps, bulletins, and pictures of closet slimeballs soon to be exposed.

I'm not talking about gang members or drug dealers. The slimeballs I go after like to deal in children. These are the high-end kind of assholes that think they're above suspicion because they live in exclusive neighborhoods like mine. Communities that are supposed to be safe.

I scoff at the thought. No place is safe as long as monsters hide in plain sight. And that's why I'm awake at two a.m. I've made it my mission to expose the predators preying on kids. It's the least I can do after serving up my friend to one of them. I should have stopped Amelia from sneaking out. I should have told my parents. I should have done something. If I had, Meals would still be alive.

Since I didn't, since I failed her, I now hunt the hunters in hopes of saving someone else's daughter, sister, or friend. It's the only way I've been able to appease the guilt. Appease it, yes, but the guilt never fully goes away.

My system is up and running in seconds, and I dive right into my undercover

operation. I pose as a minor on various platforms and phish for pedos. I've perfected my craft over several years, studying transcripts and police files for the right language to attract my quarry.

Once I zero in on a local target, I access his financial records and set up surveillance using his and his employer's security systems. It usually doesn't take more than two or three weeks to work them up to a meet. By then, I would've already reached out to one of several police contacts to give them a heads-up.

These detectives are some that I've gotten to know when I've been a consultant on cases in need of forensic computer investigations. They're men and women I've come to trust, and they extend that same trust to me.

Once I have enough evidence to get a conviction, I set up a meet between the predator and non-existent child in one of four jurisdictions, submit all my evidence and meeting details anonymously to the respective tip line, and the local detectives greet the bastard.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

A few times, I've needed to make an appearance when the target is reluctant to accept my meeting place suggestion. Those men are careful enough to stake out a place and not move until they see their prey. On those occasions, I don my disguise and make a show of arriving at the location. The target sees me and is all too ready to follow, only for me to be quickly escorted out through a secondary exit.

The ruse is successful because, with the right makeup and the right clothes, I easily pass for a fifteen-year-old girl. For this reason, it's my pictures used in any contact with the targets. It's not like I could use a real teenage girl to play "pretend" with. I have several different photos in rotation, but for my safety, I only send pictures when absolutely necessary.

I've never actually witnessed an arrest at one of my sting ops. The detectives I work with, one in particular, don't want me anywhere around when they make contact with the suspect. Usually, I'll get an email with a news clip or copy of DA charges to let me know the bust was a success. In the cases where I've worked with my own jurisdiction's Detective Cooper, I get a phone call. Ultimately, it doesn't matter if I'm on hand to witness a monster's life come crashing down around him or not. Knowing that I've prevented him from creating more victims is enough. The work is gratifying, to say the least, and each takedown satisfies the demons torturing me. For a while.

Tonight's hunt revolves around a man I call Predator Tom. I've been leading him on for a while now, and my work resumes with a bit of Minecraft world-building. I get logged into a public server in the game and walk around, get in a few fights, and generally make my character be seen in the area my target frequents.

Within ten minutes, I get my first message. Gotcha.

Bastien “Bash” Laurent

Today is opening day of baseball season, which explains why the bar is packed on a Thursday night. While I could do without the crowd, at least the beer is cold and the wings are hot, two things I’ve been without for the last three weeks.

My team of private military contractors just got back from a support deployment in the Middle East. We served as security forces for a joint training camp of Marines and Iraqi soldiers. I’ve never much liked the desert, always preferring the water or mountains from my time in the SEALs. And just like that, I’ve sunk my first night back.

For the last eighteen months, thoughts of my Navy days have left a sour taste in my mouth. I don’t regret any part of serving in SEAL Team Two. Just how I left. I miss being part of The Teams, the brotherhood—my platoon.

As I wax melancholy over my lost career, my phone pings with an incoming message, barely audible over the cheers around the bar. I drop my eyes to check the screen and shove my fingers into my temples. Speak of the devil. Jackson “Clothespin” Bennet, a friend from the SEALs and someone I’ve been avoiding lately.

I spin the phone around a few times on the worn bar surface before unlocking the device. Reluctantly, I check Jackson’s message. The original crew is getting together next weekend for our team anniversary. Join us.

I want to message back, Not a chance in hell, but I won’t. I don’t do anything except slide the phone away and pick up my beer again. Jackson shouldn’t have asked. He knows I won’t go. If it were any other occasion, I’d be the first to sign up. I just don’t feel much like celebrating our SEAL anniversary anymore. Not since I got kicked out of the Navy.

I'm still angry, but not at Jackson or anyone else on my old team. I'm not even angry at the Navy. My resentment is reserved for one person alone: me. I'm mad as hell at my own stupid self.

After a lifetime of fighting against it, I became the one thing I swore I'd never be, my father. He was an asshole. All my life, I fought against my breeding so much that the day I turned eighteen, I changed my name, dropping Smith and adopting my mother's French maiden name.

Too bad changing your name doesn't change who you are.

For as long as I can remember, my father liked to use his fists on my mother. When I got old enough to get between them, he found more enjoyment in putting his hands on me. Years later, I was big enough that he started having second thoughts about taking me on. It wasn't long after that he put my mom in a coma.

My life became a countdown to freedom after that. The second I turned eighteen and received my ID with my new name, I rushed to the closest military recruiting office. I'd seen commercials about soldiers in training and in battle and knew I needed an outlet for my hand-me-down hot temper. I thought the military would provide safeguards to keep me from becoming what I hated.

It just so happened that the closest recruiter happened to be working for the Navy. I signed up, never looking back, and for years, my plan worked. In basic training, the Navy broke me down and made me a team player. SEAL training built me into a fighting machine and placed me under the direction of Timothy "Stone" O'Reilly.

The SEALs gave me better focus and even stronger boundaries. While stationed at Little Creek, I could exorcise my demons daily. And when in the field, my temper took a backseat to keeping mine and my team's asses alive.

After nine years, all my good intentions went up in flames in a single moment. One second was all it took of not keeping myself in check for my father to win out. I put my fist through some prick's face for something he said And, of course, he had to be an officer.

It doesn't matter that the guy deserved it. I let him get to me. I let my temper fly, and it cost me my career. Dillan Knot took a chance on me after I was forced out of the service, and ever since then, I have kept to myself, flying under the radar as co-leader of an elite team of paramilitary operatives. I'm good at my job, just as I was a good SEAL. I won't fuck up and let my father win again.

I glance at my phone, feeling guilty for ignoring Jackson's text. I'm not my father, but I don't want to be reminded of what I lost, either. Loyalty to my friend eventually wins out, and I open the messaging app to peck out a quick reply. Have to work.

The device rings a second later. Shit. Dropping my head, I bring the phone to my ear. "Laurent."

"I'm calling bullshit," Jackson announces.

I won't even try to deny it. "Fine. It's bullshit. I'm still not going."

"The hell you aren't. It's time I drag your ass out of the shit pit, kicking and screaming if I have to. You're coming. I've even lined up a date for you."

"Hell no. Now you couldn't even drag my dead ass there."

"I'll do it if I have to—"

Cheers from around the crowded bar drown out Jackson's voice. I look up to one of the half-dozen TVs hanging over the bar in time to see one of the Nats trot around the

bases after hitting a home run during his first major league at bat. “Bennet, it’s pretty loud here. I’ll have to catch up with you later.”

“Convenient,” he grumbles before hanging up.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

I tuck the phone in my pocket and take another swig of beer, confident I've called his bluff. There's no way Bennet is dumb enough to line up a date for me. That was him desperately grasping at straws. Idiot.

Women. Another area where I don't trust myself. If I ever caused a woman to look at me for one second the way my mother looked at my father, I'd throw myself off the nearest bridge.

For that reason, any woman I've hooked up with over the years has been a one-and-done deal. I don't want to chance going further. Unbidden, an image comes to mind, one that I've been fighting off for the last four weeks. Birdie Crenshaw. Pistol-fast. Brilliant. And on my mind way too much since our chance meeting in the woods on an early Wednesday morning.

I'd had a dream during the night about my father cheering me on as I beat the shit out of that Naval officer. When I woke, I was haunted by the image of his satisfied grin. I got up immediately and went to the Knot compound gym.

After an hour of lifting weights, the rage hadn't receded. Spatch arrived to prepare for the day's training, but I feared what might happen if he or someone else said the wrong thing to me. That's when I ran outside to spend some time on the woods trail.

I took the track at a full run but only made it halfway around before hearing my father's taunting voice in my head. Like father, like son. My feet froze, and I launched my fist into the nearest tree. Thankfully, it was barely more than a sapling, big enough to take the blows but resilient, so it didn't break my hands.

Once I'd worn myself out, I rested my head above the bloody, abused bark to catch my breath. That's how Birdie found me. I didn't know it then, but Birdie runs the track several mornings a week.

She called my name when she saw me propped against the tree, unmoving. Blood dripped from my fingers to the small white stones paving the track, the contrast visible even in the low morning light. "Oh my god, Bash. What happened?"

I turned slowly toward her, and her eyes widened in shock once she noticed the blood on the tree. Birdie rushed over and took one of my hands in hers, gently cradling my wounded paw.

I'd never been that close to her before. I'd noticed her, for sure, as have many of the other operatives. I had my reasons for staying away, but the others avoided talking her up because of her special relationship with the CEO.

Alone in those woods, with her holding my hand, I had no excuse to escape. Birdie was flushed and sweaty from her run, but the intel genius still smelled of vanilla and chocolate. Her intoxicating scent took me back to one of the few times my life wasn't so shitty, times spent watching my mom baking traditional French pastries while she told me fables from her childhood.

The next thought to hit me that morning was how soft Birdie's skin was. And as many times as I'd listened to her give intel and logistics reports, I'd never noticed how smooth and soothing her voice was. Her soft crooning enveloped me like a warm blanket, so comforting that I no longer felt the ache in my hands.

For a moment, just a moment, Birdie made me forget. I couldn't say what it was about her, but for a short time, I knew peace. Knowing the reprieve wouldn't last long, I closed my eyes and drank it in.

Birdie didn't ask what happened to set me off. She didn't scold me for acting like a barbarian and hurting myself. After her initial inspection, she held my hands and silently walked me the one mile back out of the woods and toward the trailhead. Surprisingly, I let her.

At the boundary of the natural, wooded area, Birdie led me to sit on a bench and trotted over to a little white SUV, where she opened the back and began rummaging around in a first aid kit.

As her delicate scent faded, the trance that held me captive released my mind. What the hell am I doing? The thought played on repeat in my head as I watched her gather supplies. I had to remind myself that with my fucked-up lineage, I needed to stay as far away from Birdie Crenshaw as possible, no matter how much I wanted to get closer.

I stood up from the bench to return to the gym, but Birdie's sharp command froze me mid-rise. "Sit. Your. Ass. Down."

Shock, more than anything, had me obeying the shy intelligence analyst. Birdie collected her selections, holding all of them tightly against her ample chest to keep from dropping anything. She returned to my side quickly, her scent once again filling my lungs.

Birdie picked up my left hand and a pair of tweezers. "This probably won't feel great, but it will hurt less than that tree."

Her hands were just as silky as her voice, calming the beast inside. Intrigued, I studied my nurse as she picked bits of bark from my chewed-up knuckles, still unsure why I was letting her do it. I was plenty capable of treating myself just as effectively. I couldn't, however, deny that Birdie made for a better-looking nurse than I would have.

Birdie's dark blond hair was tied up in a complicated knot, and her fresh face made her look impossibly younger than she was. Her eyes, the color of faded blue jeans, were framed by tight brows as she concentrated on her task.

"What are you wearing?" slipped out before I could stop myself from asking.

Birdie's eyes cut to my face as if she thought me crazy. "Workout clothes?"

She couldn't hold my intense gaze and darted her eyes away. "No. Perfume, lotion, or something," I pressed.

"Just some lotion. Does it bother you?"

I clamped my mouth shut to keep from commenting, and Birdie returned to her work. Before long, both hands were cleaned, ointment applied, and bandages wrapped tight. Birdie gathered the leftover supplies and stood, disregarding our failed conversation. "You'll want to change those dressings in a few hours."

She rushed back to her car, the sway of her curvy ass sending a punch of heat straight to my groin. Exactly what I didn't need. Thankfully, my spaced-out psycho behavior seemed to intimidate her, meaning that'll be the last of our close encounters. I just wish my body could come to grips with the notion.

Groaning at the memory of her soft figure in those leggings and tank, I pay my tab and leave the bar with the Braves leading the Nats by two.

Birdie

With moves that would put Houdini to shame, my bra is off in under three seconds after walking through my door. Ahhh. I toss the offending garment into the laundry room, wishing the girls were small enough that I could wear a bra without wires.

When you're armed with knockers like this, they need an undercarriage. My shoes come off next, and I visit the kitchen for a glass of water and a fork.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

Dinner after a busy day at work is a prepackaged salad on the sofa in my living room. I was on loan to the Department of Homeland Security today, who, despite being the ones that requested my help, aren't always the nicest people to work with. Well, the rank-and-file members, anyway. The upper echelon only cares about my success rate, not my getting along with agency personnel.

The animosity stems from my colored past. Too many, in my experience, take issue with the government consulting with me because of my juvie record. Speaking of juvenile, I've been called Jail Bird a time or two over the years. Or worse. I don't let those morons bother me. An illegal search for Amelia's killer might have landed me in hot water thirteen years ago, but it hasn't kept the powers that be from asking for my help on occasion.

I've always assumed hostilities from those in the intelligence field develop whenever the big bosses need to bring me in because their people can't get a job done. For that reason alone, I take more pleasure in their discontent than I probably should.

Not everyone representing the feds is like that, though. There are enough good ones who only care about helping victims to make me continue accepting the work.

I just wasn't working with that kind today. That's enough, Birdie. Wanting to send thoughts of the frustrating day packing, I turn on the TV and call up reruns of my favorite show. As the Dunder Mifflin theme plays, I pick the raisins from my salad and empty the dressing packet over the lettuce. My fingers have to be licked clean afterward because I've never figured out how to open these pouches without making a mess.

While ignoring The Office and absently chewing, I zone out to images of a magnificent chest spattered with blood from a lost battle with a tree. Bastien's chest. His abs and those arms and face have taken up quite a bit of space in my brain for the last month or so.

The man doesn't know it, but that encounter made one hell of a deposit into my spank bank. I know I should feel guilty. Bastien was obviously having a bad day. I didn't just ogle him, though. I did help him out. Though part of me wondered what riled him up, I knew better than to ask.

I've worked at Knot Corp a long time and have seen this show plenty. Somebody pissed Bastien off, and he went to the woods to work off the anger. Most of the time, heated operatives take out their frustrations by punching bags in the gym, but Bastien must be a different breed.

The odd thing is that tempers usually only flare right before or after deployment for one reason or another. Sometimes, it's because of bullshit limitations placed on our team by the bureaucrats in Washington. Sometimes, a self-righteous loudmouth asshole gave them trouble while on assignment. In both those cases, the situation is widely known and lamented by many.

Whatever set Bash off that morning had to have been bad but was known only to him. The man was tormented, ghostly even. Not that Bastien Laurent has ever been a ray of sunshine, but this was different from the guy who just doesn't talk much.

Bastien's history and how he came to be a PMC is no secret. His career as a decorated Navy SEAL was exemplary. Bash served under Dillan Knot's best friend, Commander O'Reilly, in neighboring Virginia Beach. That was until eighteen months ago.

The story I heard is that while on shore leave in Europe, Bastien witnessed a male

lieutenant making sexually inappropriate remarks to a female sailor of a lower rank. Bash intervened, much to the woman's relief. The lieutenant took issue with Bash and ran his mouth, calling the woman a cunt. Bash decked him.

The lieutenant had Bash arrested and pressed full steam ahead for a court martial. He wasn't going to be satisfied until Bash was behind bars and dishonorably discharged.

The asshole's reputation for mistreating female sailors was apparently well-known but undocumented, and Commander O'Reilly's hands were tied. O'Reilly went to bat for his SEAL anyway and spoke to the bastard officer. The lieutenant refused to drop the charges against Bastien even though the female sailor agreed to testify about his bad behavior.

Fortunately, a video surfaced of the altercation, warranting disciplinary action for the officer. But even then, the lieutenant refused to drop the charges against Bastien. The bastard figured if he would be discharged for conduct unbecoming, he wouldn't let Bash off, either.

Somehow, Commander O'Reilly worked things out so that Bastien's sentence was reduced to an honorable discharge with no time served. That still meant Bastien was out of the Navy, but at least his record was untarnished. Commander O'Reilly's next move was to refer Bastien to Dillan Knot.

Everybody here knows that Bastien was, and probably still is, angry about losing his SEAL career, but he's working out well as a PMC. At times, the guy almost seems happy here. For a grump, that is.

All except for that day in the woods. Seeing the pain in his eyes that morning actually made me hurt for him, not that I would ever tell him.

Finished with my dinner, I toss the empty container on the coffee table and lean back

against the cushion, dazed by a new revelation. In the fifteen minutes that I've been home, not once have my demons scratched at my mind's door.

Bastien's story—and his body—must make for excellent distractions. Maybe I should spend more time daydreaming about the gruff contractor and less worrying about predators and asshole bureaucrats. God knows I'd get more sleep. And perhaps a few more battery-operated orgasms.

As if summoned from the pits of hell, my demons, in the form of my cell phone, bleep from my purse. And I've just jinxed myself. I guess that means it's back to work whether I want to or not. The salad container goes into the trash on my way to the office, and I sigh. This is going to be another long night.

The notification sound on my phone was an indicator that my current target is online. In under a minute, my computer is on, and I've loaded a popular human life simulation game, the target's favorite hunting program. Soon after, I locate his avatar and initiate a private chat.

Predator Tom, his designation in my records, isn't pretending to be anything other than the perverted thirty-two-year-old he is. That makes my job easier, at least.

This guy is the type that “understands how hard it can be to be a kid and just wants to be a friend.” After a while, the young victim “comes to mean so much more,” which leads to, “We should be together. Let's meet.”

I've been working with Predator Tom for almost a month. My sting operation has been at the meeting stage for about a week now. I've been slowly progressing from I'm not sure to tonight's message of You're right. I'm tired of being misunderstood and of these stupid boys my age.

I've already picked out a neighborhood from my list of cooperative police precincts,

going with the one furthest from my target. I send all this and a clever cover story to the bastard, who enthusiastically accepts my meeting location.

My next move is to attract the interest of the boys in blue. Normally, I'd have done this first, but I've been distracted by a certain non-accented Frenchman who doesn't know I exist.

All of the chat screenshots and copies of the target's hard drive are sent to the precinct's tip line along with the time and location where the asshole is supposed to show up to have sex with a fifteen-year-old girl. My work here is done.

About an hour later, I get a text from the detective who would have received my anonymous tip, Detective Scott Cooper.

I just went down with my appendix, and the guy they brought in to cover me is a real jackass. You'll need to use one of your other locations or put your guy off for a few more days.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

“Damn.”

It’s too late to do either.

That’s why this shit is done in a specific order, Birdie. I roll my shoulders and think through my options. You picked a secure, public place. You could meet the guy yourself. You’ll be wearing multiple cameras like you always do. This op will be just like any other sting except that you’ll have to interact with the asshole and act like you’ve changed your mind instead of the police dragging the dirtbag away—no big deal. Once you reveal he’s caught, Predator Tom will probably piss himself in his hurry to get away.

Returning my attention to the simulation game, I answer Tom’s latest sext and excuse myself to go to volleyball practice. That’s when my nerves get the best of me. “What if he doesn’t just leave?” I ask the little Naked Man blooms.

Neither the orchid nor the dick pot answer me. For a hot second, I consider calling Sadie to back me up, but then I’d have to tell her why. I don’t see that conversation going well. She doesn’t know about my vigilante-justice hobby.

Ultimately, I decide that between my taser and the public location, I’d be safe enough. That means I’ve got two hours until time to meet this guy—alone. I’ll show up half an hour early to allow plenty of time to get set and settle my nerves.

So now, it’s time to transform Birdie, the twenty-eight-year-old intel analyst, into Birdie, the fifteen-year-old high school student. I replace my practical phone case with a sparkly one, add a bunch of noisy and fluffy accessories to my keychain, and

take off all my jewelry. I jump in the shower to wash my hair so I can straighten it with a flat iron.

Finally, with ten minutes to spare, I leave my room wearing leggings and Chucks, a Harvard sweatshirt, and my slick hair in a pony. Most importantly, I've applied a makeup style to look like a fifteen-year-old trying to look like a twenty-one-year-old.

Before I leave, I return to the office and add a special onyx necklace. The stone is a fake, outfitted with a camera. My phone case contains another camera, so I can record a subject up close while playing a game on my phone in case anyone looks at the screen.

A mini taser disguised as a lip balm is chained to my keys, as well as a kitty cat fluff ball hiding a locator. To activate the locator, I simply pull the cat's tail to send a distress signal to my boss. I've never had to use it and hope I never do because I'd have to explain to Knot why he received the alert.

All these measures are overkill, but I'm not taking any chances. Hell, if I could, I'd make sure every teenage girl in America had these things for protection. Then maybe I'd get more sleep at night.

Half an hour later, I'm parking a block from the small plaza on Main Street in this little city center of one of Norfolk's many suburbs. Exiting my car, I remember to keep my steps light and swingy, plopping down on a bench nearest the garden plaza entrance that lets me see up and down the street. Then, I do what any other fifteen-year-old would do, pull out my phone and ignore the rest of the world. After starting all my recording devices, of course.

Bastien

Stepping out of the neighborhood pub, I pull on my ball cap and scan the street, a

habit I haven't been able to shake since my time in the SEALs. Main Street in this picturesque town boasts beautification award signs on both ends, with every shop owner showing pride in the prime location.

In the middle of the popular shopping and entertainment district is what I call a thinking park. It's a small, reclaimed lot where a bakery burned down years ago. Thick masonry walls protected the adjacent businesses from fire spread, and the damaged structure was cleared away. Instead of building back, the owner sold the property to the city, who decided a better use of the area would be a garden.

A large fountain takes the place of honor in the center, and the city commissioned local artists to create the smaller water sculptures set at the four quadrants. Even the custom benches are part of the art installation. I'll pass the garden on my way home, which is about three blocks beyond the last storefront on Main.

The town is nice enough if you like the yuppie scene. I can't complain. I like having restaurants and pubs within walking distance of home; well, where I currently live, anyway. This place will never be home. After my mother was killed, the Navy became my home, but that was taken away from me, too. At least in this town, nothing reminds me of my childhood, which is why I chose to live here.

I turn north and start toward my house, scanning both sides of the street as I walk—another habit from my Navy days. The sun is beginning to set, meaning it's almost seven p.m. The falling temperature is cool on my bare arms, chasing away all but the restaurant crowd. Once warmer weather is here to stay, this place will remain busy until deep into the night.

Halfway down Main Street, a familiar face in the thinking park catches my attention. That looks like Birdie. She's sitting on one of the benches beneath a streetlight that hasn't come on yet.

A park in my tiny suburb seems an odd place to run into her. My brain could also be playing with me since Birdie's been on my mind a lot lately. Still, except for the odd way she's dressed, I'd swear that's her. Slowing my stride, I cross the street to get a better look.

Even though the girl/woman's face is glued to her phone screen, the closer I get, the surer I am that this is either Birdie or maybe a younger sister. I don't even know if she has sisters. I don't know anything about her except that she's wicked-smart, smells of vanilla and chocolate, and has the softest hands. And I've only noticed the last two since that day in the woods.

At fifteen feet away, I figure I'm close enough to check my suspicions without scaring the girl if I'm wrong. I call Birdie's name, but the young woman doesn't respond. Guess that's not Birdie after all. I should have known. This girl looks like a kid and isn't even wearing glasses.

Maybe you just wanted it to be Birdie—no point in lying to myself. Every time I look at my knuckles, I feel Birdie's hands on mine. I've been avoiding getting close to her at work but walk where I know she's been to catch her scent.

"Damn you, stop it," I mutter to myself. "Stay away from Birdie and any other woman. You're a ticking time bomb, remember?"

When I'm ten feet from the garden's entrance, the streetlights blink on and illuminate the woman's face enough for me to see a triangular freckle formation on her right cheek, exactly like the one Birdie has.

Shit. That is Birdie. What the hell is she doing here? Dressed like that? Though the style choice is curious, I've never seen her outside of work, so for all I know, she always dresses like that. But why isn't she wearing her glasses?

Birdie's hands begin to shake as I close the last five feet. That doesn't make sense. She's never been afraid of me before. Besides, she hasn't looked up or done anything to indicate she's noticed me. I call her name again, softly, barely more than a whisper this time.

Birdie's shoulders droop slightly, and she sighs before lifting her head. Her smile is forced, but her voice is deceptively bright. "Oh. Hi, Bastien."

Birdie looks from my face to scan the sidewalk and fidgets with a sparkly flip-flop attached to a keychain. Everything about her, from her clothes to her nervous behavior, is markedly un-Birdie-like. She's not just nervous. Birdie is downright skittish.

My body responds by going into full alert mode. Glancing in the direction she just looked, I reply, "Hi, Birdie. What's going on?"

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

She hesitates before answering. "I'm just waiting for someone."

Birdie's reason sounds innocent enough, but her actions give her away. Something more is going on here. She scans the sidewalk again, and my eyes follow as they did before. No one seems to be approaching or even watching us. "Want me to wait with you?"

Her eyes flash alarm, and she refuses a little too quickly. "NO." Birdie reaches out to touch my arm stiffly, trying to appear calm. "That's okay. I'm sure you have loads of more interesting things to do."

She looks around again, and so do I. I still don't see anything to explain why Birdie altered her appearance or why she's acting strange. Why she's acting afraid. The only time I've ever seen a woman act like that...

Right then, everything clicks into place. Birdie has to be waiting for a man. Judging by how tense she is, he's the jealous type. I know because I watched my mother exhibit the same paranoid behavior. My eyes narrow, and my spine stiffens. "Who is he? Does he hurt you?"

Birdie's eyes shoot back to mine and widen in panic, but only briefly. Then her brows knit together in confusion. "What? No. It's not like that."

Her posture doesn't relax, so I cross my arms over my chest, ready to kick some punk's ass. "What is it like then?"

Birdie rolls her eyes, the first sign that she's not as frightened as I thought. It's also

the first time I've ever seen her having attitude. The gesture makes my temper flare, so I relax my arms and take a step back. After a deep breath, I ask, "Birdie, are you all right?"

Her beautiful blue eyes soften as they find mine again. "Yes, I'm fine. I'm—"

Engine noise calls her attention away, and she looks behind me. Her eyes bug out, and I barely suppress the urge to turn and study the vehicle. The moment and the car pass without incident, and Birdie sighs and then sags in relief. What the hell is this?

Birdie stands absently and points toward the little garden's entrance for some strange reason. In a faraway voice, she says, "It was good to see you. I'll catch you later at work."

Birdie all but shoves me out of the thinking park then. So, definitely scared of someone. More than a little concerned now, I nod at her and turn to walk away. There's no way I'm leaving, though.

As I create some distance, I watch Birdie in the side mirror of a minivan parked at the ice cream shop and duck behind it when she's no longer looking.

Birdie immediately relaxes, though not completely. Even so, she's no longer the savvy intelligence genius but has transformed into someone else. This new persona is more reminiscent of an awkward teenager. Her face is quickly buried in her phone again, and the rest of the world seems to cease to exist for her.

A few minutes later, a silver coupe rolls down Main Street, parking about a block from the park's entrance. A man steps out alone and scans the area in a way that says he's not a casual observer. The guy activates my asshole alarm, and I take note of his features, five-nine, brown hair, average frame. He appears to be about my age.

I expect him to approach the pub on the other side of the street, but he goes in the opposite direction toward the garden area. He could be coming my way for ice cream, but the guy doesn't look the type. My sixth sense is proven right when he slows and smiles at Birdie.

That's when I notice something about him that isn't strictly average, his swaggering self-confidence. Maybe this is the dick she was waiting to meet. For that reason alone, I'm ready to kick his ass.

Birdie hasn't relaxed further with the guy's arrival, but nothing I see explains why she's acting like someone else or is dressed like someone half my age. Unless that's the guy's kink.

I dismiss that theory instantly. There's no way Birdie would be with a guy with a pedo fantasy. She greets the man, still acting like a teenager. I can't hear what's said but can pretty much follow the conversation by their body language. The smarmy asshole eye-fucks Birdie, holding one hand behind his back.

There's nothing in his hand, but he rubs two fingers slowly in a circle against his thumb, a sexual impulse for sure. So, this could be some sort of role-play.

Sickened by the thought of Birdie taking this man's dick, I start to leave my hiding place when Birdie drops the kid act. In one second flat, she morphs back into her adult self. The man's demeanor changes in response.

His behavior, which started out as friendly and flirting, quickly becomes agitated. I rise from my crouch behind the van, knowing the pair is too engrossed in their sudden argument to notice as I start in their direction.

My steps are slow and easy, intending not to be threatening. Then, the guy fucks up. He puts his hands on Birdie. No, the fuck you don't. Birdie fumbles for and then

drops her keys, and my feet set into a run before my brain gives the order. Knowing not to leave a mark on the guy, I step up behind him, grab a fistful of his hair, and yank backward until he's looking up at the darkening sky. "Let the lady go," I growl.

Smarmy Asshole drops Birdie's wrist, and I spin him away from her, placing my much bigger body between them. If this dick starts swinging, I want to be his only target.

I shouldn't have worried. The guy beats feet as soon as I let him go. Seeing him race down the sidewalk confirms him as a threat, making me glad I could prevent god-knows-what from going down.

Meanwhile, Birdie is practically vibrating behind me, either shaken up or pissed at the guy. A conversation is needed between us, but I need a moment to calm down before I deal with her. While breathing deeply, I watch the man jump in his flashy sports car and speed off. Only then do I feel grounded enough to face Birdie.

What the fuck?

Birdie's gone.

There's no way she could have snuck past me—except that she did. Spinning in a full circle, I look up and down both sides of the street, but she's not there. Next, I turn and sprint through the garden, spotting her walking toward her car parked on the road behind it. "Birdie, wait!"

She flinches, and her shoulders fall. Birdie turns as I catch up to her, but she doesn't speak. "Are you ok? What the hell was that?"

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

With a wave of her trembling hand, she says, “A mistake. One that I won’t be repeating.”

Birdie then pivots and steps toward her car. Worried by her actions and unsatisfied with her answer, I reach for Birdie’s arm to stop her. An image of my father grabbing my mother pops into my head, and I immediately drop Birdie’s arm as if it were a live wire. I’m frozen, not believing that I just put my hand on a woman.

Birdie takes the opportunity to slip away, and I’m too afraid of myself to stop her a second time.

Birdie

Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit!

Shaking fingers struggle to hit the start button after I’ve escaped safely to my car. What have I done? My heart races at all the ways tonight went wrong. First off, me showing up at all. That was a whole lot of stupid.

And, of course, my bad decision had to be combined with bad luck. Never at any time did I ever consider the possibility that I could run into someone I know during one of these sting operations. Now that I have, I fear my whole world is about to come crashing down around me.

I lean against the headrest and blow out an unsteady breath. The cold air blowing from the vents chills my skin, which is already experiencing cold sweats. Using my sleeve, I wipe my forehead and then rub my clammy hands over my leggings.

I fumble to turn on the heat and attempt to settle my nerves with logic. Difficult, but not because of my run-in with Bastien. I'm now wondering what might have happened if he hadn't been there.

"Stop it, Birdie." You were miked up and had cameras everywhere. Though foot traffic was light, you were in a prominent location in a public place. The guy grabbed you out of anger, but there's no way he would have made it out of the area with you. Weeks of work were wrapped up with a successful sting tonight. You should feel proud.

I present some valid points. While I know all this to be true, it doesn't stop my insides from quaking. Sure, I got what I needed from the target, but not without having the cripes scared out of me.

Despite my many precautions and the likelihood of a safe outcome, I'm glad Bastien showed up when he did—correction, pretended to leave and secretly hung around like he did. Deep down, I admit that Bastien chasing Predator Tom away was much safer than facing the extremely slim chance that Tom carried a weapon and planned to use it.

The problem is that it was Bastien that scared that guy off. Maybe not so much that he was the one who came to my rescue but that it was someone I work with. Not good. Someone like Bastien will expect an explanation. I count myself lucky that he let me leave.

If Sadie had been the one to happen by, I wouldn't have gotten out of there at all. I don't think Bastien planned to let me leave without being deposed, so I count myself lucky. I don't understand why Bastien suddenly checked out, but I wasn't going to wait around for him to recover. Not that I don't fully expect to be bitten in the ass about it later. Now that I think about it, preparing for that eventual confrontation is scarier than squaring off against Tom.

The shaking in my hands is finally gone, and not seeing Bastien anywhere around, I think it's safe to leave. Sighing, I back out of my parking spot and point my car toward home.

Before I've even left the retail district, I'm playing armchair quarterback to my own game plan. God, I feel like an idiot. And lucky. Meeting the mark without police or any other kind of backup was the worst kind of stupid. The only thing dumber was revealing the sting to Tom to try and scare him off when he wouldn't accept that the fifteen-year-old had changed her mind.

If I'm ever in a solo sting operation again, I'll stay in character and be better prepared with a full-size taser. Scratch that. No more solo stings again. Ever. After tonight, I never want to imagine being close enough to a target to need a stun gun. The bruising on my arm from Tom's grip seals that deal. Just thinking about him touching me gives me the heebie-jeebies.

I crank my car's heat to the max to ward off the chill and check the mirror before turning at the next intersection. Great. I have a tail. I guess Bastien recovered from his stupor and decided to follow me home. That likely means he's changed his mind about letting me off the hook.

After pulling into my driveway, I stall as long as possible by cleaning up discarded receipts and gum wrappers in my door bin. If I'm going to get the lecture I expect, I'll need the extra time to brace for the impact.

The dark sedan rolls past my house without stopping, and I breathe a sigh of relief. He apparently just wanted to be sure I got home okay. I'm sure I'll catch hell later, but at least I have time to come up with an acceptable explanation.

I shove the car door open, the wind from an approaching storm providing a bit of resistance. The gusty breeze blowing since yesterday finally brings with it the smell

of rain. The scent fills my lungs as I step out of the car and walk to my door.

Usually, I'd stop and soak it all in, but a shiver works its way down my spine, chasing me inside. I've always enjoyed the subtle changes in the weather, but instead of questioning why, I chalk it up to this weird night and shake it off.

My tension fades only slightly once I'm secured inside my home. Hoping it will help, I take the time to prepare a cup of warm lavender milk before sitting at my desk. The subtle fragrance wraps around me like a blanket as warmth seeps into my fingertips from the heated mug.

A few sips of the calming drink and several deep breaths go a long way to settling my frayed nerves. The wind still whips outside, but I'm not bothered by the sound.

I power on my computer now that I'm on a more even keel. All of tonight's footage gets uploaded and sent to Detective Cooper, hoping he'll get Predator Tom off the streets quickly. I don't expect Cooper's reaction to my meeting Tom alone to be any better than Bastien's, but whatever. It's too late to worry about that now.

With the case closed on my end, I take the time to archive the files and head to bed early. I've not gotten a lot of sleep lately, and tonight's sting should quiet the demons for a few days, at least.

I sigh long and loud because I'm still awake when my dick clock ticks past ten p.m. However, it's not thoughts of what happened to Meals keeping me up this time. I can't stop thinking about Bastien and what caused him to freak out and freeze up like he did.

Undoubtedly, our brief encounter caused him to experience a wide range of intense emotions. His facial expressions cycled through surprise, confusion, protectiveness, and definitely anger. Bastien wasn't angry at me at any point. His rage was directed

at the man who put his hands on me.

It's no wonder the night left Bastien in such a mess. I'd probably have the same reaction and suspicious thoughts if I saw Sadie out on the street in a dress and heels. What I don't get is what happened once it was all over. Instead of giving me the third degree, Bastien shut down completely. The man looked as lost as he did the day I found him with bloody knuckles.

I wonder again what chased him into the woods that day, what had him so outraged that he'd risk injury to purge his fury. With Bastien not being the talkative type, I'm sure he isn't the feelings-sharing type either and probably wouldn't have answered if I'd asked.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

Maybe he'll do me the same favor since I didn't try to needle the information from him back then. It's not like I see him all the time at work, anyway. And given that I plan on avoiding the areas where the PMCs congregate for the near future, I can practically guarantee I won't see him.

The plan sucks more than I'd like to admit, but it can't be helped. My hidden life needs to remain hidden if I don't want to lose everything I've worked so hard to build. I like this life of mine and plan to keep it.

I eventually nod off, thinking about Bastien's outstanding body, and morning soon comes, bringing a surprising energy despite my odd night. A check outside my window shows a clear sky, meaning the slow-moving storm finally pushed on through the early morning hours. The calm weather means I can get back to my usual morning run that I missed out on yesterday.

Dressing in my favorite leggings and runners, I gather my work clothes and skip over the walkway puddles to reach my car. Traffic is light this early morning, and within ten minutes, I'm biting into a bagel from my favorite coffee shop. I reach the Knot Corporation compound just as the sun clears the treetops.

The air is fresh and cool after the night's storm, with just a slight leftover breeze stirring the infant leaves on the trees. Some light stretching warms up my muscles, and I set off along the path, still thinking about Bastien's glitch last night. Whatever his malfunction, he rebooted himself enough to follow me home but not enough to stop and ask the questions burning in his eyes.

What's that, Birdie? Disappointment? "Shut up," I grumble to myself.

After my outburst, the only sounds in the woods are the birds and the gravel squishing with each step on the water-logged trail surface. Even the demons are quiet today. They should be. I earned at least a few hours of silence after last night. Peace won't last long, I've learned, but I plan to enjoy it as long as I've got it.

Despite the challenging and sometimes slippery terrain, my three-lap circuit is completed in good time. I didn't pass anyone on the course, and thankfully, I reached the women's locker room unseen.

I don't have a problem with any of the personnel here, but I'm awkward on a good day. Rattled Birdie is a guaranteed embarrassment, a scenario I was extremely fortunate to avoid last night. There was no way my pride would have survived a showdown with Bastien right after he had to save my ass.

While showering and getting dressed, I somehow force my thoughts away from Bastien and focus on tasks related to my day job. Three teams are set to deploy within the next two weeks, and every day, it seems I have new consultation requests from various branches of law enforcement.

My recon is done for the PMC deployments, so I'll jump on the consultation requests that came in yesterday, assigning priorities once I figure out what each department wants. More than likely, I'll probably begin with whichever contract has an in-person briefing, anything to delay Bastien's inevitable interrogation.

If none allow me the chance to slink away from Knot Corp, I'll remain hidden in my office all day, worrying about Bastien darkening my door, demanding answers.

I blow a stray hair out of my face and push my door open after only having to greet the executive receptionist. Pushing my door closed behind me, I let my fake smile fade. I don't immediately push off the door, instead remaining to study the pictures on my wall. The collection of stills feature Knot operatives sharing candy bars with

foreign children, military group shots, our people rendering aid to troops, and an explosion caught at just the right moment. I lean my head against the door and sigh. Those situations are what legitimate concerns look like. You need to get over yourself.

No matter how hairy things got last night, I still went to bed, safe and sound in my own home, while many of our operatives are currently in a war zone. The reality check focuses me, and I walk to my desk to get started.

Dropping into my cushy executive chair, I let my thoughts go to our people, risking their lives to protect servicemen and women in the most dangerous parts of the world. The nature of being a private military contractor is inherently dangerous. Though I'm partly responsible for paramilitary logistics and support, most of my job doesn't involve working through onsite, life-or-death situations. Our field operatives face those far too often, and securing an international call to me isn't exactly practical when seconds count. Except for rare occasions, contractors must rely on their own knowledge and experience to get out of hairy situations.

My job is risk assessment and reduction. To do this, I perform thorough background checks on every contract before deployment, checking for pitfalls, lining up evac, and arranging field support from our international outfitters. When my job is done well, many potential problems are mitigated before our contractors' feet hit the ground.

Occasionally, I'm needed for rescue situations that no one saw coming, foreign and domestic. Whether routine or critical, I always take my job seriously, knowing that a screw-up on my end could put our people at risk.

Once my system is up, I open my email, which shows nothing pressing. Thank god. My plate is already full. I won't learn about any new DOJ assignments until my regular morning meeting with Knot. Somebody else I wish I could avoid today. His particular brand of ESP can read people like they've got ticker tape coming out of

their ears. It's eerie.

It's also time for another cup of coffee. I'll be buzzing during my meeting, but at least then, I'll have an excuse for being antsy. I peer out of my door before darting to the executive lounge, only releasing my held breath once I'm inside. The room is thankfully empty.

I set up the single-serve coffee maker, and the machine bubbles and hisses as it brews, but my mind is a mile away. I'm so distracted that halfway through the process, I can't remember what I added and didn't.

The first sip clues me into the sad fact that I screwed up completely. I scrunch my face and wonder what the hell I did wrong before quickly pouring the nasty brew down the sink. Before my second try, I shake the cobwebs from my head and take a deep breath. Fortunately, I get it right this time and give myself a little pep talk before leaving the lounge. Spoiler alert, it wasn't a very nice one.

Armed with fresh caffeine, I walk toward my office in the executive wing again, determined to be completely chill for my standing appointment with Knot. Except for the caffeine buzz.

I round the last corner before reaching my door and freeze at the sight in the hallway, nearly spilling my coffee. Shit! Shit! Shit!

Bastien, whom I've never seen on this floor, stands right outside my office. He hasn't noticed me yet, so I execute a quick turn and dart back around the corner. There's no way to sneak past him to reach Knot's office, so my only options are to hide and wait him out or face him.

There's no question as to why Bastien is here. He finally decided to grill me about last night. There could be no other explanation. All of our other interactions have

been in the war room for official briefings. Except for that little chance encounter in the woods. Remember? That day when you cleaned blood spatter off his naked, muscled chest?

The mental picture stirs me, and recalling how his muscles flexed under my fingertips makes me shiver. Criminy, Bird. Now is soooo not the time. Shaking off the effects of the memory, I retreat toward the lounge, but I stop three steps into my escape.

Wait a minute. I'm no coward. Besides, Bastien's not my father or even my boss. I don't answer to him. The worst thing he can do is... tell Knot. Shit. I need to handle this and do it fast.

I square my shoulders and lift my chin. Gulping down the rest of my coffee, then coughing because it was a little hotter than was comfortable, I turn right back around and march to my office door.

Bastien looks up as I near, the intensity of his gaze causing my steps to falter. I recover quickly, even as he scans me from head to toe. The big man shoves off the door, moving way more gracefully than a man his size should be able. His black tactical pants and Knot t-shirt do nothing to mask his battle-earned muscles. Sigh.

Ignoring his deep-set dark eyes, clenched jaw, and arm veins that I should not find sexy, I shove through my office door and set my empty cup down. I know what's coming and take a fortifying breath before facing Bastien again. "How can I help you, Mr. Laurent?"

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

Bastien lifts a brow in response and crosses his arms. My knees wobble a little at the sight that probably makes his enemies run. “Last night. Who was he?”

Slow, lethal steps bring Bastien to my desk as he speaks. Trying to remain unaffected, I call up my best corporate voice. “Someone I won’t see again. Your intervention was admirable, if unnecessary, and concludes your involvement in the matter.”

The corner of his mouth lifts slightly, but briefly, before Bastien’s strong arms unfold. He leans over my desk, splaying his big hands on the blotter. “No more bullshit. Who was he, Birdie?”

My name coming from his mouth in that low growl vibrates my body, rendering me numb for a moment. His rumble timbre makes me wish for sinfully hot nights. Those dark eyes bore into mine, heating my skin in the most inconvenient way. Your timing still sucks, by the way.

I can’t help it. The man is two scoops of sex in a muscle cone drizzled with spankings and topped with please daddy sprinkles. And I’m the one melting.

Thankfully Bastien has no idea how he affects me. God help womankind if he ever uses his powers for seduction. He’d achieve world domination in about five minutes.

Bastien’s stare hardens the longer he waits for my response, and the heat I’d felt gives way to jitters. Having been Nerdy Birdie all my life, I’m unused to being the center of such laser focus and automatically revert to my natural protective instinct—snark. “I’ve already stated that I won’t ever see him again, so why is he any of your

concern?”

Bastien’s haunting eyes remain locked on mine, and he leans closer still. “Because I think you were doing something stupid. Or dangerous, which makes it stupid. I want to know which it is.”

My stomach leaps up into my throat. Well, crap. Busted. Though Bastien’s technically correct, I’m still pissed off at the insinuation that I could be involved in something shady. Again, he’s right, but damn. “Not that I’m admitting anything, but even if I was doing something you wouldn’t approve of, isn’t that my business alone?”

“It would be if I hadn’t watched that guy put his hands on you.”

Knot’s voice at the door draws my attention, but Bastien’s focus remains squarely on me. He also hasn’t moved to put some distance between us. “Who put his hands on Birdie?” my boss demands.

I nearly groan, knowing I’ll need to put a lid on this, and quick. “Bastien witnessed me having a slight disagreement with someone and is making a big deal out of it. The situation was handled and is over. And since it happened away from here and on my personal time, we’re not discussing it.”

My argument is weak. I know it, and so do they. Before the two can get over the shock of my abrupt, out-of-character response, I shoo the men out of my office and close the door. Though either one of them could, neither stopped me nor forced the door to remain open.

Nevertheless, I’m not stupid. A closed door isn’t going to make this go away. There’s blood in the water now. Even if Bastien lets this go, Knot won’t. All I’ve done is buy myself some time.

After dropping limply into my chair, I spare a glance at my watch. I've got thirty minutes to come up with a convincing story that I could sell to my dad since that's what Dillan Knot acts like sometimes.

Bastien

I don't know if I'm more surprised to be standing on the outside of a closed door or if Knot is. It's not a common occurrence for me and is probably a first for the boss. I do know that I don't have a valid excuse for loitering around Birdie's office after being kicked out. When I also lack sufficient motivation to walk away, Knot takes notice. "Something on your mind, Laurent?"

For a moment, I consider saying something to the protective CEO. After all, my only concern is for Birdie's safety. Bullshit. You think she's guilty as fuck and are covering her ass because you want her.

My internal debate lasts a second or two but is quickly cut off because I refuse to entertain romantic thoughts about Birdie. Ultimately, I decide to keep things to myself. If I talk to anyone about Birdie, it'll be Sadie. Everyone here knows they're close. I'll learn what I need to from the former Marine Raider without jeopardizing Birdie's career in case I'm wrong.

I answer my boss in the negative and spin away from the executive offices. I shouldn't have come to begin with. What Birdie does in her spare time is none of my business. She's not, nor will she ever be, my problem, my responsibility, or my woman, not that my stupid-ass brain can wrap itself around that reality.

I can't get the woman out of my head. It doesn't matter where I am or what I'm doing. Birdie's scent follows me like a phantom. Tortures me. Worse than that, sometimes, when I'm lying in bed, I'd swear I feel her fingertips lightly grazing my skin again.

And that's how I know I won't just turn a blind eye to whatever Birdie's into. I just have to stay disciplined enough to treat the situation like the one with Aaron several months ago. Except that you presumed Aaron to be innocent. You'd rather think Birdie guilty of something nefarious than imagine her being into kinky shit with another man.

Heading downstairs, I pick up the pace, realizing I'm going to be late for training with Spatch. Shit. There are many ways an operative's day can get fucked up. One of the worst is irritating the hardass trainer.

After a quick stop in the locker room to change, I rush into the training room with barely a minute to spare. Bodies are warming up all over the place when I walk onto the sparring floor. I scan the room looking for Sadie and find her in the middle, getting set to spar with another crew leader. Passing my own teammates already paired up, I approach Knot's second in command and motion for Cade to get lost.

The man clocks my expression and doesn't argue. He finds a new partner while Sadie studies me through narrowed eyes. Though curious, she doesn't ask what I want, instead dropping her weight and bracing her feet in a ready stance. I pop in my mouthguard and get set as well.

Muffled slightly by her own mouthguard, Sadie teases, "You look like someone has ordered you to give a lecture on expressing feelings."

I keep my voice low and thus the conversation private. "I want to talk to you about Birdie. What's she into?"

With wide eyes, Sadie tilts her head to study me to gauge if I'm being serious. Before she can speak, Spatch blows his whistle and commands the room to practice a particular takedown and escape. I volunteer to go first, and Sadie steps behind me, putting me in a headlock. In my ear, she presses, "What do you mean into? Like men

or women?”

Between the mouthguard and her choke hold, I can't answer. I duck and spin, loosening Sadie's grip, and flip her onto her back. “No, that's not what I mean.”

The two of us reset so that I'm the attacker. “What does she do when she's not here?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

With a grunt, Sadie drops all her weight, breaks out of the hold, and spins, stopping shy of a counterstrike to my kidney. Afterward, she holds her ready position and studies my face before responding. “Nothing out of the ordinary that I’ve ever seen. Why are you asking?”

I almost sag in relief, but then disgust tightens my gut again. My earlier self-accusation was right. I would rather imagine Birdie doing something illegal than think of her taking another man’s dick. Being intentionally vague, I answer, “She could be having trouble with a man—or men,” I add, grumbling.

Sadie glares as though I’ve grown a second head. Spatch barks at someone on the gym’s other side, and Sadie snaps out of it, shaking her head. “I don’t think so. Look, I’m probably breaking some girl code by discussing this with you, but if Birdie has a man, she’s doing a good job keeping him a secret. At least with me, she doesn’t hold back when it comes to the men she’s dating.”

“Bordel de merde,” I murmur, invoking my mother’s favorite swear words. Aside from the whispered curse, my reaction must have been as visible as it was visceral. Sadie grins in satisfaction. With a bit of sass and a wink, she says, “Although there hasn’t been one in a while. Are you asking for you or as a friend.”

“C’est des conneries,” my mother’s second favorite curse. Talking to Sadie was a mistake, and now, I’m busted. “Neither. Both. Shit.”

Sadie’s grin widens. “Well, I’ll be damned. The grumpiest man alive and the sweetest human to ever walk the face of the earth.”

At the look in my eyes, her humor quickly dries up. “What’s going on, Bash?” she demands.

“I don’t know,” I admit with a sigh. “A bad feeling, mostly.”

Her brows dip lower, and Sadie lifts out of her ready stance. “Bad feeling about what? I didn’t know you two regularly crossed paths outside the war room.”

“We don’t. I was just in the right place at the right time to see the wrong thing. Birdie was hanging out alone, dressed like a kid, and waiting to meet a man near my house. She chased me off before he arrived, and within seconds of him showing up, she pissed him off, and he got physical.”

Sadie looks to the floor, deep in thought. Her eyes have narrowed to angry slits when she lifts her face again. “I hope you’re not suggesting she’s dealing or tricking. Or that I knew about it and did nothing.”

“Hell no,” I say with my hands up in surrender. Dropping them in defeat, I deflate and confess, “I don’t know what I’m saying.”

“What is it you’re expecting from me?” Sadie asks.

The question gives me pause, but thankfully, Spatch hasn’t noticed my lack of focus yet. “Look. All I know is that something is off with Birdie, and you know her better than anyone.”

Spatch blows his whistle again and shouts a new command, indicating our next move. I wrap my hands around Sadie’s throat and apply moderate pressure in response. My mind, however, returns to last night and visualizes that bastard’s face. What did you want with Birdie, asshole?

Sadie breaks out of my hold and attacks. Muscle memory takes over where my mind failed to activate, but the instinctual reaction happens a split second too late. I'm on my back before I know it, with Sadie leaning over me, breathing hard.

Her neck is red, suggesting I held her throat a little too tight. Aaron's going to have something to say about that. Sadie massages her neck where my thumbprint is visible. "I can't imagine Birdie being into anything bad, with a man or otherwise. At the same time, I've never known your instincts to be wrong. I'll talk to Birdie. Unless you're planning to?" she asks suggestively.

"No. You go ahead. Like I said, I'm just looking out for a teammate."

Sadie nods and then lunges for my throat, giving me a taste of what I gave her.

Birdie

Eight fifteen rolls around, and all my reports and updates are ready for my weekly meeting with the CEO of Knot Corporation. His position within the company has nothing to do with why I'm pacing the floor in front of my desk. The nervous laps have everything to do with me failing to come up with a decent story to explain last night's events to my boss.

I wouldn't be worried, except that I'd swear Knot is telepathic. Or, at the minimum, is the best at reading people I've ever seen. Bastien may have developed a suspicion after witnessing last night's events, but in the same span of time, Knot could have written a book on his observations.

Thanks to Bastien, controlling my expressions and body language during this meeting is paramount. As much as I didn't need to run into Bash last night, I definitely don't need Knot digging around my personal life and finding my off-the-clock hobby.

At eight twenty-five, I take a deep breath and step through my door, armed with my custom tablet. You can do this, Birdie.

The lie doesn't help, so I opt for distraction instead. In my head, I review the Linux coding I modified to run on the device. Newsflash, it doesn't help during the twenty-foot walk from my office to the CEO's.

Knot's door stands wide open, depriving me of the last second I needed to steel myself before entering his office. He's on the phone, his authoritative instructions for the caller, giving me an excuse not to make eye contact. I cross the gleaming floor and slip into one of the guest chairs as he wraps up the call.

Without looking up, Knot reaches for a small stack of papers to his right. "I've got two more DOJ requests for your services. If this trend continues, I'll have to clone you."

I laugh nervously but bite my lip to stop the sound. My foot taps the floor at the speed of a Sterling engine, so I uncross my legs and tuck my feet under the chair. I finally glance at the papers as my boss lifts his dark brown eyes, the same color as his shaved head.

He studies my face briefly but then barrels ahead into logistics for an upcoming support contract. Half an hour later, we've covered personnel, ongoing DOJ projects, and surveillance updates on our domestic work.

"I guess that's it, then," Knot says with a tap of his pen after wrapping up the last topic.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

My body sags into the chair after being twitchy throughout the whole meeting. “Um. Okay.”

The relief of not being grilled has left me feeling a little lightheaded. I was sure with each passing second, the next thing to come out of Knot’s mouth would be to ask what Bastien was talking about. Despite my best effort to be emotionally neutral, I’ve been increasingly nervous, and I know my boss noticed. What I don’t get is that he hasn’t tried to squeeze an explanation from me.

That’s not to say Knot is the controlling type. He’s always been sort of a father figure to me, having recruited me to Virginia at the ripe old age of 21. He was a little overprotective when I first came on board, something my parents appreciated.

Come to think of it, Knot’s lack of curiosity is... well, curious. Eying my tablet and the stack of papers—because the government hasn’t graduated to our digital level of operating—I’m slow to gather my things before standing. As I rise from the chair, a last look at Knot finds him studying me again. His head tilts to the side, and he asks, “Something on your mind?”

“You, ah, you haven’t asked.”

Knot leans back in his chair and crosses his massive arms. “I assume if there were anything to tell, you’d volunteer the information.”

“Oh,” is the only reply I can manage.

My feet still don’t move, and Knot leans forward again, placing his elbows on his

desk. “Birdie, you should know that I see you in the same light as my daughters. Even so, you’re wiser beyond your twenty-seven years. Though we’re all capable of making bad decisions, I don’t see you running headlong into trouble. Still, I hope you know that I’m only a phone call away if trouble finds you.”

Swallowing down the lump in my throat, I answer softly, “I do, sir.”

“Good, then get out of here. You’ve got work to do,” he says.

“Yes, sir.”

I leave Knot’s office, somewhat in a daze. I’ve always respected the man for giving me a shot when everyone else took me for a criminal. Not only that, but Knot has always cared about those who work for him. Until today, I had no idea that he considered me family.

Returning to my office, I don’t notice my visitor until I hear the crackle of a candy wrapper. I glance at my guest chairs to see Sadie peeling the paper off a truffle from my nearly empty candy bowl.

Unfortunately, my defenses are down, and she reads me almost as well as Knot can. Seeing her in my office, I can’t help but sigh. “You should refill your candy,” she says with a smack of her lips.

Setting my stuff down, I drop into my chair and reach for the black bag of truffles to refill the bowl. “You’re a little early for a sugar fix.”

Sadie scrunches her nose. “I thought these didn’t have any sugar in them? They’re what? Black chocolate or something. Bitter as hell.”

“And yet, you keep emptying the bowl,” I tease.

Sadie rolls her eyes. “Anyway, Bash wanted me to find out if you’re dealing drugs or selling yourself for sex.”

My best friend’s straightforwardness takes me by surprise, making me laugh. It’s a good thing, too. Subtlety would have been disastrous. Sadie knows me too damned well for me to act my way out of the question. “Why the hell would he think I’m doing either?”

Sadie shrugs. “I don’t know. He says he had to rescue you from some angry, gropy dick last night.”

It’s my turn for a dramatic eye roll. “Come on, Sadie. Women have to deal with gropy dicks all the time. Well, except you. You naturally let off a don’t-fuck-with-me vibe when assholes are near.”

Her expression is thoughtful, and she nods her head from side to side a few times, weighing my statement. “True but stop changing the subject. Who was this guy?”

Damn, you, Bastien. “Just a guy I met online. He creeped me out in person, so I made an excuse to bail. The guy didn’t like it, and Bastien just happened to be there and chased him off before I could tase his ass.”

Sadie tilts her head and pins me with a studious glare. It looks like she’s trying to read my mind. A moment later, she decides, “I don’t like it. Try again.”

I shrug my shoulders. “Like it or not, every word I said is the truth.”

Sadie’s suspicious scowl doesn’t ease up. The more time passes, the harder it is to keep from fidgeting in my seat. The tension stretches out a bit longer before Sadie relaxes and nods. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay. I can’t say I’m a fan of online dating, but my track record with the in-person variety isn’t exactly a confidence builder. All I ask is that you add a little strength and defense training to your running schedule. You should be able to do whatever ass-kicking is needed whenever it’s needed instead of having to be rescued.”

“Never said I needed to be rescued,” I mumble.

“What was that? I didn’t hear you.”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

I clear my throat and say, “After last night, I absolutely agree. I’ll get with Spatch to develop a training regimen. Good enough?”

Sadie hops up and grabs another chocolate. “I don’t know. Ask Bash,” she says with a wink.

I shake my head as she walks out, flinging her auburn ponytail behind her. Dodged a bullet right there. Yep. My phone starts ringing before I finish the thought, and I get the feeling I just jinxed myself again. The name of the caller proves my theory.

A groggy voice rings out before I get a word out. “Dammit, Crenshaw. I thought I told you to stand down.”

I jump out of my chair to shut the door, not wanting any passersby to hear this. “It was too late, Detective. He’d already agreed to the meet-up. If I had backed out, I would have lost this guy.”

“I don’t care!” Detective Cooper growls, though whatever medication he’s on has dulled some of his bite. “One asshole isn’t worth putting yourself at risk. Especially when there are hundreds more lined up right behind him.”

I know he’s right, but my eyes water thinking about Amelia. I’d give anything for there to have been someone to stop her killer. “You’re wrong, Detective. If I saved one child, it was damn well worth it.”

The line goes silent after my outburst. When Cooper speaks again, the anger has leached from his voice. “Birdie, I know how you feel. God, believe me, I know. But

you've got to recognize something very important here. Only big city police forces have enough resources and manpower to dedicate teams for preventing these crimes. God knows small towns have no shortage of monsters and only a precious few people hunting these bastards before they create victims. If no one's out there stopping these predators, they can do whatever they want. Then, all the police can do is support the victims. And you know as well as I do that some cops don't care or simply don't have the resources. If you start taking these guys down on your own, you might end up disappearing one day. Who could you help then?"

Cooper doesn't know how right he is, and I'll never forget. Despite all my protective measures, I couldn't help the shudder of panic when Tom grabbed my wrist. Nor could I temper my relief when I recognized Bastien's angry roar. He rushed out of nowhere, forcing Tom to let me go and placing me behind his broad back.

I've never had anyone stand up for me like that. I also can't say I've ever needed it before, either. Shoving up my sleeve, I study my bruised wrist and decide not to share details of the frightening encounter with Cooper. It would not help the situation. I do stretch the truth a little to get him to calm down. "I wasn't alone."

Ok, so Bash had been there by chance, but even without him, I had way too many security measures in place to be in any real danger, no matter how freaked out I was. The lie slides too easily off my tongue. "A former SEAL was with me."

Like a kid, I actually cross my fingers, hoping he bought it. Cooper doesn't respond right away, prompting nervous lips to flap again. "Don't worry, Coop. I'm not going rogue on you, but I won't miss an opportunity like that. You may not have been able to pick this guy up last night, but he knows he's exposed. He won't touch anyone, and if he tries to run, I can track him."

Another pause and then, "You had backup?"

Though I'm not technically lying, I keep my fingers crossed. "A licensed private military contractor was with me before, during, and after the altercation."

Cooper huffs and grumbles, "I'm going back to bed."

"Take care, Coop."

The call disconnects, and I drop my head into my hands. I've lied to four people this morning, via omission or otherwise. Four people.

Hell of a way to start the day, Birdie.

Bastien

"Damn, man, who pissed you off?"

Sweat drips down my face as I force the bar back up, holding ten pounds less than my max. That's the most I'll risk without using a spotter. "Nobody," I grunt in response.

"Let me guess. You're just giving every piece of equipment in this gym a thorough safety testing, right?"

Cade sits on the bench across from me as I rack the bar and sit up. He's dressed in civilian clothes, ready to head out at the end of another workday. "What do you want, Cade?"

Used to my brusque demeanor, Cade doesn't ruffle at my angry tone. "Nothing. Just heard somebody clanging around in here and thought I'd check it out."

Swiping a towel across my face, I say, "Nothing to check out. Just working on my figure."

“Not going there,” he laughs before asking what he really wants to know. “So, what was with you this morning? I was looking forward to kicking Sadie’s ass for that bloody nose she gave me last week.”

Glancing outside, I look for Birdie’s car to be sure she hasn’t left yet. It’s still there, so I face Cade again. “Should have kept your hands up.”

“That’s what she said,” Cade mocks in his awful Michael Scott voice.

Movement outside the window catches my eye, the appearance of Birdie signaling it’s time to go. I jump off the bench and shake out my arms. “I’m out. See you tomorrow.”

Cade grips his chin in one hand and muses, “Hmm. Urgent need to spar with Sadie, and now you’re on two-a-days?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

“Yep,” I answer, not giving his curiosity anything to munch on.

Leaving Cade wondering, I sprint from the gym to the rear hallway exit. From there, I watch Birdie reach her car, ready to jump in mine to follow her. My plan changes when she grabs a duffle bag from the trunk and heads back inside.

On a hunch, I race to the training floor to wait. If Birdie doesn’t show soon, I’ll try the gym, hoping Cade has split. If it turns out that Birdie is meeting someone, I’ll back off and try again later.

At three minutes on the dot, Birdie walks into the training room dressed in Mickey Mouse leggings and a t-shirt. She looks a little intimidated and a lot lost. After a bit of deliberation, she approaches one of the punching bags tentatively and takes a few swings. She’s never done this before.

I know why she’s doing it now. Last night, whatever was going on, must have scared her. That’s a good sign, at least. She’s not used to dealing with assholes like the prick that grabbed her. So, Birdie’s either hit a string of bad luck, or whatever she’s into is new. Either way, she won’t cause much damage with the blows she’s dealing to that bag.

This begs the question, if it’s training Birdie wants, why isn’t she asking for it? She could easily get Spatch or Sadie to work with her, but she obviously hasn’t asked. It can’t be because she’s shy. Though she is, Birdie has known these people for years. Besides, at my most monstrous, she found me in the woods and didn’t hesitate to manhandle me to her car so that she could fix my bloody wounds.

My guess is she won't ask because Birdie is into something she's trying to keep hidden, something she managed to keep from Sadie. I plan to figure out what it is before she gets herself killed. And I have an in right now.

I step through the door and purposefully sneak up on Birdie. I know the woman doesn't have any military training, but damn. I've gotten to within four feet of her, and she still hasn't noticed. Risking a couple more steps, I lean in, calling her name sharply.

Birdie yelps and rounds on me, swinging her fist as she does. Grabbing her wrist and subduing her is too easy. Her eyes are feral at first, and her jaw grinds once she realizes who's got her. "What the hell, Bash?"

I let her go quickly, and she begins pacing in a circle with her hand over her heart. "Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"

"Your form needs work," I say by way of an answer.

Birdie's jaw drops, but then her arms cross, and she juts out a hip with a bit of flair. "There is nothing wrong with my body."

Her words and her actions draw my eyes over the length of her, and I have to say that I agree. The flush of her cheeks in this tantrum makes me wonder if she turns the same color after an orgasm. The business clothes she always wears, even the oversized sweatshirt last night, hide a luscious body. Shapely legs flare at the hips just right. Her cropped Minnie shirt teases a sliver of a soft waist. And you're staring, you idiot.

Overall, I'd say her body is perfect. Doing so with actual words would not be a wise move. Instead, I shake my head and drop into a proper fighting stance, gesturing with my eyes that this is what I'm talking about.

After a moment, I return to rest position and demonstrate. “Feet shoulder width apart. Slide your dominant foot straight back. You don’t want your feet to be aligned, or a surprise attacker could easily knock you down from the side.”

Birdie’s angry, suspicious posture gradually relaxes, but not to the point of being an eager participant. “Thanks for the lesson. Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

“No. My plans are working out pretty much like I hoped.”

The attitude and defensiveness return in full force. “What exactly does that mean?”

“I volunteered to be your bodyguard.”

“You what?!” Shock and disgust distort her pretty face before anger settles in once again. Damn. I wouldn’t have thought my presence would be so abhorrent. “To whom did you volunteer and why?” she demands. Birdie’s hands fly as she speaks, making her breasts dance in workout clothes that weren’t made to handle such ample endowments.

It’s a struggle to remain focused on her face because Birdie has brought her whole body into the argument. “To no one but myself. The why is because that asshole may decide he doesn’t want to leave things the way they went down last night. I also figure you feel the same way, or else you wouldn’t be here.”

“Pfft. For all you know, I work out here every day,” she fires back.

I chuckle and shake my head. “There’s no way. Anyone training here for more than five minutes wouldn’t still be that bad.”

Birdie stutters and stammers at the insult. “Fine. You happened to catch me working off some steam at the end of a rough day, some of which was your fault.”

She advances on me, poking a finger into my chest. “By the way, where do you get off insinuating to Sadie that I’m a prostitute or dealing drugs?”

“I didn’t. All I told Sadie was that something seemed off. Since she didn’t come back with any revelations after her talk with you, I figured either you gave a convincing act to satisfy her or there really is nothing going on. In either case, I thought it would be a good idea to—”

“What? Spy on me?”

“No. Like I said, in case that guy decided to try whatever he was trying again. And since you’re here, I know you’re worried about the same thing.”

Birdie rolls her eyes, but there’s no missing the fear she’s trying so hard to hide. “That guy rattled me, sure. Who wouldn’t feel that way after meeting a guy that turns out to be a total creep?”

“A well-trained somebody that can kick the creep’s ass.”

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

“Exactly. And that’s the reason I made all these grand plans to muscle up and become a ninja. All heat-of-the-moment, emotional statements. I’ll punch a bag a few times, feel better about myself, and forget the whole thing.”

Uncrossing my arms, I lift a hand to my chin. “So, you wouldn’t be interested if I offered to give you some self-defense lessons? Last night was an isolated event, so there’s no real need for you to learn to protect yourself, right?”

“Don’t be a smart ass, Bastien. Everyone should know basic defensive moves.”

Gotcha. “Then it’s settled. Three evenings a week. Right here.”

Birdie doesn’t cringe when she realizes I’ve backed her into a trap. That tells me she knew what was coming and allowed it to save face. Her next words confirm my theory. “Not that I’m agreeing to your generous demand, but tell me why you’re volunteering to train me again?”

Now, this, I wasn’t ready for. “I...uh... never thanked you.”

Birdie’s brows pinch together. “Thanked me? For what?”

“For helping me, bandaging my hands, and not giving me shit about being a caveman asshole.”

Her face softens, and then she laughs. Fucking laughs. I don’t understand her reaction, and it rubs. “What?!”

“Nothing,” she struggles to answer.

I cross my arms again and fix my eyes on her face, causing her to laugh again.

“I’m sorry. It’s just.... Have you met my friend Sadie? You know. Tall. Redhead. Kind of runs the place for Knot? Matter of fact, have you looked around much during... I don’t know... anytime you’ve been in the building?”

“Your point?” I grouse.

“Well, compared to Sadie and just about everybody else here, you’re the least caveman person in this company.”

I consider her explanation and grunt in response, unsure I accept her assessment.

“Except when you do that,” she adds with a chuckle.

At my scowl and raised brow, she waves me off and asks sarcastically, “So you’re going to teach me to kick ass, huh?”

Serious as a heart attack, I nod and say, “Not until you learn how to throw a decent punch.”

“Hey!” she yelps.

I lean down, getting in her face. “Don’t like it? Hit me.”

Birdie’s hands go right back to her hips instead of launching at my nose.

Eying the tape on the wall beyond her, I ignore Birdie’s silent tantrum and say, “I didn’t think so. Wait right here.”

I leave Birdie with her mouth hanging open, jog over to grab the tape, and return, taking one of Birdie's hands in mine. She jumps at my touch, making me wonder if she feels the same sizzle of awareness zinging up my arm. I won't lie. I expected to feel something but didn't think it could be stronger than the first time she touched me.

For a moment, I forgot what it was I was planning to do. Birdie's hands are just as soft as I remember, which is why I needed the tape in the first place. I can't allow a punching bag to spoil her perfect skin.

I turn my hand palm up, rotating her arm as well. My big hand dwarfs Birdie's smaller one, but her fingers rest comfortably in my grip. Why she's letting me touch her, I'll never know. Her smooth skin is too soft to be handled by someone like me, someone who would eventually break her.

I drop Birdie's hand, and her brows knit together in concern. "Is there a problem, Rocky?" she teases.

Despite her playful tone, when I lift my eyes, Birdie's are slightly dilated and unfocused. She's just as affected as I am. Shit. Exactly what neither of us needs.

Needing to get my hands off her, I unroll a strip of the tape, tear it with my teeth, and rush through wrapping her knuckles. "Um. What's that for?" she asks.

"Remember my hands that day in the woods?"

"Of course," she whispers.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

“I’m protecting yours. I don’t ever want to see so much as a scratch on you.”

I finish the other and turn away, needing a few feet of separation to regain my center. Grabbing a shield target off the opposite wall, I pull in a deep breath and picture my mother’s face, my mother’s vacant, bruised face. Remember who you are, Bash. Birdie deserves better.

By the time I turn around again, I’m a different person, cold and emotionless, exactly what Birdie needs. Regardless of what I want, I’ve got one purpose, one motivation. My job is training Birdie to defend herself against anyone, including me.

Birdie

Bastien turns away, and my legs nearly give out like they’re made of jelly. There’s no way I just saw what I think I saw. The heat in that man’s gaze was volcanic. My hands tingle under the tape where he gently stroked my skin, which goes well with another part of my body reacting to Bastien’s heated stare.

If it were anyone else, I’d expect fake attraction as a ruse to get me to spill what he thinks are my secrets. Not with Bastien, though. Bastien can’t bullshit worth a... well, a shit. I don’t think he has a sarcastic bone in his body, not that I know him personally.

Drawing my eyes away from his ass as he crosses the room, I flex my fists in the tape and try to focus. Ruse or no ruse, I’ll have to take care to keep my eyes open and my mouth shut or risk giving myself away.

Bastien collects a stiff, black vinyl pillow-looking thing, and when he turns, I can immediately tell that something's changed. Whatever warmth had been in his eyes has cooled, and his jaw is set hard as granite. I mean, this is some real-life Jekyll and Hyde transformation happening. Bastien, for real, looks angry.

I had chickened out of talking to Spatch about training because, frankly, he scares the hell out of me. Now, Bastien stands two feet away, holding a padded target, but he may as well be holding a gun. The man looks scary as fuck.

"Hit me. With your dominant side," he barks.

I jump at his terse order but move quickly to obey, throwing what I think is my best right. Bastien reacts before I've even touched the vinyl. His eyes widen, and he pulls the target back sharply. I stumble forward when I hit nothing but air, barely managing to stay on my feet.

Bastien stares at me with an odd look on his face. He slowly straightens, mumbling under his breath as he tosses the target away. "Make a fist, Birdie."

Doing as he says, I tuck my thumb and hold out my hand. The Mr. Miyagi wannabe shakes his head, and taking my hand in his, he unwraps my fingers to free my thumb. "If you ever attack someone like that, you'll lose the fight all on your own with your first swing. It's hard to fight with a dislocated or broken thumb. Never, and I mean ever, tuck anything into your fist unless it's a set of brass knuckles."

A shiver works its way up my arm, either from his touch or his words. Bastien doesn't give me a chance to figure it out, as he's soon stepping back and dropping into a defensive stance. Holding up both hands, he orders, "Try again."

"What about the target? Won't I hurt your hand?"

Bastien almost smiles. “You can try.”

I set my feet to mimic the stance he showed me earlier and throw a right again, making sure my thumb is emancipated this time. My fist made contact with his palm, but Bastien didn’t act like he felt a thing.

Instead of a congratulatory pat on the back for stellar effort, Bastien grabs my left hand and lifts it toward my head. “Protect your head. Always. Now again.”

On and on this goes, with Bastien barking out corrections after every swing. Use your whole body. Don’t drop your left. You dropped your left again. Now, throw the left. Unwrap that thumb!

Half an hour later, I’m winded and covered in sweat. And maybe tempted to throw something heavy at Bastien’s head. “This is so much harder than running.”

Bastien shrugs and flexes his hands. “Just different conditioning. The two nights we’re not defense training, we should probably meet in the gym. If you put on a little muscle, your punches would do more damage.”

I tug my shirt down, attempting to cover my pudge. The pudge that no amount of jogging will get rid of. Wait a minute. We? He just said, we.

My face whirls around fast enough to threaten my neck, and I gawk at Bastien. Nobody’s life is so pathetic to give up five evenings a week for me. I open my mouth to say so, but Bastien rips off his damp shirt and drapes it over his shoulder. Oh, damn!

This—all those defined lines—is going to be a problem. I thoroughly scan from the ridges on his shoulders down to his happy trail. Yep. I’m in trouble.

My tongue trips all over itself and forgets what I had been planning to say. No problem, apparently. Bastien has his own script he's following. "Five o'clock tomorrow, Birdie."

After dropping his little bomb, Bastien marches out the training room door, leaving me staring at his impressive back with my mouth hanging open. What. The hell. Just happened here? Mind reeling, I wander from the gym to my car beneath the pink and orange sky. The man is insisting on training with me five days a week.

For a long time, I sit frozen and stare out the windshield as the color fades from the horizon. It doesn't make any sense. I rack my brain, trying to figure out why Bastien Laurent gives a shit. He's a good man. Always respectful. I just don't see him giving up his free time for anybody.

I know he's curious about what happened last night, but surely, he's not so over-the-top nosy that he'd volunteer for this ridiculous training schedule just to needle information out of me. Would he?

He seems to have accepted that I'm not working the streets, so I don't know why else he'd be worried about my free time. Unless... he thinks what went down last night is a sign that I'm working to take down this organization.

The idea is a bit of a stretch but not too farfetched when considering Knot Corp's recent history. Thanks to what happened in Iran, everyone here is now hypersensitive to traitors. No one would have thought one of our own would betray us, but it happened. Bastien might think not all of the cancer got excised.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

It's the only explanation that makes sense. I may have dedicated my life to keeping people safe, but Bastien doesn't know that. He doesn't know me at all. If I were in his shoes, I'd probably be just as suspicious.

I know I'm making assumptions about Bastien here, and that's not fair. You know what else isn't fair? Bastien's sudden interest in my welfare after assuming I must be a drug dealer or prostitute.

My hands finally reach for the wheel, only to see the tape still encasing my knuckles. I tear at the wrapping, taking out my anger on the protective strips. By the time it's all off, bits of tape are scattered all over the inside of my car.

I'm pissed off. Irrationally? Maybe. Time will tell if my anger is justified or if Bastien sincerely wanted to help. I think I know a way to speed up the process.

For now, I squeal out of the compound and head home to deal with things less frustrating—my demons.

Bastien

Less than five minutes after I walked in, I decided home was too quiet for my state of mind. In under ten, I'm showered and grabbing my hat and keys on the way back out the door.

Nearly all the color has leached from the sky by the time I reach the Virginia Beach area. Without conscious decision, I drive to a bar near Little Creek frequented by my former team and other SEALs. The place looks the same as I remember, like an

oversized bait shop.

Guided by the same neon lights, I walk through the doors for the first time since my discharge. The inside hasn't changed, either. It even smells the same: lemon polish, beer, and spice from the boiled peanuts the place is famous for.

"What the hell?" I hear yelled from across the crowded room. The familiar voice draws my eyes toward a table in the back, right where I would have expected to find some of my team in the past.

In the service, you never knew who would be congregating here at any given time. Tonight, it's Jackson, Chris "Fish" Hill, and Gunner "Devil" Murphy.

Fish grins, having been the one to spot me coming in, and Jackson nearly spits out his beer when I reach the group. I shake Fish and Devil's hands and accept a hug from my friend. The men with Jackson are part of the platoon he took over when he was promoted. I know them, but not as well as he does.

Jackson and I served together in a SEAL squad before he was tapped to become a platoon leader. "Never thought I'd see you in here again," he says.

I shrug and take the chair Devil indicates. "I wanted to see if O'Reilly was still keeping you guys in line or if having a kid mellowed him any."

The men around the table laugh, which is all the answer I need. "Guess not."

The table falls silent as I rest my elbows on the surface, and I wonder if I interrupted a sensitive conversation about The Teams. Even the possibility makes me wish I hadn't come. I feel like an imposter, out of place, no longer part of the brotherhood. Just before I decide to bail, Devil leans forward to ask, "How's life working for Knot?"

A waitress walks by then, and I order a beer, so I'm obligated to stay until it arrives, at least. After she walks away, I answer, "Knot's a good man. I think Sadie is tougher than he is, though."

The men all laugh. "Yeah, we know all about Sadie," Fish says. "We've worked with her a few times, her and Aaron."

Devil continues, "I heard about your man that was killed. Losing him the way you did had to be tough."

A solemn nod. "Life has been... different since then."

I glance at "Clothespin" Bennet but don't say anything more. We never had to face betrayal like that in the SEALs. Sure, the Navy has its share of assholes, but I never once had reason to question a SEAL's loyalty while deployed. Let's say we at Knot Corp are slightly more cautious these days.

Each man seated around the table has questions swirling in his eyes, but I didn't come here to talk about what happened in Iran.

Conversation slows again, and Fish stands, dropping money on the table. "Bash, it was good to see you again. I hate to run, but I've got to pick up my daughter from dance class."

Devil joins him, tipping his head before walking away.

"Alone at last," my friend says with a grin.

His smile soon fades, and he taps my beer with his. "I'm glad to see you, even more than I am surprised."

I lift my hat and run my hand through my hair. “I’m a little surprised myself.”

“So, what brings you out this way? You come to get details about our old squad meet-up? Maybe see a picture of the woman I plan to introduce you to?”

A bark of laughter spills from my lips. “The last thing I need is another woman to worry about.”

“Another?” he asks with wide eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

The waitress delivers my beer, saving me from having to answer right away. When she leaves, and I still don't volunteer any information, Jackson leans forward and presses. "Oh, come on. Don't leave me hanging. Last time we talked, there wasn't a woman anywhere on your radar."

"There still isn't. Not like you're thinking."

"Not sure I'm buying that," my friend sneers. "This is the first time I've heard you talk about any woman. She must be something special if her influence delivered you here."

Scoffing at the allegation, I picture Birdie. Special? Maybe. Trouble? Almost certainly. "What the woman is, is the Death of Peace of Mind."

Jackson laughs. "I believe you'd say that about Mother Theresa. Who is she? How did you meet? Anybody I would know?"

I cut my eyes away, not wanting to answer. By now, I'm wishing I hadn't spoken at all. In a rare moment of self-restraint, Jackson says, "Hey, you don't have to tell me. It's enough that you've decided to join the living."

Jackson tips his beer to me and takes a long swig. That's when I caught onto what he said. "Wait. No. I'm not getting involved with any woman, given my history."

"Oh, don't start that shit again." Jackson's mouth turns down, and he whisper-yells, "Look. I get it. Your dad was a supreme asshole. What he was has nothing to do with you except maybe your blood type."

I drain the rest of my beer and slam the empty bottle down on the worn tabletop. “Right. Nothing like him at all. I’m so laid back and accommodating. That’s why I’m still a SEAL.”

“Stop it,” Jackson growls. “You know damn well the only reason you’re out is that the Navy wanted to handle that bastard’s sexual harassment case quietly. Knocking his ass out—while warranted—was the opposite of quiet.”

“Look. I didn’t come up here to rehash past shit, be it from the Navy or at Knot Corp.” I prop my elbows on the table and swipe a hand over my jaw.

“Then why did you come?” Jackson asks.

“I—” My head falls forward, and my hands clasp behind my neck. “Hell if I know.”

I pull off my cap and sit back up. “Everything about this woman is messing with me. A few weeks ago, she did something nice for me, and purely by chance, I just saved her from some prick near my house.”

“Um... I’m not seeing the problem here unless the prick has some legal claim on her.”

“No. She didn’t know him, or so she says. The circumstances were sketchy, and she wouldn’t talk about it. Nobody knows what she was doing there. Not even her best friend. Bir... um... she had disguised her appearance, making me think something dark was going on.”

Now, it’s Jackson’s turn to look dumbfounded. “Let me get this straight. You have suspicions about the woman you’ve got the hots for.”

“Hey, I never said I—” I picture Birdie’s sweet, innocent face and nearly groan.

“Shit. Yes.”

Jackson clamps a hand on my shoulder. “Damn. What are you going to do?”

I turn my head to look his way and sigh. “I don’t know.”

We order another round and move to safer topics, and an hour later, I’m walking back into my house. I’m glad I went tonight. After the initial awkwardness, it felt good to be around sailors again. Several I knew came in, intermittently joining us, and I actually laughed a little. Of course, that’ll only make tomorrow suck worse when I don’t drive to Little Creek for work.

I said so to the group, and one of the guys pointed out that my ass could walk through those barroom doors whenever I wanted.

He was right. My career may be different, but I’m still here. My team may have changed, but that wasn’t the first time. I guess there’s no real reason to avoid memories of my SEAL career. Maybe I should meet up with the old team after all. It’ll finally get Jackson off my back, anyway.

Morning comes easy after a decent night’s sleep. Instead of having to talk myself up, I’m out of bed in a hurry, showered, and ready to go in record time. I arrive at work early and run into my team co-leader in the Knot Corp parking lot. Grinning to myself, I surprise Chelsea by speaking. “Morning, Yeet.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch her stop and rear back in shock. I almost smile but keep moving. Hurried steps catch up to me, and she stares at my profile as we walk.

Chelsea opens and closes her mouth several times before any words come out. “I want to kick your ass for calling me that, but I’m too shocked that you even spoke it.

Did you get laid last night or something?”

Chelsea looks down and counts on her fingers some imaginary criteria. “No, that can’t be it. That’s the first time you’ve done something so... ‘not-Bash’ in the past eighteen months. I have to assume you’ve gotten some ass at least a few times, which means something else has you feeling playful.”

Her choice of words halts me. “Playful?”

Chelsea tilts her head and rocks her hand in the universal symbol for iffy. “Playful for a rabid grizzly bear. So, what was it? Did you get a personality transplant?”

I cut my eyes to her and bite my tongue, making Chelsea grin. “There he is. There’s my friend that I lost for a minute.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

I shake my head and resume walking. “You need help.”

Chelsea follows along, her long, brown hair swinging in a ponytail—the smile on her face lighting up her blue eyes and pinching her cheeks.

We reach the lobby entrance and enter, separating to get ready for the day’s training. From then on, everyone I run across throughout the morning acts funny. I’m stared at, joked with, and spoken to more than I have the entire eighteen months prior. I assume Chelsea’s to blame and spend the next little while plotting my revenge.

After range training, I pass Aaron “Grim” Hosfeld, the second-most senior operative here after Sadie. He’s a good man and one that doesn’t irritate the shit out of me by talking too much.

Aaron isn’t the type of guy you hang around and gossip with, so I know Chelsea wouldn’t have gotten to him. I switch directions and call out to stop him. “Grim.”

He stops and waits for me to catch up. “What’s up, Laurent?”

“You notice anything unusual today? Everyone here seems to be high or something.”

Aaron snickers. “I hate to say it, but they’re only responding to you.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

He leans a shoulder against the wall and crosses his arms. “I don’t think anyone’s seen you smile once since you came on with us. And suddenly, you’ve been... not

grimacing all day.”

“Oh, come on. Not you, too.”

Aaron laughs. “Sorry, man, but it’s the truth. Some advice? Whatever you’re into, keep it up. It must be doing you some good.”

Aaron slaps me on the back and enters the locker room. My feet remain still while my brain processes this information. Training went as it usually does, but with me making a note of a few moves I want to teach Birdie. I scored my high average on the range, so nothing off there. I did wonder if Birdie had any experience shooting a gun and if she’d be open to learning.

At the mission briefing this afternoon, my team was alerted to an upcoming maritime security mission. During which, you wondered if you could find a suitable sub to handle Birdie’s training in your absence.

After a long minute and several deep breaths, I realize the common denominator. Birdie. The woman has been on my mind all day. Even now, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t looking forward to working with her this evening. Not good, man. Not good.

A look at my watch shows that I’ve got an hour before meeting Birdie in the gym. I think a long, hard run would do me some good. Abandoning the locker room, I turn for the exit and jog to the running trail.

Forty minutes later, sweaty and no more focused than before, I return to the locker room to shower before meeting with Birdie. My hair is still damp when I walk into the gym. Birdie’s not here yet, so I spend a few minutes setting out what we’ll use. Ten minutes after that, I’m still waiting.

Birdie’s job carries a lot of responsibilities, so I decide to give her five more minutes

before visiting her office.

At seven minutes, I exit the gym and glance out the windows on my way to the lobby. Her car's not there. She left. I don't believe it.

Did she forget? Did she change her mind? Did she leave for an illicit meeting of some sort? Pulling out my phone, I fire a message off to Sadie. Need Birdie's address. She stood me up for training today.

I pace in front of the same window for the next two minutes, waiting for her reply. You could just call her, you know? Sadie sent.

And have Birdie talk her way out of this? Hell no. Address, please. I send next.

Sadie's reply is Sigh, followed by the requested address. Having what I need to find Birdie, I jog to my truck and set out.

Birdie

A whispered curse falls from my lips as I approach my house. First, out of jealousy that Southern girls have this kind of view all the time. Hot guy in a white tee, gray sweats, and a ball cap leaning against a massive pickup truck.

The second reason is that it's Bastien standing next to my mailbox, looking kinda pissed. Well, game on, I sneer to myself.

I steer the car into my driveway and take my time getting out. The door swings open before I'm ready, Bastien having run out of patience. I turn to meet his glare, giving him one of my own. "What are you doing here?"

Give him credit. The man backs down, surprised by the venom in my voice. He

softens his tone and says, “You know why.”

I toss my hands up in a silly me gesture before rolling my eyes. “Right. I skipped out on your spy session.”

“You’re angry,” Bastien says, confused.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

“Damn right, I’m angry. You see me with a guy and assume I’m doing something wrong. Like it’s impossible to imagine that a man would have a legitimate interest in me, so I must be up to something.”

Bastien leans into the car, bringing his face to within inches of mine. “Cut the bullshit, Birdie. I’m sure your gorgeous ass has no trouble finding company when you want it.”

His words thrill and hurt at the same time. “Think so?” I challenge.

“I know so. What I can’t figure out is why you’d alter your appearance to catch a guy’s attention.”

Leaning forward, I lick my lips and whisper, “Maybe that’s my kink.”

Bastien’s jaw clenches, and his eyes drop to my mouth. I let him stare a moment and mouth, “Back the fuck up.” The big operative snaps out of his trance and scrambles away from my door. With the opening clear, I grab my stuff and step out of the car. “Well, this has been educational, but I’ve had enough. I am not a drug dealer, a hooker, or a traitor. What I do in my personal life is my own business and not subject to your approval. So, you can take your fake concern and your training sessions and shove it.”

I leave a stunned Bastien crouched on my driveway and turn for my front door. At the steps, I spin around and deliver my last blow. “Oh, and by the way, you suck at mobile surveillance. If you’re going to tail someone, they shouldn’t know it.”

Two seconds later, a hand clamps down over mine that's about to open my front door. I shriek and jump, but Bastien's body blocks my escape. "What are you talking about?" he growls over my shoulder.

"Please," I say, facing the door. "Are you going to deny following me home two nights ago?"

Bastien spins me around and pins me to the still-closed door. "I didn't follow you home."

The man's face holds no humor—not that it ever does—making it impossible to know if he's jerking me around or not. "Sure, you did. After your freak-out, you rebooted your system and followed me home to interrogate me. You must have cooled off during the drive, so you kept going after I pulled into my driveway."

He shakes his head slowly. "I walked to the pub that night. My truck was at home."

"Your blue sedan—"

"I don't drive anything but that truck, Birdie. Someone else was following you."

My knees threaten to buckle right there on the porch. "Oh shit."

Bastien opens the door and shoves me through it. After depositing me in the closest chair, he kneels in front of me. "Yes, I spoke to Sadie because I was worried. I offered to train you for the same reason. You were acting scared that night, and then that asshole grabbed you. Of course, I wanted to know what was happening."

I barely registered what he said, consumed by one prevailing thought. Reaching out, I grab onto Bastien's forearms. "Someone was following me?"

“You tell me. Who would be following you, Birdie? What are you involved in that you would be targeted? Who was the man I chased off?”

Suddenly cold, I wrap my arms around myself. “He was a... target.”

When I don’t continue, Bastien tips my chin up, forcing me to look into his eyes. “Blackmail? Assassination? You’ve got to give me something.”

Bastien’s eyes are loaded with concern, his voice with genuine worry. The effect works with my fear to loosen my tongue. “He was the subject of a sting operation.”

“Sting? There were no cops, Birdie.”

“Um, my detective contact was rushed to the hospital just before the scheduled meet. I didn’t want to risk losing the mark, so I went alone.”

Bastien closes his eyes, drops his head, and takes a deep breath. After letting it out slowly, he lifts his head again. The concern I saw in his eyes before has been replaced with relief. Talking to himself, he says, “She was dressed like a teenage girl, scared to death, waiting to meet this guy.” He looks at me again and adds, “The man’s a pedophile.”

My only response is a slow nod, but I may as well lay it out. There’s no hiding after today’s revelation. “I hunt them. With my research and occasional participation, police are able to get these bastards off the streets.”

I’ve surprised Bastien. His level of shock stings, as it means he really was expecting some dark truth to spill from my lips. He drops to sit on his ass with his arms on his elevated knees.

After several breaths, he finally says, “I can’t imagine the police would sanction you

meeting this guy on your own.”

“Detective Cooper wasn’t exactly happy about it. But it’s over. Nothing happened, and Predator Tom is already in a cage.”

“That’s good to know, but this Tom fucker isn’t who followed you. I watched him peel out of town, going in the opposite direction. In a different car.”

Bastien lifts to his knees again and takes one of my hands in his. “Have you ever been followed before?”

“No.”

“What about these side projects you do for the DOJ? What kind of exposure risk to you is involved?”

“None. I’m completely insulated.”

Bastien’s eyes flick from me to the front windows before finding my face again. “You know what this means, right? Somebody’s been watching you. Probably someone you’ve targeted before. Or maybe someone’s figured out what you’re doing and wants you stopped.”

These scenarios scare the shit out of me. I hadn’t thought them possible, but here I am. Bastien picks up on my fear and squeezes my hand. “I need you to read me in, Birdie. Tell me everything.”

Bastien

Birdie’s eyes close, and I look down at my hands, which are practically caressing her arm. I hadn’t realized it, but I’ve leaned toward her with my offer to help. Dropping her hand, I stand and clear my throat. “Birdie?”

She looks up, eyes beseeching. “Before I tell you anything, I need to know you’ll keep this to yourself. Promise me that.”

“I don’t understand, but I’ll keep your secret as long as you promise never to meet up with a target alone again.”

“Oh, god, no! Never again.”

“Good.”

I pace the floor in front of Birdie’s chair while she clutches her chest and breathes deeply. No doubt, her heart’s racing, so I give her a chance to calm down before continuing.

Eventually, the need to find this sedan overpowers my compassion. “I don’t mean to pressure you, but you need to start talking. Whoever we’re dealing with knows where you live.”

Birdie jumps at the sound of my voice, but at least I’ve got her attention. “The first thing I want to know is how robust your security system is.”

She blinks a few times before the question registers. Then Birdie raises a brow. “You do know who my boss is, right?”

Point taken. “So, your security system is good. Now, I want to know everything; how you find targets, how you communicate, and the name of every target that’s ever laid eyes on you.”

Birdie nods, and her stomach growls. I’m fully prepared to ignore my hunger, but remember she’s a civilian and more crucial to Knot’s organization than any one operative.

Her stomach growls again, louder this time. Birdie’s cheeks redden, and I can’t help the tilt of my lips. “Maybe we should do something about dinner first.”

“Oh. I picked up something—”

She reaches around to grab a pre-packaged salad from a bag next to her purse. Her fingers catch on the bag, and the bowl goes sailing, opening and scattering its contents all over the floor once it lands. Birdie utters a dirty curse under her breath, drawing a laugh from me. “Maybe spy training could wait an hour,” I tell her.

And because I can’t help it, I grab her hand again and pull her out of the chair. “Let me take you to dinner.”

“You don’t have to do that,” she blushes.

“Come on. I’m hungry, you just lost your dinner, and I owe you.” And I don’t want you out of my sight until we’ve looked for that fucking car.

Instead of accepting, Birdie pulls her hand free and enters the kitchen to get a broom and dustpan. She sweeps up the salad explosion and says, “You don’t owe me anything. Bandaging your hands is something anyone would have done.”

“You’d think so, but you’re the first.”

The broom stills, and Birdie looks up. A sadness creeps over her face, and she asks, “You mean that’s happened before?”

“A time or two,” I answer with a shrug.

To avoid any further discussion on the subject of my temper, I take the broom from her. “Tell you what. You change out of that suit, and I’ll finish here.”

Birdie accepts my offer eagerly, as if she might feel raw and exposed and need a moment to steady herself. As Birdie turns to leave, those luscious curls swish around her, ensnaring my attention and drawing my gaze down the length of her.

Like it's impossible to imagine that a guy would have a legitimate interest in me. Her defensive words from earlier echo in my head as I watch Birdie move down the hall. I'd like to know where her low self-esteem came from because she doesn't see what I see. The woman is beautiful, glasses included.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

I don't see Birdie every day at work when I'm stateside, which has been a good thing. She's been on my mind enough as it is since the bloody knuckles incident. Constantly breathing her beguiling scent and seeing her shy smile would have been torture.

Birdie doesn't attract attention by flaunting her fantastic curves, though I wish she would give them a little more love. What makes Birdie stand out like a beacon is that she's wholesome. Everything about her is a true-blue American dream, something I didn't have much of growing up.

She's gentle, loyal, earnest, and has a protective streak a mile wide. And yes, she's gorgeous, without needing heavy makeup and flash.

And I want her. Damn me, but I want her. There couldn't possibly be anyone worse for Birdie to get wrapped up in than me, and that's why I have to be more careful to keep my thoughts in line and my hands to myself.

As much as I want to take Birdie in hand and show her just how much her body can move a man, there's one thing I want more. I want to find the pricks that made her feel like she was undesirable and feed their dicks to them.

It takes a real bitch of a male to beat on or put down a woman so that he can feel like a man. Someone like my father.

Shoving those thoughts aside, I finish sweeping up the last of the lettuce, ham, and cheese and dump it into the trash next to the island. Afterward, I notice a dick-shaped bowl in the center containing fruit. I shake my head and stash the broom back where Birdie had retrieved it. Then, because I can't not do it, I walk around and check the

windows and back door to make sure they're locked.

While in Birdie's office, I spot yet another dick; this one is holding a plant. A plant that I swear looks like a tiny person, complete with a tiny dick. The fuck? I consider asking Birdie about the phallus collection but decide I don't really want to know.

I confirm that the office windows are locked and bend down to scan up and down the street. Part of me hopes to see a dark blue sedan parked nearby, but that would be too easy. And I've never been that lucky.

Thinking Birdie has had enough time to change, I pull myself upright again in time to hear footsteps coming down the hall. Birdie changed into ripped skinny jeans, white Converse, and a loose plaid shirt. The bouncing waves she wore are now in some messy knot on top of her head.

Overall, the whole look is sexy as hell, and I regret suggesting she change. It'll be even harder now to keep my eyes off her, and I'm wearing the wrong damn pants to deal with a boner. Needing to clear my throat first, I ask, "Ready to go?"

Birdie fidgets with her shirt hem. "Why don't you go get something? I'll be fine here, just heating up a can of soup."

"So help me, Birdie Crenshaw. If you don't march your sweet ass out that door in the next two seconds."

She darts through the front door, and I follow her onto the porch. "See, you can be a good girl," I speak under my breath.

Under my watchful eye, Birdie locks up and uses her phone to activate her security system. Descending the steps, I ask, "Do you have cameras around the house?"

“Front and back,” she answers. “They’re motion activated.”

My eyes never stop moving, scanning the street and nearby homes as I lead Birdie to my truck. I open the passenger door for her, and she fidgets with her shirttail and does this shaking little half-laugh. “Me in a pickup truck wearing a blue plaid shirt. I guess I’m going country girl tonight.”

Birdie’s nervous chatter is uncharacteristic for her. She’s probably afraid of you and your grabby fingers. I yank my hand away from her back and put some distance between us, closing the door once she’s seated. Keep your hands to yourself, moron.

Neither of us speaks during the ten-minute drive to my favorite barbecue joint, but the silence doesn’t grate. I’ve never observed Birdie to be the overly talkative type. She’s always come across as being more shy and observing, but I worry she’s too nervous to speak.

I open my mouth to tell her where we’re going but stop myself at the last second. I picked The Pit because they have several salads on the menu. Not that I think Birdie needs to eat a salad, but since she had chosen one for her dinner, I figured this was a safe plan. I realized just in time how stupid it would have been to say so.

Birdie climbs out of the truck before I can get to her side and steps down onto the gravel surface of the parking lot. She takes in the Davey Crockett decor and looks down at herself when we enter the restaurant. “I’m going to be dreaming about banjos tonight, aren’t I?”

I choke on a laugh at her joke and nearly groan at the tightening in my gut. The more time I spend with this woman, the more I want to spend with her. Focus on her safety, not her ass. “Lucky banjos,” I murmur.

We’re soon seated, and Birdie surprises me by ordering a plate of wings and a beer

instead of a salad. She didn't order just any wings. Birdie asked for hell's fury wings. I opt for a beer and a half rack of ribs.

Not wanting the whole evening to be void of conversation, I ask, "How long have you been working for Knot?"

"Since I was twenty-one."

"Twenty-one? Is it rude if I say that's shocking?"

"I don't guess so. I mean, I was shocked when he hired me. No one else would."

Having seen how thorough Birdie is about her work, her statement floors me. "Why?"

"Simple. Because I had a criminal record."

I freeze with my beer halfway to my mouth. At my wide eyes, Birdie rolls hers. "Oh, please. After thinking I was dealing or hooking, you're acting surprised now?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

“Yes, I’m surprised because I never thought you did those things. Sadie only asked if I was accusing you of playing dirty. So, what was it you got in trouble for?”

She shrugs and says, “Hooking and dealing drugs.”

I spit out the beer I had just poured into my mouth, and Birdie laughs. “You should see your face.”

Reaching for a napkin, I wipe off my chin, enjoying the sound of her laughter. I’m slightly disappointed when she continues, and her smile fades. “When I was fifteen, I accessed the non-public part of the sex offender database illegally and got caught.”

“You’ve been hunting for a long time, then.”

“A long time,” she confirms.

I suspect she has a good reason for doing so, but I don’t ask. Yet.

When dinner arrives, Birdie shocks the hell out of me again by digging in with just as much enthusiasm as a guy. Before long, she’s got sauce on her fingers and her face, and I have only one thought.

I am in a lot of fucking trouble.

Birdie

Stop eating. Stop eating. Put down the chicken wing.

I drop the last wing back on the plate and watch Bastien reach over to pick it up with a wink. He replaces the confiscated drummie with one of his ribs and bites into the saucy chicken.

Who is this guy? He's definitely not the gruff and growly man I've always encountered in the war room.

Seconds after Bastien's first bite, he drops the wing and reaches for the glass of water brought out with the beer. He takes a healthy swig and looks my way again, grinning sheepishly. "You must have an iron stomach."

My mind immediately goes to my fluffy middle and then to his washboard abs. I know that's not what he meant, but abs like his should never be covered. I pick up the traded rib and take a dainty nibble to hide my guilty smile.

The waitress comes by and drops a ticket on the table, and Bastien stuffs some bills underneath before chugging some more water.

He stands after finally relinquishing the cup and reaches for my hand, the move surprising me now as much as it did at home. As I place my fingers in Bastien's palm, all sorts of things happen to my girly parts.

Funny, just an hour ago, I was mad as hell, assuming Bastien thought me a criminal or worse. Since then, he's taken my hand twice, led me around with a firm touch on my back, and draped his arm over my shoulders. The mixed signals are killing me, and the only person who seems more confused by them is Bastien.

If that wasn't enough of a brain cramp, I remember why Bastien wants to hang out with me this weekend, and all warm fuzzies take a hike. Oh yeah, this isn't a date. He's concerned someone could be trying to kill you. With Bastien keeping his body close to mine, we walk back out to his truck in the waning light.

I'm halfway expecting the boogeyman to jump out of the shadows and look up to see Bastien studying our surroundings as well. This shit's beginning to feel a little too real now.

"You're going to have to tell Knot." Bastien's voice calls my attention away from a blue car rolling down the street, but it's not the right kind or size. "Um. What did you say?"

Bastien's steely eyes focus on mine long enough for me to know he's not playing. "Knot. You need to tell him that you're being followed."

I want to argue that the whole thing could still be a coincidence and that all this talk of being followed is overkill. At the same time, there's no way someone could inadvertently trail me from Bastien's neighborhood to mine.

Still, I'd rather eat glass than have to tell my boss what I've been doing on the side. "Let's wait until..."

I stop because I don't really have a good argument. "Until?" Bastien prods.

"I don't know. I want to look for the car first."

Bastien doesn't try to mask the skepticism coloring his expression, but he holds his tongue. For now.

We're back at my house soon, and my nerves ratchet up, knowing what comes next. Bastien said he wants to know everything. I'll tell him, but only because I'm afraid of ending up in a shallow grave somewhere courtesy of Mr. Blue Sedan.

So, Bastien will learn the what, but there's no reason to tell him the why. I'm sure he didn't join the Navy to atone for some past sin, so it's not likely he'd assume that's

what I'm doing.

Bastien parks his truck behind my car and reaches for my arm when I turn to get out.

“Let me look around first?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

Before answering, I pull out my phone and show him my security app. “My cameras are motion activated, and I haven’t received any alerts. If anyone’s been here, they didn’t get within fifteen feet of my house.”

“Of the front or back of your house. Your cameras are visible, meaning it’s obvious the sides of your house are unprotected.”

Not for long. I make a mental note to request additional cameras in the morning. “Thirty seconds, Birdie. That’s all I ask.”

I release the door handle, and Bastien slides off the leather seat to creep like a ghost around my house. His cursory inspection doesn’t turn up any monsters, so he collects me from the truck and walks me to the house, once again, with his hand at my back.

Just inside the door, Bastien levels a somber, mind-control-like glare my way. “It’s time to let me in, Birdie.”

All I can do is sigh, nod, and gesture for him to follow me. Inside my office, I lower the display screen over the windows and fire up all my systems. Bastien sits, rapt, as I spend the next hour walking him through my work as a vigilante. “Well, that’s it,” I say when finished.

Bastien leans back in the kitchen chair he brought into my office. “Ok. So now, I’m equally impressed as I was pissed off.”

I bristle at this comment, but he continues before I can object. “That you would use your extensive skills to do this to save others is commendable. You’re an amazing

woman, Birdie Crenshaw.”

Bastien’s awe-filled praise is short-lived, and bossy Bash is back in a blink. “However, putting yourself in danger, especially after the cop said he couldn’t back you up, wasn’t a good decision. More than that, it was downright irresponsible, and you won’t do it again.”

“You think you can tell me—”

“Because I’ll be going with you from now on.”

I had been ready to launch verbal nukes, but at Bastien’s declaration, all I can manage is a pitiful squeaked, “What?”

Matter-of-factly, he announces, “You need a partner. I’m it.” Then, daring me to challenge him, he adds, “Unless you want to involve Sadie, Knot, or someone else. And since I know you want this kept as quiet as possible, you’re stuck with me.”

Bastien grabs my chair, rolling it toward him until we sit knees to knees. He leans close and warns, “Don’t test me on this. I won’t hesitate to roll on you if it means keeping you safe.”

Huh. So, this is what blackmail feels like. I sag in my chair and stare at the man threatening me with help. “Why are you doing this?”

Bastien’s growling voice vibrates my skin. “I think you know why.”

My heart pounds like this is some scene in a romance movie, except there’s no way Bastien is interested in me. He’s right, though. I do know why, or at least I have a good idea. “I have a theory. It’s for the same reason you sacrificed your career in the Navy. You’re a natural-born protector. You stood up for a vulnerable sailor, and now

you want to help me save kids from predators.”

Bastien blinks away his shock to stare back wordlessly. Bullseye. “Who was she, Bastien? The woman you couldn’t save?”

The warrior’s face goes slack. He did not expect this conversation to turn on him. He’s silent for a long while before whispering, “My mother.”

The pain etched on his face shows me the nightmare beyond. Something inside compels me to comfort him, so I place my hand on his thigh. Just a small touch, but Bastien’s eyes shoot to the spot and remain. “What happened?” I ask, encouraging him to continue.

He places his hand over mine, lightly tracing circles on my skin. “As long as I can remember, my father liked to hit her. He started on me when I got old enough to beg him to stop. Then he beat both of us until I was big enough to fight back. He left me alone then, but my mother’s beatings got worse. I begged her to take us away. I think she may have even tried a couple times early on when I first started showing bruises. Then, when I was seventeen, she left us both for good.

“I came home drunk one night. Just once. I’d heard that alcohol could make you forget, and I wanted one night of peace. My father raged at my condition, and I was too drunk to put up a defense. Mom stepped in to protect me and never woke up from the head injury he gave her.

“That bastard went to prison, and I went to live with my father’s sister. She’s nothing like him, decent. Still, I took off the minute I turned eighteen and never looked back.”

“I’m so sorry, Bastien.” It must have been awful to feel so helpless. Bastien nods and leans back, stretching his long legs and crossing his arms over his chest. “You know my story now. So, tell me why it is you do this. Why do you hunt monsters?”

I look down, pulling my hand from beneath his and dust imaginary crumbs from my jeans. Well, Birdie? Tit for tat. You didn't think he'd share and then move on, did you?

Once again, I failed to think things through around Bastien. I push out of my chair, needing to escape the conversation. I'm not like him, an innocent victim. I'm the reason Amelia's dead. If Bastien finds out, all that rosy nobility he thinks I harbor will be gone. "I can't... I'm not... ready to share my story."

Bastien doesn't press, even though I'm being unfair. Since being around him fries my brain, the best thing to do is get him out of here. "Well, it's getting late. I'm sure you have a full morning ahead of you."

Bastien stands, taking up way too much of my personal space. "So do you. I'm changing our schedule. Starting Monday, you'll work out with me three mornings a week. When I'm deployed, you'll be checking in with Spatch. I'll set everything up."

"It doesn't sound like you're leaving me any room to say no," I grumble.

Bastien steps in close, bending until we're nose to nose. "You're damn right. I'm not. And after work tomorrow, you and I are looking for this car. Until then, keep this house locked up tight, and don't make any stops between here and work."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

He reaches around me to grab a sticky note and pen from my desk. “If you see this car following you again, call me immediately.”

Bastien scribbles a number down and hands the note to me. While his words were pure caveman, his tone and his eyes are full of genuine concern. It’s like he’s pleading with me for my own safety. Under the power of his stare, I can only take the note and offer a simple promise. “I will.”

Bastien

Birdie closes the small slip of paper in her fist. I breathe her in while we’re this close, knowing I’ll berate myself for it later. “We’re partners in this now. Neither one of us makes a move without the other. I’ll need to get some things straightened out in the morning, so I won’t see you until later in the day.”

Then, before I give in to the urge to taste her sweet lips, I turn and walk out of Birdie’s house. Taking deep breaths to clear her scent from my head, I wait on the porch until I hear the door lock click and finally march to my truck.

The powerful engine rumbles to life, but I don’t go far. After rounding a nearby block a couple of times, I return to Birdie’s street with my lights off and park at an empty lot a few houses down. Someone was following Birdie forty-eight hours ago. Birdie thought it was me, so she hasn’t been looking for a stalker. I am, and I’m staying in case he shows up.

Since my weekend has just been booked, I pop in my earbuds, dial a memorized number, and put the phone on the seat, screen side down, to douse the light.

“Bash. Twice in one week? How did I get so lucky?”

“Shut up, Bennett.”

“Ooh. Last names? This must be serious.”

Ignoring Jackson’s sarcasm, I get right to the point. “I know I said I would try, but I won’t make it this weekend. The woman I told you about? I think somebody’s after her. I’ll be trying to catch the bastard.”

“Whoa. Wait. Back up. Let’s take a minute to discuss this complete one-eighty you just pulled. You’re hot for a mystery woman you thought was trouble but apparently do not any longer. Before we unpack the rest of this shit, I want to know who she is and what exactly has been happening.”

I’m reluctant to give her up, but this is Jackson, Clothespin, my best friend and Navy SEAL. If I can’t trust him, I can’t trust anybody. I take a deep breath and answer on the exhale, “Birdie Crenshaw.”

Jackson makes a choking sound but is otherwise quiet for several seconds. “You’ve gotta be shitting me. Knot’s right hand? I don’t know Crenshaw personally, but I heard about her work to help pull Fish’s squad out of hell in Estonia. Not to mention her hands-on role in saving the pregnant wife of one of his squad guys. And you suspected her... of anything? Damn. You’d have to be paranoid or stupid to speak against that woman.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m an idiot, but I wasn’t completely wrong. Birdie is leading a secret life nobody knows about, but I don’t understand why. What she’s doing is nothing she should have to hide.”

When I fail to continue, Jackson complains, “The suspense is killing me, Laurent.”

“I need you to keep this between us because she doesn’t want Knot to find out. The woman is a legal vigilante, hunting pedophiles on her off time. I only found out because I happened to show up right before a meetup and stepped in when an asshole got physical.”

Again, Jackson spends a silent moment forming his words. “Forgive me, but I don’t see how anyone could read a damsel in distress situation as the damsel being guilty of something. You did initially suspect her of something?”

“Yes, dammit, but shut up. I didn’t give you all the details of what I saw, but they don’t matter now anyway. I was wrong. Birdie hunts monsters, and based on what I’ve just learned, it could be that one of the monsters found out and wants her stopped.”

“And you’re not gonna let that happen.”

“No, I’m fucking not.”

Jackson huffs a sort of amused sound. “You really have fallen for this woman, haven’t you?”

I don’t answer because no matter what comes out of my mouth, I know what would come out of his. “I plead the fifth because I don’t feel like arguing with you. This was just supposed to be a courtesy call because I won’t be there this weekend.”

“Like you would have shown up anyway,” he grumbles before hanging up.

With the call over, I remove the earbuds and settle in to watch for a while. The night rolls on, and traffic on the street thins to nonexistent. At ten, the only movement is the flickering light in the gas lanterns lining the street.

By midnight, Birdie's house has gone dark, and there's been no sign of a blue sedan. It was a long shot, but I figured it wouldn't hurt to stake the place out for a while.

I crank my truck and set off toward home, planning to go on the offensive tomorrow.

Spatch looks up from his desk when I enter, his brows lifting in surprise at someone seeking him out before necessary. "Can I do something for you, Laurent?"

Piper lifts her head off her dog bed but doesn't move to greet me. Though the Sable Malinois seems calm, she'd kill me in seconds if I made a threatening move toward Spatch.

"I'm giving Birdie self-defense lessons, and she needs a little more power behind her punches. I'd appreciate it if you would write her a strength training regimen."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

“Birdie’s not an operative,” he points out.

“And that’s why I’m training her. All I need from you are some recommendations on weights and reps.”

Spatch still isn’t convinced. “You want me to prescribe a workout for someone without evaluating her?”

Dismissing his concern, I say, “She’s a beginner. Use your imagination. Call Knot if working with a civilian is bothering you. He knows what’s going on and that she needs this.”

The former Ranger school trainer stares back a moment before conceding. Shaking his head, he says, “I’ll have something for you by the end of the day.”

The man didn’t seem surprised by the strange request, just like I wasn’t surprised when he threw me out afterward. It’s not like anything about working here is normal.

All of us, except for Birdie and the support staff, experienced hell through one military branch or another, and yet, here we are, fighting again. The pay and equipment are better, but that’s where the benefits end. We’re heroes no longer. In the eyes of about eighty percent of the population, we’re all war-mongering, psychopathic mercenaries.

In truth, we’re more like the government’s dirty little side piece. We’re sent to war zones so the Pentagon can claim smaller troop deployment numbers. Not important right now, jackass.

The rest of the morning passes painfully slow for me, like a kid waiting for Christmas. Throughout strength and conditioning, hand-to-hand, and range practice, I kept looking at the clock, all because of a pair of sunglasses. Birdie's sunglasses.

I found them last night in my truck after I left her house. Figuring she's probably wondering where they went, I plan to take them to her when I've cleaned up after today's training.

I rush through my shower and dress, and for the second time this week, I'm on my way to the executive floor.

Birdie's door is closed when I arrive, glasses in hand. I knock, but no one answers. "Back again, Laurent?" a low voice asks from behind me.

I face the man and hold up Birdie's sunglasses in answer. "Birdie left these in my truck. I thought she might need them."

Knot's stance doesn't change, but his eyes narrow slightly. I get the sense that if a shotgun were nearby, he'd be sitting down cleaning it during this conversation. "Birdie's not here," he says. "She's on her way to Langley."

I slide the glasses into my shirt pocket and turn to leave. "You could leave those with me," Knot says. "I'll make sure she gets them."

"I'll come back," I answer without turning around.

Refusing to admit my disappointment, I trudge back downstairs to the war room ahead of our weekly team meeting. I'm early, and the room is empty. I spend the quiet time thinking through the situation with Birdie.

She doesn't want to bring anyone else in, but I'll be deploying sooner rather than

later. If someone has fixated on Birdie, her self-imposed isolation will leave her a sitting duck. So, you'll just have to find this bastard and stop him fast.

Chelsea flops down next to me a few minutes later, the first person to enter the room after me. She props her feet on the table and teases, "Where have you been, Bestie? You missed lunch. Today was grouper day."

"I hate grouper."

"I know," she gloats. Then, before I realize her intentions, she's plucked the sunglasses out of my pocket. "Nice shades, but not exactly your style."

I reach for them, but she holds them out of reach and puts them on her face. "Oh my god! Your girl must be blind as a bat."

Chelsea looks around the room and at the rest of the operatives filing in until I manage to get a finger on the bridge and pull the glasses off. Tucking them back into my pocket, I say, "You're the reason I'm glad to be an only child."

"Bullshit," she rolls her eyes. "Your being an only child is why you're this way. So who's your girlfriend?"

"Not girlfriend and not your business."

Sadie walks into the room then, and Aaron, leaning against the wall by the door, looks her up and down before slamming down the light switch. The interactive wall lights up, and Sadie smacks the hologram of the first of three folders. "We've got three new assignments. One imminent, and two coming up."

Sadie turns back to the wall, waves over one of the folders, opening it, and expands a map of Haiti. "Multiple American tourists and do-gooders have been kidnapped for

ransom. Our government needs to do something about it without appearing to do something about it. We got the contract this morning. All available intel is being transmitted, but a team needs to leave today. Who wants it?”

Chelsea starts to lift her hand, but I grab it, stopping her from volunteering. Her neck nearly snaps at the speed at which she turns to glare at me in disbelief. I have reasons for sitting this one out, but I won’t explain them to her.

Fortunately, Cade steps up as a new leader. He more than proved himself over the years of working with Sadie, earning the promotion to team captain. As Sadie dives into assignment details, Chelsea leans close, whispering, “Care to explain that?”

Just as quietly, I answer, giving her a half-truth. “I’ve got a side thing going here that I need a few days to clear up before I can deploy.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

One eyebrow shoots up, and Chelsea gives me a dirty side-eye. “That’s funny. Sadie didn’t list us as ineligible.”

I shrug, keeping my eyes forward. “Sadie doesn’t know everything.”

“Ok. Next up,” Sadie calls out. “We’ve got a group of celebrities going to dig wells in Africa next week, and they want security. My team will take this.”

She nods to one of her own teammates, Dani. “We’re bound to be dealing with shit tons of press and entourage. Being former secret service, Dani has the most experience dealing with that zoo.”

Finally, Sadie looks our way, glancing back and forth between Chelsea and me. “Your team is to join crews from several other organizations to provide security for some rock.”

The contractors in the room laugh, given the description of the rock currently displayed on the screen. “The Blue Moon of Josephine is a fifty-million-dollar diamond going on display at the Smithsonian Natural History Museum the week after next. The idea is to mix people from the different security companies to prevent espionage and any attempted theft of the stone.

“Each company has been contracted for the whole week, even though you’ll likely only see two days of duty each. Operatives will be chosen randomly, and only the owner’s team will know the security schedule, which will change daily. You’ll basically be on call for the week and show up when told.”

Shit. Birdie and I only have nine days to find the bastard in the blue car. That's not a lot of time. It's a good thing that I'll be working with the best in the business.

Sadie dismisses the meeting a few minutes later, and I'm the first one out of the room. Swinging by the cafeteria, I grab a ready-made ham sandwich and eat it during the walk back to the executive area. Only an hour has passed since I was last here, so there's a good chance Birdie's not back yet.

Fortunately, she is. I walk through her open door and take one of the seats across from her desk. "If this keeps up, I'm going to have to start billing you for chocolate." Birdie turns away from her computer screen, and her eyes widen when they land on me. "Oh. You're not Sadie."

"Afraid not. How late are you working today?"

The unexpected turn and fast pivot leave Birdie befuddled. She struggles to gather her thoughts but eventually stumbles over an explanation. "Um. I don't know. I usually work until I hit a good stopping point."

"Ok. When is your next stopping point?" I ask.

Birdie never gets the chance to answer. "How did it..." Knot waltzes in Birdie's office, his voice freezing when he notices his audience. Head cocked in curiosity, he continues, "... go today?"

"Fine," Birdie squeaks. Then, finding her voice, she adds, "Apparently, all the big guns were drawn for this target. Cle Maxwell from Pantera Security joined the meeting via video conference. All involved gave their reports, and as of now, I'm officially finished with the project."

"Good. Two more counterintelligence requests came in today but can wait until next

week.”

Seeing an opening, I insert myself into the conversation. “Can Birdie cut out for the rest of the day?”

Bastien

Knot’s questioning glare swings from me to Birdie, softening the slightest amount when landing on her face. “I suppose that would be fine since there are no pressing matters. Why? Is something wrong?”

“No,” Birdie answers a little too quickly. “I have to—”

“She’s helping me with something. Sort of my own counterintelligence thing.”

Knot crosses his massive arms, shooting me a glare that calls all kinds of bullshit. But seeing that Birdie doesn’t object, he relents with a threat. “If Birdie ends up on the news or in the hospital, there won’t be a body to bury, Laurent.”

“Yes, sir.”

Birdie groans. “Um. Hello. I’m sitting right here in case anyone wants to ask me what I need to do with the rest of my day.”

Knot chuckles and walks out, shaking his head. “Strike one, Bash.”

The man’s such a hard ass, I wouldn’t have guessed he had a sense of humor. That’s also the first time he’s ever addressed me using anything besides my last name.

Birdie clears her throat loudly, pulling my attention to her pouting face. That plump bottom lip of hers sticking out is not helping my resolve. Stern Birdie is causing an

unwelcome reaction in my dick, so I stand to relieve the sudden tightness in my pants. “I’m sorry, Birdie. Since we already had plans to find the blue car, I just thought I’d see about securing some extra time to do so.”

“Oh. Right,” Birdie backpedals. “On that, after you left last night, I pulled footage from all the cameras around the businesses in your neighborhood. None of them caught the car.”

Shit. That’s not good news. “That means he parked in the public lot at the end instead of on the street.”

She nods and adds, “There aren’t too many businesses between there and my house, but I plan to check for cameras along the route anyway. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

Her cheeks flame red, realizing what she said. “I mean, maybe I’ll find the car when I hit that... Shit.”

I’m enjoying the rosy color of Birdie’s cheeks immensely but decide to show some mercy when she drops her head into her hands. “Why don’t we get started.”

Without lifting her face, she says, “I don’t want to work on it here. Too many nosy people, and you contractors gossip like little girls.”

“Okay. How about I follow you home then? We’ll work in your office and order in when we get hungry.”

“Ah, sure.” Birdie picks up her purse, stands, but then sits down again. “Maybe you should go first. That way, we won’t have to explain to anyone why we’re leaving together.”

I stiffen at the suggestion but can’t disagree with her logic. Part of me liked the idea of being seen with Birdie. The working part of my brain reminds me that I won’t be laying claim to any woman. “Fine,” I say through clenched teeth. “I’ll go get my shit and be right behind you.”

Barely a minute later, I’m slamming around the locker room, pissed at myself. I keep breaking my own damned rules with Birdie, but I can’t seem to control it. I want her more than an addict wants his next hit, but fortunately, I care about her, which is why I’m not giving in to the desire.

Cade and some other guys are dressing to leave for the weekend and call out to me

when my temper draws their attention. “Hey, Bash. We’re going out later. Want to join—”

“No,” I interrupt, slamming my locker door.

Realizing I look like a dick, I sigh and pick up my head. “I’ve got plans already, but thanks.”

From the corner of his eye, Grim watches me carefully. He grabs his bag and follows me out the door. “You went from almost smiling to being pretty uptight in twenty-four hours. Actually, you look like you’re wearing the same face I did for about ten years.”

I know exactly what he means, but we’re not the same. The man pined for Sadie forever, only making a move when she was almost killed. “Don’t you fucking start,” I warn. “I’m sure Sadie’s told you everything, even though there was nothing to tell. I was wrong about Birdie, so Sadie can forget I said anything.”

Grim glosses over my rant, going the one place I warned him away from. “You know, there’s nothing wrong with wanting Birdie—”

“See you Monday, Grim,” I reply, cutting him off.

I pick up the pace toward the exit, wanting nothing more to do with this conversation. Aaron doesn’t know me. No one here does. Sure, everyone knows I came from the Navy. A few even know about my grand exit. Of those, some hail me as a hero for the sacrifice. They’re wrong. They just don’t know.

The day my SEAL career ended was like a volcanic eruption. The explosion was inevitable. All I needed was the right trigger. It happened then, and it’ll happen again.

Pulling up to the curb at Birdie's house a short time later, I'm relieved to see one of our security contractor's vans parked in her driveway. Two men are busy installing additional cameras around the house, meaning Birdie will have tighter security from now on. I nod at the crew as I walk to her porch, happy for the quick turnaround.

Birdie answers the door in her bare feet. She's had time to change since arriving home and wears pink joggers and a black fitted tee. I'm openly staring and can't help it.

A throat clears from the stairs behind me, and Birdie steps to the side to speak with the security installer. Though I want to get an update on the new security features, I need a private moment for a mental ass-kicking. You're here to help her identify a threat, not become one.

I continue deeper into the house, going straight for Birdie's office. Her scent is stronger in this room. Not helping. My shoulders slump, and a sad sigh escapes my lips. The quirky, nerdy woman with dicks everywhere has gotten under my skin, but I have to pretend otherwise. That should make this the most challenging, miserable mission of my life.

Cracking my neck, I square my shoulders and face the massive screen covering the office windows. I need to find this asshole fast and get the hell away from Birdie, for both our sakes.

The suspended screen displays multiple searches at once. At the top left, pictures of cars fly by, pausing occasionally on four-door sedans. The colors are all over the place, so I'm guessing Birdie is pulling makes and models to help identify the car that followed her. All the pictures are night views, highlighting head and taillight configurations. Smart girl.

A second window searches through documents and scrolls too fast for me to tell what

kind. The last active area displays the view on the right side of Birdie's house, where she's talking to the installer.

My eyes remain glued to the feed as Birdie reaches behind her back, lifting her shirt enough to scratch a spot above her right hip. My skin heats at the secret peek of her soft skin, but then my blood simmers at the hint of ink poking out from below the fabric.

I turn from the screen and storm to her kitchen, looking for a glass of water. I'm hot all over and fuming at the same time. Never. Never have I reacted so quickly to a woman. Not on a beach with tits and ass on display and not in a bar with barracks bunnies trying their hardest to bed any man they thought was a SEAL.

Only Birdie.

After guzzling two glassfuls, I return to the office just as Birdie walks in the front door. "They're finished," she announces.

Birdie glides past me and walks to her chair. "Let me show you what I've got going."

I drop into the kitchen chair she must have brought back in for me. "I wasn't far behind you. How did you get changed and get all this up and running before I got here?"

"I didn't. Well, I did, but not exactly. I couldn't sleep last night, so I got up and started working on it at three."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

She points to the big screen and explains, “I searched all sedan models made from oh-five to now. Using that list, I’m running a cross-check with the DMVs of all Virginia counties east of Richmond. I’m also building a lineup of night pictures to see if I can identify any details to narrow down the search.”

I’m stunned. It’s true what they say. The woman’s a genius, and it’s entirely possible that my being here will only slow her down. The trouble is, I know I won’t be going anywhere even if I should.

“What can I do to help?”

She looks at her lap and lifts a shoulder. “I don’t really know. I’m not used to having anyone working with me.”

Birdie said the words as if they left a foul taste in her mouth. She’s disappointed. Looking up sharply, Birdie speaks fast, like she’s just gotten an idea. “Do you know a lot about cars?”

I’m no expert, but I won’t give her any reason to dismiss me. Trying to sound confident, I answer, “As much as the next guy.”

“Then maybe if I see something familiar in one of the security feeds, you could help identify the car faster.”

“Sure. I can do that.” Any excuse to stay, I grudgingly admit.

Birdie pulls the spare chair behind the desk and settles me next to her, pulling up the

night shots on one of her desktop flat screens. On the other is a map of the area, zoomed in on my neighborhood.

She takes me through her route home that night, only turning up a few gas stations and corner stores along the way. Two hours later, we've checked footage from every available camera with automatic upload, and none offered views of the cars passing by.

Birdie's face falls as she closes the last view. "That was a complete waste of time."

She reaches up and squeezes the back of her neck, and my fingers itch to take over and massage the soreness for her. Instead, I stand and stretch. "Let's take a break, yeah?"

It's just past six, so I pull out my phone. "Do you like pizza?"

Birdie looks down at her middle and says, "Obviously."

My temper flares at her disparaging reply, not for refusing to give a simple yes answer but for feeling the need to deride herself because of a food she likes. Birdie's low opinion of her beautiful body is quickly becoming a trigger point for me. To keep from saying something about it, I step out of the room, asking what she likes as I move.

I'll eat anything, so I order a single pie with Birdie's request for pepperoni and bacon. Then I take a much-needed minute to make sure I've cooled off.

When I return to the office, Birdie has switched seats for the next leg of our investigation.

"I'm not even sure this is going to work. I didn't pay much attention because I

figured it was you. I didn't even see the taillights, only the red glow on the street as the car drove away."

She starts pouring through the nighttime images of the various sedan models. She's looking for a match to the headlight shape, size, and placement on the car that followed her. "Don't worry about it. If something sparks, we'll chase it."

"And if it doesn't? I'm inclined to think I was just being crazy. It's not like I've ever noticed anyone following me before. And no one's done it since."

Her voice was so heavy with self-doubt that I sit on my hands to keep from reaching out. "You're way too observant to imagine or miss a tail. Whether it was a one-off thing or not, I don't know. I'm sure you'd feel better if you could at least rule out the possibility that one of your targets is out for revenge."

Two fingers pinch the bridge of her nose, highlighting how tired she must be after working for fifteen hours already today. "I guess you're right."

We settle in and continue through the seemingly endless list of sedan models, Birdie quickly dismissing some and pausing on others. The pizza arrives forty minutes later, which is good timing because even my eyes are beginning to cross.

Taking the pie to the kitchen, I sit at the table while Birdie grabs some beers and water from the fridge. We dive in without plates, and after the first bite, I ask, "Is this, intel work, what you saw yourself doing?"

Birdie shrugs as though uninterested in the topic. "As a kid, I wanted to be a vet or a marine biologist. But I grew up. I learned that life is sometimes about doing what you need to do, not what you want to do."

I recognize her carefully constructed answer for what it is, resignation. This life isn't

the one she wanted to live. That could only mean one thing; guilt drove her here. I just can't imagine what she could have done to owe a lifetime of penance.

We finish dinner in silence, the quiet as comfortable as our light teasing last night. The lack of conversation does allow me to think through our strategy. "Hey. If we're thinking one of your targets could be the blue sedan, why aren't we checking the DMV to see if any of them has a blue sedan registered to them."

Birdie wipes her mouth and shakes her head. "I already checked. No match. However, I found plenty of known associates and family members that do. I still need something to match or eliminate them."

"Damn. I never realized how tedious your job could be."

Birdie dismisses the comment, unimpressed with her own efforts. "It takes patience, dedication, and the sacrifice of any semblance of a social life."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

I shrug and fold up the empty box. “I didn’t have one anyway. Let’s get back to work.”

The rest of our dinner mess is cleaned up quickly, and we return to the office to resume our search. Birdie updates the search criteria as each model is eliminated. By ten, we’ve narrowed the list of possible matches but still have a way to go.

Birdie is leaning forward with her elbow propped on her desk and her head resting against her fist. She’s been working for almost nineteen hours straight. The woman needs a break.

“You look tired.”

Birdie jumps at my voice as if I startled her awake. She rubs her eyes, smearing day-old makeup and checks her watch. After noting the time, Birdie opens up one of the computer games she mentioned using as a hunting ground.

“Birdie?”

She turns around, lifting her weary eyes to mine. “You’re right. It’s getting late. You should go get some sleep. I can leave these searches to run and check the results in the morning.”

Birdie returns her focus to the screen again, only to look over her shoulder once more. “Thanks for your help.”

Looking beyond her to the program she called up, I watch the game load and shake

my head. “My observation was that you look tired and should get some sleep. Not me.”

“Oh. I’ll probably only drop into a few sites. The door will automatically lock behind you when you leave.”

Birdie quickly becomes so absorbed in her task, not to mention her exhaustion, that she fails to notice I don’t move. Or that I’m still behind her ten minutes later.

Between typed responses to various sick assholes across two gaming platforms, she’s back to resting on her fist. When her head bobs forward, I step up and push the power button on her computer, forcing a shutdown.

Birdie shrieks, not having noticed I was so close. “What are you doing? I’ve got work to do.”

“No, you need sleep.”

“I mean it, Bastien. I’m really close with this one. If I pull off now, he’ll walk and find a real victim.”

She tries to shove my hand away to turn her computer back on, but I grab her wrist instead. “Look at yourself. You can barely hold your eyes open.”

“I just need a few more minutes.”

“No, Birdie. You can’t wreck yourself to stop the assholes of the world. Even if you do, there will always be new assholes lined up to take their place.”

“You don’t understand. If I don’t do my job, another child could be hurt or killed.”

She's frantic now and on the verge of panicking. "Birdie, you know as well as I do. You can't save everyone."

"I have to try!" she shouts.

Kneeling beside her, I spin Birdie's chair, making her face me. "Who was she, Birdie? Who are you trying to save?"

"I can't. You don't understand," she says as her eyes fill with tears.

"Make me understand. Please," I beg.

A sob breaks free, and Birdie's hands go to her face. "It's my fault! She was raped and killed, and it's all my fault!"

Now that the dam has broken, Birdie breaks down into gut-wrenching wails.

Shooting up from the floor, I pick her up and cradle her to my chest. The anguished cries coming from deep inside Birdie rip me to shreds as I walk us to the living room. All the way, I find myself wishing I could do something, anything, to ease her pain.

I fall back onto the couch, wrapping my arms tightly around her trembling body and pressing my lips to her ear. "Tell me, Birdie," I plead.

She's barely able to breathe as she confesses the sin that's tortured her for thirteen years. I don't let go, hanging on tight the whole time, feeling every tear like a knife to the heart.

I hold my tongue throughout the soul-crushing story, knowing there's nothing I can say to make her feel any less shitty. After Birdie details the start of her hunt and the illegal methods that landed her in hot water, her body goes slack in my arms.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

She must have found some level of peace in getting her past off her chest as she's now passed out against mine. I stroke her soft hair, sharing the weight of her guilt. Our pasts may not be the same, but our scars are.

I understand so much about Birdie now. She's spent her whole adult life paying for the death of her friend. It's time she let that go. If she'll let me, I'll help her. For now, she needs rest.

Moving as carefully as possible, I stand again, making sure not to jostle Birdie awake, and walk down the hall looking for her bedroom. When I find it, I lay her down, covering her with the blanket draped on a nearby chair.

Birdie's cheeks are blotchy and red from crying, and her body refuses to relax, even in sleep. Unable to resist, I brush the silky strands from her forehead, replacing them with my lips and murmuring against her skin. "Shhh Petit Oiseau. You're okay."

Straining against the desire to wrap myself around her, I step away, and Birdie whimpers in her sleep, a deep, mournful sound. Her distress crushes my heart.

I can't leave her like this. Kicking off my shoes, I stretch out beside her on the queen-sized bed and pull her into my arms. She settles down again, and press my nose to her hair, breathing in her delicate scent.

God help me.

Birdie

It was just a dream. It had to be. I'm all alone in this bed.

Opening my eyes, I remember the worst parts and cringe. It wasn't all a dream. Last night's confession hadn't been imagined. That actually happened. What went down after is the illusion. I wasn't carried to bed by a sexy warrior who joined me, enveloping me with his hard body. That I had the best sleep of my adult life was a fluke brought about by sheer exhaustion.

Still, I can't explain how I got into bed or why I'm still fully dressed. I've crawled into bed half-conscious before, but never without taking off my bra.

I roll over and blink a few times. The other side of the bed is mussed, and a familiar ball cap rests on the opposite nightstand. Holy shit! I wasn't dreaming.

The dick clock on the wall shows it's just past eight. I've slept late, even for a Saturday. I roll out of bed, straightening my bra that popped a tit during the night. In the bathroom, I use a face wipe to remove yesterday's slept-in makeup, apologizing to my skin.

After brushing my teeth and putting my hair up, I walk out, not even bothering to change clothes. Bastien is gone. I should be relieved, but I'm not.

I'm barely out of my room when sounds from the kitchen inform me that Bastien never left. The sounds and smells of apples and bacon turn my disappointment into dread because now, I have to face him.

Bastien knows what I've never told another living soul. I don't know how to move forward from that, how to look him in the eye. Part of me wants to delay the inevitable and return to my room for a shower. But what would that accomplish?

A shower and clean clothes won't make this any easier. Just rip off the band-aid,

Birdie.

Taking a fortifying breath, I walk down the hall to the kitchen to find Bash at the stove. He's cooking, using groceries I didn't have. Hearing me approach, he looks over his shoulder and says, "You have an interesting collection of dicks."

I can't bring myself to look him in the eye, so I stare at the floor and shrug my shoulders. "Sadie gave me most of them."

Bastien turns back to the stove and says, "I took your keys and went out. You didn't have much in the fridge for breakfast."

"I don't..." Shaking my head, I collapse onto one of the barstools and drop my head onto my hands. A moment later, Bastien is behind me, spinning the stool around. "You don't what?"

Even though my elbows slide off the counter with the movement, I keep my hands over my face. Bastien takes hold of my wrists, forcing my hands down. Shame has my head turning to keep from looking into his eyes, but I finally answer his question. "I don't understand why you're still here."

Bastien lets me go, returns to the stove, and plates the eggs he'd been scrambling. "You needed someone," he answers simply.

"No, Bastien. I got someone killed. A kid. You should be running as far and as fast as you can, not cooking me breakfast."

The fabric of Bastien's T-shirt strains at the sudden flexing of his arms. His back expands with a slow, deep breath as if he's trying to calm himself. Then Bastien turns around, carrying two plates and sets them down on the bar.

Propping both hands on the surface, he leans forward, sympathy, not disgust, riding his eyes. “I wish I could say something to ease the guilt, but words won’t fix this. As shitty as you feel, your friend knew sneaking out was a bad idea. She shouldn’t have had to pay for that mistake with her life, but that’s the bastard’s fault that hurt and killed her, not yours.”

I keep quiet, silently warring with myself over his words. I know what he says is true, but I don’t know if I’ll ever be okay with myself for what happened. When I haven’t responded several moments later, Bastien taps the counter and stands upright again. “Now, I hope you like chausson aux pommes.”

“Pardon?”

Bastien smiles for the first time ever, I think. The sight sets bats to flight in my middle, and Bastien turns for the oven, pulling out a pan of cute little pastries with leaf designs cut into the top. “Chausson aux pommes. French apple turnovers. They were my mom’s favorite after a bad... when we needed a pick-me-up. She taught me how to make them. I cheated and used pre-made puff pastry this time.”

I’m speechless. My brain just refuses to form a coherent thought. Bash serves up two of the turnovers on my plate and nudges me with the flipper. “You don’t have to figure out everything or even be okay right now, Birdie. Eat, and let’s go find this car.”

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

Picking at my plate, I eat breakfast silently, though I find my voice once. “Thank you for breakfast and...”

It doesn’t bother Bastien that I can’t finish. He nods and answers, “You’re welcome.”

An hour later, I lay my head on my desk and groan. “I never want to look at another car again.”

Bastien chuckles and pats me on the back. His hand lingers, rubbing circles over my spine. I’m beginning to crave his little touches, so I keep still, not wanting to be the one to break contact. “At least we’re one step closer,” he says.

“Maybe,” I grumble to the blotter.

With a final pat, Bastien removes his hand and pulls me upright. “Let’s find out.”

Calling up the search from yesterday, I update the search criteria and re-run the query. The system checks all known associates of my list of targets from the last three years for any registrations for the four cars we identified in the pictures.

With the narrowed search, we have a result in ten minutes. “Shit. No data returned,” Bastien reads off my screen. “That means—”

“Someone either borrowed a car, or I’m completely crazy and imagined the whole thing.”

Bastien doesn’t look away from the screen; he gets closer. “Or... whoever this is just

isn't on your radar yet."

"That's not reassuring," I grumble.

"It wasn't meant to be."

Since my expertise is finding a named target, I'm a little out of my league when the target is unknown. I don't know what investigative qualities Bastien possesses, but I ask anyway. "So, security expert, what do I do now?"

"Now, you get back to your routine. Do what you'd normally do on a Saturday, and let me handle the rest."

Shaking my head, I stare back and open my mouth to speak. "Don't argue with me," Bastien warns.

Shock freezes my tongue. I cannot believe this guy. And yes, I had been about to argue. "So, what do you normally do on a Saturday?" he asks.

This is one time in my life I wish I could lie easily. I don't want to tell Bastien that I have no social life at all and that each weekend is spent hunting. Looking away, I swipe at an imaginary piece of dust and say, "This. I do this on the weekends. Every weekend."

"Then let's do this," he says with a shrug.

My eyes draw up sharply. "What about your social life?"

"Don't have one. Haven't since leaving the Navy. Now, since we've gotten that out of the way, how about you show me how you work the games some more."

Rolling my eyes, I turn back toward my computer, mumbling to myself, “You need to get a life, said the pot to the kettle.”

Bastien pulls his chair next to mine, close enough that the heat from his thigh radiates to my leg. It’s quite distracting. “Okay. First of all, predators utilize the chat features of many games common to kids and teens. I have a list of profiles for each program, rotating them out with each new target to avoid detection.”

“Won’t your picture be a dead giveaway?”

“No. These guys only see my picture if and when an investigation advances far enough.”

To show him what I mean, I log into the favorite game of my current target. Here, my profile picture is of my avatar. “I join the server where I first encountered the target and interact with the simulated world. If he’s active and still interested in grooming me, he’ll make contact.”

Bastien watches quietly as I manipulate this pixelated world of cubes and strange animals. I’ve been working at it in my private map for about twenty minutes, explaining some of the facets of the game as Bash asks questions.

Then, to be seen, I join in the community chat using urban shorthand. Bastien studies the odd code and words with a scowl. “It makes me feel old to ask this, but is this how kids talk these days?”

I have to laugh because Bash is only a few years older than me. “Yes, and I hate to admit it, but because I use it so much, I’ve been known to let it slip into business conversations.”

He leans closer, putting his face right next to mine as if it might make him understand

better. “God, I’m getting old. I can’t read most of this.”

Studying his profile and day-old beard scruff, I joke, “Next thing you know, you’ll be yelling at kids to get off your lawn.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

Bastien is oblivious to my trance and leans back, shaking his head. “Don’t you ever get bored of this?”

With him not so close, my brain function improves. “It’s not so bad. Some of these worlds can be fun. They’re safe, at least. What about you? What fills your weekend if not wild parties?”

“I work on my house, work out. Read.”

“Oh yeah? What do you read?”

“Science fiction, believe it or not,” he confesses, surprising me.

A laugh bubbles forth. I can’t help it. Bastien pouts, “What?”

“I wouldn’t have believed it. You’re just as much a nerd as I am.”

I point to my bookshelf, filled to the brim with sci-fi titles. Before Bash can respond, my system chirps with a notification. “That’s him,” I announce. Then, after accepting the private chat request, I crack my knuckles. “It’s show time.”

Bastien

Right away, it’s obvious this asshole isn’t pretending to be a kid. He’s not using any of the fucked-up code everyone else is so fond of. Birdie continues using the odd language but backs it down enough that the kiddie fiddler and I can understand her.

What blows my mind is how quickly the conversation turns sexual. I won't lie. I'm struggling to sit here and watch. I'm very much disgusted by the bastard's attempt to seduce who he thinks is a fifteen-year-old girl. At the same time, sitting so close to Birdie while all these dirty suggestions are being discussed is turning me the hell on.

The dichotomy pisses me off and gets worse the longer this goes on. The worst part is that Birdie talks as she types, and my dick reacts to every filthy thing that comes out of her mouth.

Eventually, the target suggests meeting so they can do these things in person. Birdie balks at his request, purposefully acting like a kid who only wants to play with fire via sexting. She ends the session with a promise to think about it.

By then, I'm fuming. Birdie turns around, completely unaffected, and I react without thought. "There's no way in hell you're meeting this guy."

Birdie shrugs as though my order doesn't carry any weight, which it doesn't. Shit. "Well, that's my preference, but I'll do whatever I have to do to help the police get this man off the street. Either way, I'm pretty sure it's not up to you."

The fuck, she just didn't. Feeling rage building, I jump out of my chair and cross the room to be out of arm's reach. The woman just doesn't get it. "You already possibly have one of these guys after you. You watch the news much lately?"

"Um, no. What does that have to do with anything?"

"You should check sometime. You might find it interesting. Did you know the state and local DAs are implementing their own version of bail reform? Do you know what that means?"

Birdie's voice rises in response to mine. "I obviously don't."

“Let me help you out, then. For people arrested for non-violent crimes, there is no bail requirement.”

Birdie doesn't react, which further sets me off. I know she's smarter than this. “That means this guy, and probably the one I chased off, would be back on the street in hours if not minutes. If that's not clear enough, let me paint it for you this way. At first, you're just a screen name to these assholes. Once things progress enough, you're a picture, a real person.

“If a target sees you in person and gets arrested, he'll know it was you that set him up. Not some fake profile—you. These genius state attorneys who don't think sex crimes qualify as violent will let him go. He could come gunning for you.”

Birdie scoffs and rolls her eyes, making my hands twitch. “If he were able to find me. I've been careful.”

Now, I have to shove my hands in my pockets. Voice dropping low, I snarl, “You do remember why I'm here, right? Maybe someone's already found you.”

Birdie goes quiet, and I know I've finally got her attention. “So, what do I do? Let him go? Now that he's ready to meet, if I refuse altogether, I'll lose him. What then? He walks and victimizes a real fifteen-year-old.”

“Then I meet him.”

Birdie freezes, fingers twitching like she's experiencing a glitch, and I almost laugh at the face she makes. “You're not exactly his type,” she says.

“I know that, but all you need is incriminating video for the police, right?”

“Yeah. That's the whole point. Especially in this case where he hasn't acknowledged

my presumed age.”

Alright, asshole. Think. What’s your grand plan?

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

“What if I happen to meet him and strike up a conversation? I could convince him we have similar tastes. Get him to tell me of his conquests. Would that work?”

“It might,” Birdie answers. “But only if he identifies his victims in a way that the police can confirm them.”

“Locations and physical descriptions. Got it. I know you’ve been tracking this guy. What does he do on the weekends?”

“He, uh, is a bit of an alcoholic, so he goes to a dog park that’s also a biergarten. He gets to drink and watch kids at the same time.”

“Simple enough. It’s settled, then. I assume the sooner, the better?”

Birdie’s skeptical face hasn’t changed when she says, “I’m sure his next intended victim would appreciate it.”

“Then let’s make a run at him tonight.”

Birdie has progressed from skeptic to full-on shock. “You’re serious.”

“You weren’t?”

“Um. Yeah. I just didn’t expect you to be so gung ho.”

“Well, I am, so we’re doing this. Now, I just need a dog.”

My phone was out of my pocket before I finished speaking. I call up my friend yet again, hoping he'll be on board. "Bash, what's up?"

"I'm calling to see if Captain has plans tonight."

The silence coming from his end says that I've surprised him. "Jackson?"

"You're beginning to worry me, my friend."

Ignoring him, I get right to the point. "I need a favor. I have to go undercover at a dog park and need to borrow Captain for a little while."

"You're not trying to impress a lady by pretending to have a dog, are you?" he jokes.

"No, I'm trying to catch a pedophile before he can hurt a kid."

Jackson's voice hardens when he asks, "This the guy you think might be after Birdie?"

I don't answer his question because doing so would reveal to Birdie that Jackson knows. "Nope. Just a candidate for castration in my book."

"I love my dog."

"I know you do. I would never let anything happen to Captain. She won't be involved. I just need her to get me into the place."

My friend considers the request momentarily before answering, "You can have her on one condition."

I'm thinking he's going to use this to blackmail me into going to another SEAL team

reunion. Instead, he announces, “As long as I go with her.”

I toss a glance toward Birdie and figure another set of eyes on her couldn’t hurt. “Deal.”

We make arrangements to meet at the park at four, planning to stay as long as it takes to get a quasi-confession. Or at least to try.

Until then, Birdie and I work out details, including getting me home to clean up and dress like an overgrown adolescent. While Birdie showers, I look up the dog park, studying the layout, exits, and parking.

Over lunch, we script the scene, with her giving me tips on what to say and what not to say. Until now, I didn’t think about how hard this was going to be. To play the part, I’ll have to let some sickening things cross my lips. Studying Birdie as she checks on our target, I decide I can’t back out now.

Birdie gathers her equipment once she’s done, and the two of us pack into my truck to go to my place. We arrive little more than ten minutes later in a neighborhood a lot like Birdie’s. My house is similar in size to hers, even if the style is a little more modern.

“Make yourself at home,” I say once we’re inside. “I’ll shower and be right out.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

Watching Birdie settle in the living room, I realize how different our living spaces are. Hers is artsy and colorful, with plants and dicks all over the place. Mine is bare. Matching leather furniture and a big-ass TV adorn the living room, but the place is otherwise empty.

I forego shaving to match the devil-may-care persona I plan to project for the op. From my closet, I grab some athletic shorts, a black tee, and my grubbiest hat, which goes on backward. Birdie snickers when I walk back out. “You look like you’re ready for a game of cornhole at a frat party.”

“That’s the idea.”

Gesturing for me to come closer, she says, “All right. Let’s get you set up.”

I do as I’m told, and Birdie lifts her hands toward my head and chuckles. “Um... maybe you should sit down.”

I walk over to the sofa and sit, meaning Birdie now has to stand between my legs to do whatever she’s planning to do to my hat. Her proximity and our current height differential put her breasts right in front of my face.

If that wasn’t bad enough, with every breath I take, Birdie’s scent fills my senses, making me want to lock my arms around her waist and pull her closer.

“Hmm. I’d like to use a few more cameras, but there aren’t as many places on a guy to hide them without being obvious.”

She steps back finally, a good thing. I had resorted to holding my breath to keep from becoming hypnotized by her scent. I take a deep breath, and Birdie hands me an in-ear radio before placing her own. “These will record audio as a backup to the primary camera. We’ll be able to talk to each other, as will Jackson.”

“Sounds good. Let’s go catch this bastard.”

Bastien

Captain, a beautiful four-year-old black boxer, jumps onto the hood of Jackson’s truck, barking as soon as I pull into the parking lot. She hops down the instant I open my door, racing toward me, tongue wagging.

I stoop to pet her, hitting that good spot behind her ear. “Hey, girl. Did you miss me?”

Jackson walks up behind her, reeling in the excess leash rope. “She’s my dog. Why the hell would she miss you?”

Giving Captain a final pat, I stand and accept my friend’s hand. “Thanks for doing this, man.” I let go and gesture to Birdie. “Jackson Bennett, meet Birdie Crenshaw.”

Jackson hands me the leash and approaches. “Some friends of mine are fans of yours.”

At Birdie’s wary expression, he chuckles and explains, “Do the names Leo and Mira Ramsay ring a bell?”

Birdie nods. “You know Skin?”

“Please. I’m technically Skin’s boss.”

The light bulb goes off when she realizes what he means, and I finish their introduction. “Birdie, meet Lieutenant Jackson “Clothespin” Bennett of the US Navy SEALs.”

She adjusts her glasses and tentatively shakes his hand. “I appreciate your help.”

Birdie scans the immediate area and swings her bag around to open the top. “I guess we should get set up.”

Two minutes later, Jackson has his radio in place, and we all are switched on for auto transmission. Birdie double-checks my camera and confirms that it’s recording and the feed is being received. “Ok. We’re ready.”

“Then let’s do this,” I say.

The three of us walk in together, with Birdie and Jackson splitting off while I get Captain checked in. Once she’s green-lighted, I turn her loose and clock my team at a table away from the entrance.

To fit in, I play with Captain for a while and walk her through some of the doggie jungle gyms, all the while listening to a running commentary from Jackson. The bastard is being a little too generous, sharing embarrassing stories about me with Birdie, knowing I can’t break character and stop him.

When he gets to a particularly humiliating story, I pick up a frisbee and bring it up to cover my face. “Shut the fuck up, asshole.”

Birdie’s musical laugh comes through the radio, a much better sound than her anguished cry from last night. Jackson ignores me and continues the twisted tale, embellishing details to make me look even more like an ass.

By now, we've been here about twenty minutes, and I take a circuit around the place, stopping by the bar for a beer to blend in better.

Cracking the seal on the Ghost Train lager, I glance toward my team and notice Birdie's tense posture. I bring the beer to my lips and take a sip, holding it up to shield my mouth. "What's wrong?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

“He’s late,” Birdie says. “I put too much stock in him being predictable. What if he doesn’t show?”

I walk away from the bar and take another real sip. “If you say he’ll show, he’ll show. Give it some more time.”

Another twenty minutes pass, and the rest of my beer has remained untouched. From where I’m watching Captain play in a doggie pool, I keep an eye on the entrance and Birdie, noting that she’s growing more anxious with every minute. I’m just about to reassure her again when the target walks through the gate. “Got him,” I say into the warm beer can.

“I see him,” Birdie reports.

The asshole removes the leash from a sad dog’s collar and walks straight to the bar. Of course, the seat he chooses is one that gives him the best vantage point of a group of teenage girls hovering around the sprinklers.

I mill around a little longer before visiting the bathroom to pour out the rest of my beer. Confirming that the room is empty, I speak freely to Birdie and Jackson. “I’m about to move in.”

Outside, I pretend to gulp down the last of the lager and walk straight toward the bar. The empty can sails into a nearby trash can, catching the man’s attention. That and I intentionally moved into his line of sight. Charles Mercan focuses on my face, and I give him a chin lift before looking away toward the barkeep. “Lager, please.”

I pay for the beer and turn around, leaning against the bar next to Mercan. Pretending to scan the yard for a bit, I take a big swig of the beer and mumble a little louder than just to myself. “That is one tight ass.”

My stare is locked onto the wood fence above the sprinklers, but Mercan doesn’t know that. He attempts to follow my gaze, landing his right where I expected him to, on the teen girls. Because he took the bait, I make a show of noticing and act guilty, backpedaling. “I mean... um... shit.”

I turn my hat around, pull the bill low, and storm off to make it look like I’ve been caught. “Captain,” I call as I sit at an umbrella table near the young women.

The happy boxer bounds up to me carrying a toss ring. I fling it out several times, continuing to look over the heads of the teenagers playing nearby. Now that I’ve aligned myself with Mercan, he will be watching me closely. At least, that’s the goal.

I sneak peeks toward the girls, landing my gaze on anything and everything except human bodies. Alternately, I glance around the yard like someone afraid of being accused of staring at kids.

After a few minutes of this, I set the beer at my hip and call Captain again. As I’d hoped, she stomps all over the place, kicking over the can. This gives me the opening I need.

“Wow,” I hear through the radio. “You’re really good at this,” Birdie says. “You could have been an undercover cop.”

I tried. Failed miserably. Apparently, part of the entry process is seeing how quickly you can be riled up. “Nah. With my well-documented anger issues, I’d be a political liability.”

“That’s such bullshit,” Jackson argues.

Tossing the second empty, I show my wet hip to the barkeep. “Another lager, please. My dog seems determined to make you guys some extra money today.”

Captain, who’s followed me to the bar, nudges my leg with a ball in her mouth. Good girl. I take the ball from her and throw it, grumbling to myself. “That’s the last time, you little cock blocker.”

Mercan laughs, but the sound is anything but pleasant. His roaming eyes and sleazy smile make my skin crawl. Regardless, his reaction presents me with the opportunity I’ve been waiting for. “Seriously. That little bitch has got the worst timing.”

“I take it you don’t like the attention.”

Overtly studying the man, I answer warily, “I don’t mind an audience as long as it’s the right kind.”

“Or the right age,” he says coolly.

Looking left and right for eavesdroppers, I bark, “The fuck are you trying to say?”

The guy puts his hands up. “Nothing. Besides. You don’t have a ring on your finger. You can look as long as you want.”

He leans over then. “As long as you don’t get caught.”

Getting closer. Leveling my most suspicious yet curious glare, I stare at the guy for a moment. Then, by some miracle, a barely legal coed saunters up to the bar, thrusting her chest over the top.

She's so close to me that her arm brushes against mine when reaching for a drink menu. The girl is obviously trying to get my attention. I act uninterested, which isn't hard. Not when I spent last night holding Birdie's body next to mine.

Further distracting me from the tits now touching my bicep, Jackson's voice comes over the radio. "I'm going to get us something to drink. Water, soda, beer?"

"Water's fine," Birdie answers.

Mercan grins, a sick sight. He assumes I'm not attracted to the breasty woman because she's old enough to drink. I'm happy to let him think so because that gets me closer to hearing him brag about his sins.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

The barkeep hands me the new beer right as I hear Birdie over the radio again. “Ow!” followed by a whispered, “Excuse me.”

With me standing next to Mercan, I can’t ask what happened or see Birdie from here. Thankfully, Jackson doesn’t fail me. He makes eye contact with me from the snack bar and asks, “What’s happened?”

“Oh. Nothing,” Birdie answers. “Somebody wasn’t watching where he was going.”

Satisfied that Birdie is ok, I focus on Mercan once again. That is until Birdie speaks again a few seconds later. Her voice is somewhat slurred. “Hot... Water.”

I hear gasps and shrieks through the radio, and then an unfamiliar voice says, “She’s just had a little too much to drink. I’ll take care of her.”

Jackson’s eyes search mine again, thinking the same thing I am. That was a little too close to her mike. Breaking character, I say, “Bennet.”

He jumps out of line and rushes toward Birdie’s location. “I’m on it.”

“What was that?” Mercan asks me.

I hold position and my breath to keep from blowing my cover, but that all goes to hell when I hear Jackson swearing.

I’m pounding pavement on my way to them in the next heartbeat. A small crowd surrounds the area where Birdie and Jackson set up. Mercilessly shoving people out

of the way, I break through the crowd to see Jackson laying Birdie on the turf.

“What’s wrong with her?!”

One of the nosy onlookers volunteers, “It’ll be ok. Her boyfriend went to get her medicine.”

“He did not,” my immediate denial.

“Yeah,” the woman insists. “He said she had too much to drink, and when she called for help, he said she needed her medicine and took off to get it.”

Facing off with the woman, I yell, “No, he did not! I’m her fucking boyfriend.”

I drop to the ground by Birdie’s side, checking her pulse and eyes. “I need a bus, Jackson!”

Jackson points to the woman who spoke up about the fake boyfriend. “You! Call 911!” Then, into his own phone, he says, “Commander, I need you to put in a call to Dillan Knot. It’s an emergency.”

Ignoring them both, I bend down close. “Birdie, can you hear me?”

She moans and opens her eyes but can’t focus or even recognize that I’ve spoken to her. My phone rings in my pocket, but I ignore the call. The ringing stops as I check Birdie for excessive sweating or clammy skin. When it rings again, I pull the device from my pocket and toss it to Jackson.

Sirens sound in the distance as he answers, but I ignore the harried conversation in favor of the EMTs rushing through the crowd of onlookers. “What have we got?” one of them asks as he snaps on a pair of gloves. “I went to get drinks. Some guy ran into

her, and a short time later, she collapsed. The guy that hit her claimed to be her boyfriend before running off.”

“Who are you?”

“The real boyfriend. The other guy claimed she was drunk and needed some medication before he split. I’m guessing our friend scared him away.”

The other medic, who’d begun checking Birdie’s vitals, calls them out. “BP’s low. Respiratory depression,” he reports. “Pulse below normal.”

“What kind of drugs does she take,” I’m asked.

“I can’t give you a medical history, but I guarantee she’s clean. I know this because of where she works.”

“Well, she’s definitely under the influence of something. She’s exhibiting signs of overdose.”

I bend down once again, brushing her hair off her forehead. “Dammit, Birdie. What happened?”

The medics shove me out of the way to load her onto a gurney, and I look around to seek out Jackson. “I’m going with her. You deal with the police. Tell them to get in touch with a Detective Cooper. He’s local.”

Grabbing Birdie’s bag, I keep pace with the medical crew on their way out of the park. “Where are you taking her?”

“Princess Anne,” the driver answers.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

Knowing Jackson would have heard his response, I trail the gurney to the waiting bus. I more or less stand guard at the rear until the ambulance doors are slammed shut, and then I race to my truck to follow.

I keep on the ambulance's back bumper, reaching the hospital at the same time it does, and slide into a spot outside emergency.

From there, I sprint to the ambulance in time to open the rear doors. Birdie's eyes are open now, but when I call out her name, she doesn't respond. She doesn't see me, making the overdose diagnosis much more tangible. My legs go weak at the thought of losing her like this.

"Any word?" a low voice laced with fury growls behind me.

"You got here fast," I say to my boss.

Knot and I watch the medics wheel Birdie inside, and a punishing grip on my shoulder keeps me from following.

"I think it's time you and I had a little talk."

Birdie

"Birdie, dammit. Knock it off."

At Detective Cooper's sharp command, I stop batting away the bright lights and turn toward his voice. The image is too blurry to make out, so I focus on the gray blob

until a human form takes shape. “Cooper?”

He comes closer, helping me see him better, though it won’t be enough since I don’t have my glasses on. “What’s... what happened?”

“That’s what I’d like to know. I’m sitting at home, recovering from surgery, when I get a call from dispatch. A Navy SEAL named Jackson Bennett reported that you were the victim of either a failed kidnapping or murder attempt. It’s my job to find out which.”

My brain’s a little slow on the uptake, but I get stuck on the name he mentioned. “Who?”

“You don’t know any Jackson Bennett?”

“Um, no.”

A man in a lab coat steps closer and says, “It’s possible, Detective, that the ketamine has caused retrograde amnesia. Ms. Crenshaw might not recover memories from her attack.”

“Attack? Can someone tell me what’s going on?”

“We’ll get to that,” Cooper promises. “What is the last thing you remember?”

Warm apples. “Bash. He made breakfast.”

“Do you mean Bastien Laurent?”

I nod absently, mind wandering to what I could have gotten myself into. “I’ll talk to him next,” Cooper announces. “Since you’re awake, you have a visitor if you feel up

to it.”

My answer is to nod again, and Detective Cooper opens the door. None other than Dillan Knot walks in and rushes to my bedside. He places his hand over mine and leans down close enough for me to see his face clearly. “You scared the hell out of me. Are you all right?”

“I don’t know. I guess so. Where’s Bastien?”

“He’s outside waiting for Bennet to arrive from the dog park.”

“Dog park? Who is this Bennett everybody keeps talking about?”

Knot turns and gives a questioning look to the doctor, who shakes his head. Knot returns his gaze to me and answers, “Laurent served with him. Apparently, the two were helping you with a sting operation.”

My breath catches in my throat. Oh god. Please tell me my boss doesn’t know. The machines I’m attached to start beeping, and Knot bends and whispers, “Don’t worry, Birdie. I’ve known for a long, long time.”

My breathing normalizes, and he adds, “I left you alone because you were doing a good job and being smart about it. And it seemed like something you needed to do. I never had a reason to worry until now. Laurent tells me that someone has been following you.”

The blue car. Cooper perks up and steps closer to the bed. “That was just once, I think.” Addressing Cooper directly, I add, “The night you couldn’t make it. Someone followed me home. I thought it was Bastien, but it wasn’t. We’ve been looking for the car without any luck.”

Without a word, Detective Cooper goes to the door again. “Get in here. Both of you.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

Bastien and another man walk in, and Bash rushes to my bedside. “You’re okay?”

“I’m okay.” Looking to the other man, I ask, “Who’s your friend?”

Bastien’s brows knit together in confusion, and he snaps upright again. “This is Clothespin. He went to the dog park with us because we needed to borrow his dog. He sat with you the whole time I was undercover. You don’t remember?”

I turn to study the man. He’s maybe a couple of years older than Bastien. Built and ruggedly handsome, just not as much as Bastien, in my opinion. Nothing about him seems familiar. “The doctor said the drug I was given wiped my memory of everything past breakfast. What were those apple things called again?”

Bastien pulls his hat off and drops his head. “Then he was trying to kill her. The EMTs said they thought she’d overdosed on something.”

“Not quite an overdose,” the doctor says. “The dosage was strong enough to incapacitate her but not cause death.”

Throat suddenly thick, I swallow and ask, “For what purpose?”

Knot pipes up when no one else does. “My guess is that he was trying to make you disappear.”

“Oh shit.”

The crowded space grows even more packed when another body enters the room.

This one I do recognize. He's Cooper's partner. Speaking to Cooper and pointing to Bastien and the other man, he says, "I deposed these guys while you had your hands full. Until we get the official medical reports, we're all wrapped up here."

Detective Cooper nods and walks toward the bed again, displacing Bastien. "Once you're out of here, I'd like you to come to the station to give a statement."

"I don't remember anything, remember?"

"I'd like to hear more about the night you were followed home," he replies.

"Okay."

The two cops exit the room, leaving Bastien, Knot, Bastien's friend, and the doctor.

"How long will she be here," my boss asks.

"Now that she's awake and showing no adverse effects besides the memory loss, I'll be comfortable discharging her as soon as—" he points to a bag of clear fluids hanging from an IV pole "—this is empty."

The doctor takes his leave then, and I find myself alone with three very angry males.

"So... how much trouble am I in?"

"You didn't do anything wrong," the stranger insists. "It's my fault. I left your side to get us some water."

"Stop," Bastien tells the man. "This isn't on you. We had no reason to think that Birdie was in danger. It's not even like we were followed to the dog park. I checked."

"Well, if you weren't followed, how did some asshole find Birdie?" our boss demands.

“That’s what I can’t figure out,” Bastien confesses. “We were in my truck. Birdie rode with me to my place, and from there, we went straight to the biergarten.”

Knot’s expression is dire. “Give me your keys.”

Bastien gives them up and accepts the set Knot hands him in return. During the exchange, Knot asks, “What’s your home security like?”

“Standard. No exterior cameras. I haven’t gotten around to upgrading yet.”

“You might want to get on that. Whoever this is found you without following. He probably tagged you. I’m taking your truck to get scanned for tracking devices.”

Knot pats my hand and adds, “Make sure she gets home safe.” He turns for the door, nodding at Bennett on his way out.

Bastien’s friend comes closer then, his stony face finally coming into focus. “I hate that you don’t remember me. I told you some pretty good stories about our boy here. Maybe I can tell you again someday.”

“I’m sure I’ll like them just as much as the first time.”

With a wink for me and a pat on Bastien’s back, Jackson leaves. Bastien hasn’t moved from his spot. He looks miserable, making me feel guilty. Wanting to snap him out of this funk, I ask, “What were we doing at a dog park?”

Bastien leans forward onto his elbows and drops his head. Next, he pulls his cap off and turns it over several times. “Executing a stupid idea.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

Knowing my tendency to go overboard, I draw inward and drop my eyes to my lap. “I sucked you into one of my stings, didn’t I?”

Bastien snickers, but there’s no humor in the sound. “No. This little experiment was my idea. I thought I could role-play and get Mercan to confess to me. It would’ve worked, too. I almost had him, but then someone came after you.”

Bringing a hand to my face. I squeeze my temples. “I was still hoping I was crazy, but this means the guy in the blue car is real.”

“Looks that way,” Bastien confirms.

“So, what now?”

“Well, that volunteer bodyguard assignment you didn’t like is now non-negotiable.”

Funny. I was under the impression that it never was. Before I can point that out, a knock at the door precedes a nurse coming in with a wheelchair. “It’s time to get you out of here. Our orderlies are backed up, so you’ll taste freedom faster if your friend wheels you out.”

The woman removes the IV and has me sign some papers. Bastien steps into the hall for me to dress, and the nurse helps me into the wheelchair. Then she’s gone, and Bastien reenters the room. Without a word, he steps behind me and pushes the wheelchair toward the elevator.

The situation is so unbelievable; I can’t help but laugh. Laugh to keep from crying. “I

can't imagine what's so funny," Bastien says.

I fight to reign in my crazy reaction to the absolute insanity of the day. "I'm glad I'm in the hospital instead of some dirtbag's trunk. At the same time, I hate that I'm in a hospital because Knot threatened to kill you if I ended up here. And I'm hungry."

At the elevator lobby, I push out of the chair and roll the thing to an empty corner. Bastien's face pinches like he wants to argue about me being stubborn, but wisely, he keeps his mouth shut. I'd sure hate to have to remind him of the tree incident. He wasn't exactly a shining example of level-headedness that day.

I don't speak to Bastien during the drive to my house, not even when he stops at a drive-through to pick up some food. Though I started out scared and angry when I woke up, now, I'm just embarrassed.

Something like this wouldn't have happened to Sadie or Chelsea. Poor Bastien. He's saddled with little Miss Naïve, who couldn't defend herself against an overzealous bunny rabbit.

As I munch on a curly fry, the clock in Knot's Escalade reads eleven forty p.m. I've lost half a day's memories because of a drug I was given. That's unbelievable, not to mention infuriating. I know I spent the day with Bastien, but I don't know what we did. What we talked about. For all I know, he could have confessed his undying love and suggested we run off to Vegas to get married, but then changed his mind when I let myself get nearly kidnapped.

The only things I know about the evening were conveyed to me by other people. Bastien and Jackson Bennet reported that I'd complained about someone running into me at the park. Because I'd called out in pain, the doctor cleared the room of everyone except a nurse and searched every inch of my skin until he found what he'd been looking for. A puncture wound on my left thigh indicated where I'd been

injected with the ketamine.

Eventually, the doctor determined that the amount in my system was below the danger threshold. The news was both good and bad. It wasn't attempted murder. At least I won't have to worry about multiple attempts on my life. On the flip side, the doctor's conclusion confirmed my biggest fear. The goal was kidnap. I'm having a little trouble processing that information.

Lost in my thoughts, I'm startled when Bastien knocks on my window. I hadn't even noticed that we'd arrived at my house. Releasing the seatbelt, I move to get out but pause, sensing Bastien has something to say. When he finds his voice, my insides tighten at his words. "I didn't argue with Knot at the hospital about bringing you home, but now that we're here, I can't stomach the thought of you being alone."

Before my stupid mouth suggests something completely crazy—that he stay with me—I rush to say, "I won't be. Well, not for long, anyway. I plan to be here just long enough to pack up some stuff and go stay in the dorm at work. I'm hoping the police can ID the guy and pick him up within the next few days."

Bastien trains his eyes down the street. "And if they don't?" he asks without looking at me.

What if, indeed? "One day at a time, Bastien. That's all I can focus on right now."

With a nod, he says, "Well, if it's all right with you, I'd like to stick around and see that you get to the compound okay."

"That would make me feel a lot better. Thanks."

My easy concession does nothing to ease the worry weighing down Bastien's brow. His face is still drawn and his shoulders still tense. Sensing he has more to say, I

remain seated. Bastien doesn't make me wait long. "You know. It's late. I could stay. Keep watch. Then you could get some sleep tonight and do all this in the morning."

My heart pounds at his suggestion. I'm reading too much into his offer because I want it to mean something. Whispering to hide just how affected I am, I say, "Okay. Thanks."

Bastien nods, takes my hand, and leads me inside. Then, as I'm finally walking toward my bedroom, he says, "I'm sorry about today. I should've... I didn't think... I'm sorry."

Dropping my purse, I rush over and place both hands on his shoulders, pulling him down to my eye level. "It wasn't your fault, Bastien. Neither one of us can see the future. Even the great Dillan Knot didn't see this coming, and I just found out that he's known about my hobby for years. Besides, while I may not remember, and despite what you said, I know we wouldn't have been there unless I had asked."

Without responding, Bastien backs out of my grip. He spins toward the living room, leaving me watching his back as he walks away, taking my breath with him.

I don't understand. Bastien's sudden coldness confuses me. After confessing my darkest sin, he held me all night in my bed. No, there wasn't some great declaration of love, but I thought it meant something. But now, after being drugged and almost kidnapped... nothing.

Knot could have said something to make him back off. Or it could be that Bastien never had a personal interest. Only by chance was he there to scare off Tom, after all. That scenario, I refuse to accept. There's no way he'd have stayed the night if he felt nothing.

In any case, agonizing over it isn't helping. It's been a hell of a day, and I should get

some rest. Picking up my discarded purse, I step inside my room and pause. There is one more possibility—and this is wishful thinking here. Maybe Bastien is only being careful with me because I went through a traumatizing event. That's more plausible. He's just looking out for me again, not wanting to push or overstep. It's completely unnecessary, and I intend to tell him just that.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

I walk right back out of my bedroom, following Bastien's course to the main part of the house. Bash is in the living room, standing in front of the sofa with his shirt and shoes off. Hearing my quiet steps, he turns as I approach. "What's wrong?"

I close the last few feet, not answering his question. I respond only when I'm close enough to feel the heat from his skin. A single, shaking hand lifts, touching the hard planes of his chest. Bastien freezes, and his breath catches.

Spurred on by his sharp inhalation, I push up on my toes and touch my lips to his. Bastien's body is so warm but so rigid. My other hand joins the first, and then both slide up to wrap around his neck. Finally, he melts into my kiss.

Amazingly, the man whose body was carved from stone has the most supple, soft lips. The stubble on his chin is rough against my skin but creates a delicious contrast—an instant addiction.

Before long, Bastien takes over completely, grasping my waist with his big hands and pinning me to the nearest wall. Fireworks shoot off all over my body, leaving little pinpricks of awareness on my skin as he plunders my mouth.

With a death grip on Bastien's shoulders, I whimper, begging for more. I want everything. At the sound, Bastien draws back sharply, dropping my leg that he'd lifted to wrap around his hip.

"What is it?" I gasped, still vibrating with anticipation.

Bastien steps toward the sofa, reaching for and yanking on his shirt. After, he scrubs a

hand over his angry, disgusted face. “I can’t do this,” he growls.

I push off the wall and reach for his hand, only for him to pull it away. “You’re not taking advantage of me if that’s what you’re worried about. I came on to you, remember?”

“That’s not what I mean,” he fires back.

Thrown by his vehemence, I whisper, “Then what do you mean? I don’t understand.”

He throws his head back and sighs. “I’m a dangerous man, Birdie, too dangerous to have anything more than casual relationships. You’re worth more than that. Worth too much to let me ruin you.”

I step closer again, only for Bastien to retreat as if he’s afraid for me to touch him. “I still don’t understand. What are you talking about?”

“I’m my father’s son. My name may be different, but that bastard’s blood still runs through my veins.”

I try to defend Bastien, but he cuts me off. “Nothing you want to say will change the truth. I’ve heard it all several times already. What I can’t get anyone else to understand is he didn’t always, but there was a point where he began beating my mother. My father was a decent man until he wasn’t. I have no idea what triggered the monster inside, but that man raised me, and I see him every time I look in the mirror. I already know I share his violent temper. I won’t risk doing to any woman what he did to my mother.”

So, he does want me and thinks he has to protect me from himself. Unbelievable. I don’t care that Bastien thinks he’s heard it all before. There’s no way I can keep silent. “You are not your father. I know you well enough to believe you could never

do the things he did.”

He shakes his head in immediate denial. “You’re wrong, Birdie. Because of mine and my father’s violent temper, I’ve already lost two of the most important things in my life, my mother and my career in the SEALs.”

“How can you say that? Yes, your father was a monster, but you didn’t go on some rage-induced rampage. Defending someone who can’t defend themselves is an honorable thing. I’m sorry you lost your career over it, that the Navy felt it needed to cover its ass instead of protecting you and the female sailor. But I’m telling you, any decent man would have and should have done the same thing. You are way too conscientious to ever let yourself become what you hate. You have to see that.”

Bastien scoffs and rolls his eyes like he’s dealing with a naïve child. “You don’t know the beast inside, Birdie. No one does. And I’m going to make sure you never do.”

Bastien looks away toward the door. The hard set to his jaw means he’s finished with the discussion and is considering leaving. He’s wrong about everything but intent on allowing his father’s influence to keep him bound.

He was right about one thing. My words meant nothing. Any further conversation would be awkward, so I keep quiet and return to my room. I swipe away a hot, angry tear once I shut the door. What hurts worse? Being rejected or not actually being rejected but shut down anyway? Too close to call.

So, Bastien’s made up his mind. He’s determined to punish himself for his father’s sins and won’t listen to reason. I can understand his rejecting others’ words. They’ve never helped me forgive myself. I can’t give up, though. Bastien needs help, and I think I’m the only one for the job. Fearing a monster inside isn’t the same as being one. I should know.

I'm going to help Bastien. This beast he's so afraid of, Bastien's wrong about him. And I plan to prove it.

Birdie

"How the hell am I supposed to do this?"

The ceiling above my bed fails to offer a decent answer or sensible advice. Even worse, the demons are back, mocking me. What right do you have to try and fix anyone? How can you help him if you can't help yourself?

The demons have a good point. I have no answer for these questions harder than Bastien's head. But what if? Maybe we could fix each other. Not that I deserve absolution, but what if?

The rest of the night is rough and passes slowly without much rest. Cranky from the lack of sleep and still in my pajamas, I tiptoe to the kitchen for some coffee.

It comes as no surprise that my dreams failed to produce some grand epiphany to help Bastien see beyond the dark shadow left by his father. Why would they? I'm constantly reminded that I have to be batshit for thinking I have license to try to help him at all.

Speaking of batshit, my only idea involves doing something so incredibly stupid that I'd have to be crazy to try it. Or desperate. Good thing I'm both.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:32 am

Pulling a cup from the cabinet, I move on autopilot, thinking through how this might turn out. If my plan works, I could end up dead, silencing the demons for good. Or Bastien and I could end up fighting our demons together.

I glance around the kitchen at my solitary life filled with ceramic dicks and shake my head. Okay, maybe I'm a little crazy myself, not to mention lonely. Exhausting all other arguments, the only question left worth asking is, what the hell have I got to lose?

Another point to the demons is that I even considered going through with my crazy plan... and have apparently now decided in favor of it.

It probably means I'm insane, but I'm going to push Bastien, intentionally get under his skin. I'll test his patience and drive him mad until I prove my point that there's no way he could hit a woman, even provoked.

Assuming my theory is correct, his attraction to me won't let him walk away easily. If I'm wrong, he'll be gone in under three seconds. All I have to do now is figure out how to do it, how to push him without being bratty.

The last drops of coffee sputter out of the machine, and I pull the cup off to dress it how I like. Instead of working on a plan, I think about last night's kiss while stirring my coffee. Bastien's hold on my body was tight, possessive. The way he pinned me to the wall, his hungry mouth, his erection straining the fabric of his shorts, everything was straight out of an erotic fantasy land. He absolutely hijacked the moment, which I absolutely didn't mind.

Even though he backed off, Bastien made one thing abundantly clear. He wants me. As much as he fears becoming his father, he can't seem to fight the urge to be near me. At least I've got that point going in my favor.

Noise from the living room draws me out of my fantasy. I hurriedly finish the coffee and ready myself for what I expect to be an awkward Sunday morning. "Your bed was much more comfortable than your sofa," Bastien claims while flexing his neck.

"Of course. That's because I was in it."

"Birdie," he growls in warning.

"Yes, Bastien?" I ask sweetly.

He groans and steals my coffee before storming back to the living room.

Game on.

Yep. I just figured out my strategy. Wearing a smile on my face, I pull some cinnamon rolls from a bag in the freezer, plop them on a baking pan, and make another cup of coffee. This one, I take back to my room.

I have a shower and pack some things for what I hope is a short stay on the compound. Once that's done, I haul my crap to the entry hall and return to the kitchen to pop the not-homemade pastries in the oven. I'm no French chef like Monsieur Laurent, but I can operate an oven. While those bake, I pull some sausage patties from the freezer and grab a pan from the hanging rack.

Bastien returns to the kitchen, holding the empty mug, and approaches the table warily. I barely glance his way before focusing on the pan of sausage—half-focusing, anyway. When I'm not tending to the sizzling meat, I'm putting on a show.

After our earlier encounter and showering, I dressed in my favorite jeans. Those jeans.

Every girl has a pair of those jeans. Ones that she feels sexy in. I paired mine with a fluttery floral top with a peek-a-boo crisscross back. I've also put my hair up so it doesn't cover any skin exposed by the shirt's design.

I stretch to reach the utensils instead of side-stepping. Later, I bend over to peek at the rolls instead of stooping. This mating dance goes on for a while, and then I hear, "I know what you're doing, Birdie. Knock it off."

Using my most innocent voice, I ask, "You want me to quit making breakfast?"

Since the sausages are done anyway, I turn off the eye and reach into an upper cabinet for plates. Of course, I make sure to poke out my butt as I do.

The next thing I know, Bastien presses himself against my back, crotch to shoulder, slightly bending me over the counter. With his hands on the granite and mouth to my ear, he rumbles, "I've been trained to withstand torture, Petit Oiseau. You shaking that ass in front of my face won't work. It'll only get you spanked."

After delicious shivers roll down my entire body, uncontrollable laughter bubbles up from my middle. "God, I hope you didn't mean that as a threat. Most women would form a line down the street for you to spank them."

Bastien scrambles away, and I turn around to see him wearing a comically horrified expression. "You're making that up."

I force the laughter down enough to say, "I swear, I'm not. Haven't you ever seen...?" I stop, realizing how ridiculous the question is. There's no way he's seen *Fifty Shades*. "Never mind. Just... if you want to threaten a woman, you better come up

with something else because that will definitely not work.”

Bastien nods solemnly. “Noted, though I don’t actually want to threaten any woman.”

“We’ll see,” I reply under my breath.

Bastien’s eyes narrow, indicating he heard me. He doesn’t comment, however.

Breakfast is soon finished despite my occasional chuckles at Bastien’s threat, and then we’re heading out. My stuff gets loaded into the back of my SUV, and I climb behind the wheel.

We’re both headed to the Knot Corp compound, me to have a fortress to protect me, and Bastien to trade in Knot’s Escalade for his truck.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

My eyes constantly flit to the rear-view mirrors, but I don't notice a blue car following me during the trip. Bastien blocks most of my view, but I'm sure he's watching as well. If we'd picked up a tail, he would have told me.

The guard at the gate doesn't seem surprised to see me mid-morning on a Sunday. "Good morning, Ms. Crenshaw. The boss wants your car to be scanned for trackers. Park your car under the portico, and it'll be taken care of for you."

"Do you know if anything was found in Bastien's truck?"

"Sorry, Birdie. I wasn't informed. I'll have someone meet you for your keys. He'll be able to tell you more."

"Thanks."

I pull through, leaving Bastien to talk with the guard, anxious to get a report on whatever tracking system was used to find me yesterday. Frank, a fifty-something, retired Marine, waits at the entrance for me. "Morning, Frank," I say when he opens my door. "I'm surprised to see you here on a Sunday."

"Ms. Crenshaw," he says in greeting. "When I heard about what happened and that Knot thought you'd been tracked, I came in to see to the situation myself."

He follows me to the back, where I unload my weekender and computer bag. "I'll drive your car to the motor pool for a thorough scan. You can pick up the keys from the security desk this afternoon."

Hoping the answer is no, I ask, “That’s fine. Did you find anything in the scan of Bastien’s truck?”

Frank’s grim expression means the news is bad. “Yes. I could give you the basics, but the full report has already been sent to you and the boss.”

With a nod, I haul my bags inside and rush to my office. Don’t freak out, Birdie. Remain objective and keep a cool head.

Until now, I hadn’t let myself dwell on the possibility that someone had been watching my every move, intent on abducting me. Guilt settles heavily on my shoulders when I realize the culprit would have had to place the tracker in Bastien’s truck while we slept. And now, the bastard knows where Bastien lives.

As I push through my office door, I give up any hope of logical detachment. This bastard came for me, but since he failed, he might go after Bastien for getting in his way. There’s no way I can let that happen.

Barely a minute later, my computer is on, and I’m pouring through the report when a big body drops into one of my guest chairs. “What’s the story?” Bastien asks.

“A tracker was found attached to your truck.”

Despite the temper he likes to warn me about continually, Bastien doesn’t react to the news. I look up from the screen to find him studying me. “You don’t seem surprised,” I say.

“No. Knot was right. It’s the only thing that makes sense. How else would this guy have known to look for you at a dog park?”

Bastien leans forward, placing his forearms on my desk. “Did our people locate the

signal following it?”

“No such luck. The device was low-energy Bluetooth, the kind you can get from any store selling cell phone accessories. You can even find them at many gas stations. The devices are anonymous to everyone except the person who’s tracking them. Not even the manufacturer can pull owner information off the device. Even if they could, there’s a good chance the user is set up on a burner phone under a fake name.”

“So, basically, the tracker is a dead end.”

I lean back in my seat and sigh. “Yep. My car is being scanned now, but given this information, it doesn’t matter what they find. At this point, I can only wait and hope the police make an ID on our asshole.”

Bastien pushes up from the chair and says, “So, you’re going to stay here. All day.”

There’s no point in arguing, even if I had reason to. “Yeah. I’ve got some work I can do, and though there isn’t hot food in the café, there’s the usual weekend cold fare.”

Bastien looks anywhere but my face and nods. “Since you’ll be safe here, I’ll leave you to your work.”

I know why he wants to rush off, or at least I’m semi-confident I know why. Still, it stings that he’s so eager to get away from me. Just before he disappears through the door, I call out, “Bastien.”

He turns slightly, the tightness in his eyes telling me he’s worried about what might come out of my mouth. I’d be lying if I said that didn’t hurt just as much. Holding back a sigh, I say, “Thank you for looking out for me.”

Bastien’s shoulders sag in relief. “Anytime, Birdie.”

And then he's gone.

Bastien

Walking from Birdie's office, I finger the keys in my pocket, the ones just given back to me by security. I'm finding it hard to leave. My steps grow slower and heavier the closer I get to the entrance, which is precisely why I have to go. I've gotten too close already, and my stupid ass has nearly gotten Birdie killed.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

I suppose that's the only reason I kissed her like I did. I'll never experience it again, and knowing what I almost allowed to happen, I deserve to have that memory torture me for a very long time.

Finally, in my truck, I fly from the compound and across the city toward the beach. I'm still in yesterday's disguise of athletic shorts and running shoes, so I plan to do a long, soft-sand run to add to my punishment.

The sky is a patchwork of clouds ranging from heavy gray to almost black, a continuation of our unpredictable weather. Fine. It suits my mood. I strip off my hat and shirt, stow my phone, and set off for the sand.

Three miles, a lot of sweat, and plenty of self-lecture later, I return to my truck. The sight at the rear has me nearly spinning right back around to go for another run. "How the hell did you find me?"

Jackson winks and offers me a bottle of water. I accept without thanks and take a few big gulps while he snickers. "A gift from Birdie. Yesterday, she explained to me all about her homemade app she put on your phone to record and upload. Funny thing, that software. It shows the user's location. I had her put the app on my phone to record any important observations I made on my trek to the snack bar. It was nice to have when you weren't answering your phone."

"So, you've found me. Tag, you're it?"

Jackson laughs, lowers my tailgate, and takes a seat on it. "How's Birdie?"

“She’s fine. She’s sequestered inside the compound until the police find the guy that drugged her.”

I know the man well enough to know that he’s holding back what he really wants to say when he asks, “Any word on that?”

“Not that I’ve heard. I’m not exactly in the police loop.”

“That’s a crock of shit. It’s not like Birdie won’t tell you every word they say.”

When I remain quiet, he prods. “Unless...”

I stare out over the angry ocean instead of at my friend, not wanting to admit to anything. No matter. The bastard could always read my mind.

“You jackass. You did something stupid, didn’t you?”

Jackson hops off the truck to pace a few feet away. When he’s built up a good head of steam, he whirls on me. “I don’t believe you, man. I always thought all this bullshit with your dad was stupid, but I hoped you’d let it go when you found the right woman. Well, I was wrong because here you are, being an absolute moron.”

I dismiss his claim with a shrug. “Say what you want, Clothespin. I don’t care. I know myself better than you do. I won’t make a second victim out of Birdie.”

He throws his arms up. “Mother fucker.”

Jackson’s seriously worked up and pissed off, two things I’ve never seen before coming from the man. He storms the few feet separating us and gouges his finger into my chest. “Let me tell you something, dickhead. The only reason I’m still in the Navy, and you’re not, is that you flattened that asshole lieutenant before I could get to

him. So, don't make yourself out to be some martyr."

I make no attempt to move his finger but say, "I know what I am."

Jackson's dark laugh is ominous as he backs up a step. "You know what? You're right. You refuse to take up with Birdie because you're afraid you'd hurt her. Well, congratulations, asshole. You've already fucking done it."

Now, I'm the one advancing. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Mainly, that you're an idiot. I learned two things about Birdie Crenshaw during our time together in that park. Number one, she's the smartest person either of us knows, and two, she's over the moon for you. It seems you've been paying her a lot of attention lately. You didn't give her any shit about hunting but volunteered to help. That sort of thing leaves an impression on a woman.

"Something happened that caused you to develop feelings for her. You couldn't help getting close and showing her support at that point. Then, I'm guessing, just guessing, you planned to walk away, sacrificing your own heart to save her from yourself. You wanted to look at your face in the mirror and feel vindicated by paying some bullshit debt to the universe."

"Shut the fuck up, Bennett."

"Why? Because I'm right? Well, listen up, asshole. I ain't done yet. You made Birdie want you just so you get to walk away, the bigger man than your father. Guess what that means?" he yells. "You've hurt the woman, even if she doesn't know it yet. So, again, I say congratulations. You got your wish. You know what else? You've turned out just like him."

Jackson turns for his truck, and I chase after him, grabbing his arm and getting in his

face. “I am nothing like that sorry excuse for a man!”

Jackson yanks free from my grip and looks out over the ocean and shore, anywhere but at me. “There are plenty more ways to break a woman than your fists. You just chose another way.”

Without another word, my best friend climbs behind the wheel of his truck and drives away.

I’m left choking on his words. I wish I were the kind of bastard he described. I wish I could turn it off and take Birdie for my own. But Jackson doesn’t know the anger that burns through my veins. He doesn’t know that I constantly fight to reign in my rage every time I step into the sparring ring at work. I fear I’d kill my opponent after a well-placed punch if I didn’t.

Putting my hands on Birdie, even just once, might bruise her, but it would destroy me. I don’t want to see fear in her eyes, and I don’t want to see the devil in mine.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

As I stare out over the water, a niggling voice in my head spies an opportunity and urges me to run headlong into the waves and never come back. Why suffer a miserable existence? End the pain now.

I don't realize I've crept toward the rising tide until the water nearly touches my shoes. "I won't do it. I don't want to be a monster like him, but even more, I don't want to be the coward he was."

The next day, I show up for work at the last possible minute and keep to myself, only doing the minimum before cutting out as soon as I'm able. Tuesday goes pretty much the same. I haven't spoken to Birdie, Jackson, or Knot, and as much as I hate to admit it, I feel like shit because of it.

I've had plenty of moments where I wondered if Jackson could be right, if I am being stupid. Shortly after, I always remember what my father's public defender argued when vying for a lighter sentence. Early onset dementia caused him to become violent.

While the judge dismissed the claim of the questionable medical diagnosis, the seed was planted, and I've never forgotten it. Regardless of what Jackson thinks, I've decided to take the path of least regret.

Wednesday morning, I enter the training room a little before our scheduled session. My mood this morning is dark, and I want to work on the bags before sparring to ensure I don't take my anger out on an innocent opponent.

The decision turns out to be a mistake.

The first thing I see when I open the training room door is Austin “Spatch” Madden with his arms around Birdie. I see all kinds of red until he lifts her off her feet, yelling at her to break free. Get a grip, asshole. He’s only training her.

Swamped with relief, I berate myself for wanting to rush in and run away at the same time. I’m not a coward, but just this once, running away wins. I snatch some tape off the wall and wrap my hands as I walk to the woods trail to find a tree instead.

I avoid showing up early again on Thursday and go straight to the gym when I arrive on campus. The sight greeting me this morning is no better. Kai stands behind Birdie, spotting her as she does low-bar squats. He’s not looking at her ass as she dips down low, but my blood boils anyway. Fuck this.

I head for the range.

Birdie

“Give me one more, Birdie!” Kai yells.

Legs quivering, I sink low—the easy part. The trip back up is a different story. My legs nearly buckle as if I’m loaded with five tons of extra iron. Calling up every bit of oomph I can muster, I start the trip back up as a groan from deep in the pit of my gut spills from my mouth.

By some miracle, I make it upright again, and Kai guides me back to the rack. As the weight lifts from my hands, I moan. I might collapse on the floor right here. Kai slaps me on the back. “Nice work, Rookie. Now go hit the showers.”

His encouraging gesture nearly sends me to the floor, where I would likely remain for several hours. Thankfully, I hold steady on my feet and only stare at my would-be resting place until my legs can carry me away.

With my overzealous training instructor's back turned, I let the victorious smile slide from my face. It was just as fake as the one I wore for Spatch yesterday. And, just like yesterday, Bastien didn't show.

I'm sure he's around here somewhere, but he's avoiding me now. When Bastien didn't report for Monday's training session that he mandated, I figured I had two options. I could forget the whole learning to defend myself thing, or I could reach out to any of these other capable operatives for help.

Spatch was the obvious choice for hand-to-hand practice. While I would have preferred to weight train with Sadie, her team is currently deployed. Spatch assigned the task to Kai instead.

The former SWAT bomb disposal officer is always a nice guy. During today's training, he was overly friendly and encouraging. Though I'm sure it wasn't intentional, he came across as patronizing. During the entire session, I don't know which I did more of, rolling my eyes or wishing I could punch his teeth in.

With my legs no longer protesting movement, I drag my ass to the locker room and shower to go to work. Well, to go upstairs, anyway.

I've been working a lot since Sunday. There's nothing else to do here except sleep and eat since I haven't returned home. As such, I'm running out of things to do. Detective Cooper has often updated me on the case, though the news hasn't been good.

No cameras caught the attacker's face at the biergarten, and he parked far enough away from the facility that he couldn't be connected with a vehicle. So, basically, the case has gone cold. That doesn't bode well for my current living situation.

I'm stuck here since I'm too afraid to go home where I'd be by myself. Knot and his

wife, Trish, offered to let me stay with them, but there was no point. I'm already secure here, and their vast estate still wouldn't be home. Pretty soon, I'll have to do something or go crazy. Until then, status quo it is.

After getting cleaned up, I take my time grabbing breakfast from the café before going upstairs. My ass hasn't been behind my desk for thirty seconds before a tall figure darkens my door. Expecting, or maybe hoping it's Bastien, I pop my head up only to slump when it's just my boss. "Hi, sir."

"Don't sound so disappointed. Expecting someone else?"

Scoffing in response, I shake my head. "Not really. No."

Knot slants a skeptical brow, but he doesn't call me on it. He appears to be waiting me out, but I'm not in the mood to be manipulated, even with the best intentions. In a quick pivot, I ask, "Any new work for me?"

"No. And with all you've done between Sunday and now, I believe you're all caught up until sometime next year."

"I'm sure that can't be good for my job security."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

Knot closes the door and leans against it. “Your job is secure, Birdie. It’s your mental well-being I’m worried about.”

“Sir, I’m—”

“Hold it.” Knot throws up his hand, and I snap my mouth shut. “The boss is talking now. I’m sending you home and don’t want to see you until Monday. Understand?”

He doesn’t wait for a response but barrels forward in his speech. “I want you out of here so you can get some rest. I’m assigning round-the-clock security at your house to make sure you’re not vulnerable at any time.”

I suppress the desire to roll my eyes. Barely. “With all due respect, sir, that’s ridiculous. I’m fully secure here without anyone else being assigned more work.”

“I’m not changing my mind, Birdie. You’re no good to us in a hospital or a straight jacket, and being young doesn’t make you immune to burnout.”

You have been knocking back Advil like M&Ms this week, I remind myself. “Okay, so I back off the working hours. I was only doing it because I had nothing else to occupy my time.”

“Exactly why you need to get away from here. And before you argue further—by the way, I’ve been way too lax if you’re arguing at all—I need you to be at full capacity at a moment’s notice. You never know when something might come up that needs you to be at peak performance. The life of someone on our team might depend on it.”

“That’s a low blow,” I grumble.

“Whatever gets the job done,” he answers with a smile.

My caring and somewhat overbearing, father-figure boss pushes off the door. “Pack your stuff. I want you out of here within the hour. And Birdie, you’ll be in serious trouble if I find out you haven’t had a nap and a glass of wine by five p.m.”

“You know, Dad, you’ll make your other employees jealous if you keep treating me like one of your kids.”

“And I don’t give a shit,” he says with a wink.

Knot turns to leave, and it’s then that I realize we only have one team not currently deployed. Chelsea and Bastien’s team. “Ah, sir, what is the rotation you’ve scheduled? Just so... you know...” Come up with something fast, Birdie. “...I won’t be caught off-guard in case I have to go somewhere.”

“I’m leaving that up to Chelsea and Bastien.”

My boss eyes me with burning curiosity, so I figure I better stop while I’m ahead. Knot watches me a moment longer before finally walking out of my office. That went well. Not! I let go of my held breath and start packing up my stuff as ordered. Next, I visit the dorm to get my clothes and toiletries.

Now, it’s time to find out who gets the first watch. I walk down to the motor pool, where my car is waiting. The crossover SUV is parked at the curb with one of Knot Corp’s black Tahoes parked behind it.

Kai leans against the hood, waiting. “So, you’re my babysitter for the afternoon?” I ask.

With a nod, he answers, “Until eight. Then Chelsea takes my place.”

I don’t ask him where Bastien falls on the schedule. The last thing I need is for Kai or any of the others to start spreading rumors. Although... it would force Bastien to acknowledge them.

“...coming inside, so don’t worry. Yoo hoo. Birdie.”

“Huh?”

“Wow, you really do need a nap. Since I lost your rapt attention, I’ll repeat. You don’t have to worry about playing hostess. Neither I nor the others will be coming inside your place. Our orders are to watch from a distance. Bastien briefed us on your security system so we’ll know if there has been a breach. Your job is to pretend we’re not there and not to leave until you’ve checked in with whoever is on duty.”

“Sounds simple enough, but...”

“But what?”

I’m embarrassed to say that after all these years of being part of this industry, I’ve never thought of this before now. “Um. If you’re stuck in a car that long, what do you do when you have to, you know?”

Kai only laughs and pushes off the hood. “I’ll follow you. Don’t drive too fast.”

I file the question away to ask Sadie later and get into my car. Kai follows closely until we reach my neighborhood. Then I notice him hanging back and ultimately driving past my house when I turn into my drive.

He doesn’t go far. The unmarked Knot Corp SUV turns at the corner and disappears.

Only a few seconds later, it returns and parks alongside the trees lining the road on the right side of my home. Kai will have a decent line of sight to anyone coming or going down either street and be able to see the front and back of my house.

I climb the two steps of my front porch, feeling weird about going inside alone. Being here, even with a capable security presence, is risky. I'm bait. Knot must want this guy to make a move and for our people to catch him. Otherwise, why would the operatives remain hidden?

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

My code unlocks the front door, and I walk inside, torn about the situation. On the one hand, I want to collapse in complete peace, with no one having anything to report come morning. Conversely, it wouldn't bother me to get woken up in the middle of the night because my attacker tried to break in and got tackled by Chelsea—tough choice.

After peering through the blinds in my office, I take a moment to spritz my orchid before I crash. Knot was right about me being exhausted. I'll be lucky if I even make it to my bed.

After passing out fully dressed, I wake up around eleven, courtesy of my demons and growling stomach. I appease my stomach with a can of soup and attempt to ignore the call to hunt.

Keeping out of my office would probably be easier if I didn't already have Mercan on the hook. Well, had. I don't know for sure one way or another. The disaster in the dog park might have killed my opportunity. I haven't been in contact with him since Sunday and fear he's moved on to a real fifteen-year-old. And there went any chance you had of going back to sleep. My computer blinks on with the push of a button, and I get right to work.

As luck would have it, Mercan is logged in, and I find him quickly. Or, more accurately, he finds me.

Mercan: Where have you been, Sweetness?

Me: Ugh. Grounded. So lame.

Mercan: What did you do?

Me: Got caught sampling my dad's scotch. He's probably more pissed off that it was his favorite than about me drinking.

With his curiosity satisfied, Mercan begins the slow dance of trying to talk me into meeting in person. Like last time, he doesn't acknowledge my projected age, meaning this won't be just a simple info dump to the police tip line. Mercan will have to be caught in person.

I play shy and hard to get for a little longer before appearing to cave. That's when I feed him some shit about my restrictions being lifted on Monday. Mercan makes one last attempt to convince me to meet, and I finally agree.

I choose the same area as last time to be in Cooper's jurisdiction. He wants to be the one to collar the guy and ask about the dog park incident. My cover story for Mercan is that I'll skip my theatre group meeting after school and walk to the local ice cream shop instead.

Mercan agrees without questioning my possible high school age. Dammit. Making one last attempt, I send, I know it's lame to meet there, but I can't drive. I only have my permit.

I wait with bated breath to know if I've got him or if I've just blown the whole damned thing. Mercan takes the bait and gives me the best possible reply. No problem, baby girl. I love all kinds of cream.

Leaning back in my chair, I close my eyes in relief. Got you, you bastard.

I no longer have a reason to keep the conversation going, so with a rushed, Gotta go. My mom's coming, I sign off. Then, because I'm pumped to have gotten what I need,

I go ahead and send all my files and info to Detective Cooper. Hopefully, four days is enough time for him to set things up. I'm just glad he won't need me to be there for the arrest. I don't think my nerves could take any more just yet.

With nothing left to do, I shut down my system and return to bed, wondering who's in the SUV parked a few yards from my window.

Bastien

The Tahoe comes to a stop right behind its twin. At ten till midnight, I'm a few minutes early for my security shift. Parked outside Birdie's house is not a good place for me to be. At least it's late. I volunteered for this shift, figuring Birdie would be asleep.

Being this close during her waking hours would have been a mistake. This way, I'll be gone by four, and she'll never even know I was here.

The passenger door of the SUV opens, and Chelsea slips inside. "Nice night," she muses.

"If you say so."

Of course, my partner isn't fazed by my sour mood. She's immune. I'd swear, she seems to thrive on it at times. Chelsea scans the inside of the SUV as if looking for an audience. Deciding it's clear, she asks casually, "So, how long have you been sleeping with Birdie?"

If she had asked about anyone else, I would have laughed. Since it's Birdie, I don't find it funny at all. "You need to check who you're getting your info from," I say calmly. Barely. "I'm not sleeping with anybody."

Chelsea pats my hand. “That’s good. I’d hate it if I had to train a new partner because Knot killed your ass.”

“Why did you ask? Who the hell’s talking?”

She grins as if I just confirmed her suspicions. “Nobody. This is my own observation of your uncharacteristic behavior as of late. You have been acting a little... ” Chelsea floats her fingers through the air, searching for the right word and pissing me off. “...lovesick.”

Don’t take the bait, Bash. “Your shift is over. I’ll see you later.”

She doesn’t leave, so I shove open the door, step out of the vehicle, and trudge to the SUV parked off my front bumper. Chelsea must have climbed over the console of the one I drove as she pulled away from the curb just a few seconds later, leaving me alone on the quiet street.

An initial inspection of the area turns up the same cars I tagged my first time watching Birdie’s place. The parking configuration is slightly different, but there’s enough continuity to convince me these are neighbors’ cars.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

From what I can see through the trees, Birdie's house looks untouched. The light is on in her office, which could mean nothing, or she's at work hunting another monster. From what Knot told us during our briefing, she was sent home to get some sleep. The temptation is there to call and order Birdie to bed, but I'm afraid of what might be said if I do.

I get confirmation of Birdie's activities an hour later when her office darkens, and her bedroom light comes on soon after. She was working. Rage sours my stomach when I imagine the depraved conversation between her and some sick asshole.

A steady diet of shit is bound to warp the mind. Kind of like an abusive father would. Maybe she's fucked up as bad as I am. I know she was after telling me about Amelia.

I try damned hard not to think about that night, her scent, her skin. The woman had been wrung out and so scared that her whole world would write her off after the truth came out. I can't speak for anyone else that may find out, but I didn't dismiss her. I did the opposite and drew closer like an idiot.

I shouldn't have noticed how much more alluring Birdie's scent was with my nose pressed to her hair. I certainly shouldn't have closed my eyes and reveled in the feeling of Birdie's body nestled so tightly against mine while she slept.

I shouldn't have, but I did. And that's all I've been able to think about since that night. If Jackson was right about anything, it's that. The closer I get to Birdie Crenshaw, the more I want her. Keeping away from her is a living hell.

Fighting my desire to walk into that house is bad enough that I can't sit still in this

damned seat, no matter how hard I try. Only my SEAL training allows me to keep focused on watching the street, not that I'm having an easy time of it.

My phone buzzes from its place in the cup holder. I know who it is without looking. I feel her. I reach for the phone, knowing I shouldn't answer the message.

I feel guilty trying to sleep while people sit outside my house all night.

Thumbing in my reply, I begin with, Don't. It's part of my—

I pause and back out the last word, instead adding, "our jobs" and sending. Not changing the message would have been a mistake. The pull toward Birdie is too strong to let on that I'm the one outside.

The dots beneath Birdie's name flash, and I'm not surprised to see her trying to rationalize herself out of this situation. It's stupid to assign an entire team to guard one person. It makes much more sense for me to go back to campus tomorrow.

"I don't think so, sweetheart."

I thumb in a slightly different response than my whispered words and hit send. I wouldn't, not that Knot will let you back in. My suggestion is to enjoy your freedom while you have it. My team is deploying Monday for the job in DC, leaving no operatives here. If your attacker is still loose, you'll have no choice but to go back.

I watch the screen for a while, waiting for Birdie's reply. A full three minutes pass with the little indicator bubble coming and going as if she's struggling to get her thoughts together. If she brings up the kiss, I'll have to shut her down.

She's too damned close, and we're too alone. The temptation would be too great. Hell, it already is. I shouldn't even be texting her because I'm supposed to be

protecting her ass.

I scan the street and her house for the fiftieth time, just before my phone sounds with a new message. I'm almost disappointed to see the subject isn't our kiss. I got Mercan tonight. He's on record, in writing. I set up a meeting for Monday.

"What the hell?" I whisper yell to myself. Pecking at my phone violently, I message back. You are not meeting this prick.

God, no. Police have everything they need. My presence won't be necessary.

Leaning my head back, I sigh. It's time to end this, so I send, Get some sleep, Birdie.

"And I'll try not to think about your ass nestled against my dick."

One more message comes in a minute later, and I just know it will ruin my night. I don't regret what I did.

My eyes drift closed, and I groan. "Oh, fuck."

Then, knowing she'll hate me but needing to do it, I answer back, But I do.

Birdie

God, I wish Sadie were back. I've spent the last week on a roller coaster from hell and haven't had my best friend around for support. While her counsel is typically about as comforting as a bed of glass, I know she's only looking out for me and never gives me bullshit advice.

Although, when she finds out about my secret life, I'm sure she'll give me plenty of shit then. At this point, it's not a question of if. It's only a matter of time before she

knows.

Tapping my stylus on the large mahogany desk, I exhale loudly toward the window. My Friday has been boring so far. After the week I've had, you would think boredom would be a welcome break, but I've been high-strung for a long enough stretch that this quiet solitude is getting to me.

I know I can't go traipsing around the mall, but I walk outside to the surveillance car where Brody Dunmire, my current security operative, ushers me into the back seat. "What's up?"

"I didn't know who was on duty this morning. I need to do a little grocery shopping. Can I do that?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

“Yes. I’ll have someone come out to watch your place, and then I’ll take you wherever you need.”

The thought of being ushered around is not my favorite. “I couldn’t drive myself?”

“Sorry. There’s only eight of us available, and I’m on the fourth shift. If you drove, we’d need a third person to safeguard your car while I accompanied you shopping.”

Great. This just got complicated. Now I feel shitty for even asking. I’m also rethinking going to the store at all. I could get things delivered, but besides needing food, the whole point is getting out of here for a while. Sigh. Well, it’s either be a pain in the butt or go nuts. “All right.”

Later that night, while munching on some fresh fruit, I wonder whose turn it is to babysit. I check my phone to see if it’s Bastien but take a dagger to the heart when I realize he must have uninstalled my program. Bastien knew the app tracked our locations, and I guess this was his way of taking a firm stance after I kissed him. Stubborn asshole.

Despite being bored out of my mind the whole day Saturday, my demons remain quiet. Maybe they’ve decided to let me off the hook because of the drugging incident. Not likely. A more credible explanation is that they figure the whole Bastien thing is torture enough.

By Sunday morning, I’m ready to crawl out of my skin. It’s been a week since I last spoke with Sadie and days since I spoke with Bastien. Even though talking with him was new, he’s spent a lot of time with me over the last two weeks.

I love Sadie like a sister, but if I could only have one person walk through my door right now, it'd be Bastien. The sad thing is that he would refuse if I asked.

Needing to do something, I go to my office, sign into one of my world-building games, and spend some time actually playing for the hell of it. I'm not hunting, but by legit playing, I am maintaining my cover in a way.

An hour later, I've built a cool little house entirely made up of fish tank walls when I get a chat notification. It's from Mercan. Damn. I should have stayed in my private world. This is unexpected but not a problem. All I have to do is keep up the narrative of a fifteen-year-old girl planning to meet a grown man for sex tomorrow.

The chat goes like I would have guessed, turning explicit pretty quickly. The dirty suggestions do nothing for me, not when I have the very real memory of Bastien's hands on my body.

The chat pauses for a while, so I message back as an insecure teenager would. "Still there, or did you blow?"

"Oh, I blew all right. Just thinking about that sweet little ass was enough to make me do it. I can't wait till tomorrow. Send me a pic and wait outside for me."

That right there is an oh shit moment. "Dammit." The whole operation just blew up in my face. I can't refuse, or he'll suspect something. Not only that, if he shows up tomorrow and I don't make an appearance, he'll leave.

Swearing the whole time, I ask for Mercan's email address, which I already have, and send him one of the pictures I use for such occasions. Then, with a promise to be outside the ice cream shop waiting, I sign off and immediately type an email to update Detective Cooper.

I go to bed early that night, fully expecting to get no sleep. I worry about losing Mercan by keeping to the compound and upsetting Bastien if I help Detective Cooper score the arrest. I'm caught in a classic catch-22, where every answer is the wrong one.

It takes a lot of effort and several swear words to drag myself out of bed the following morning. With Bastien's team deploying today, that leaves me stuck at Knot Corp indefinitely. I may as well get my favorite breakfast on the way in. I won't likely get another chance for a while.

The big, black Knot SUV follows me through my neighborhood when I leave, and when I take a left instead of a right onto the highway, my phone rings three seconds later. Bastien.

"This isn't the way to work."

So he's the one behind me. "Observant. I thought I'd enjoy one last taste of freedom before prison."

"That's a little dramatic, don't you think?"

Crabby from lack of sleep, I lash out. "You'd know all about dramatics, wouldn't you?"

The line goes quiet, and I feel like shit all over again. "I'm sorry, Bastien. I had a bad night. The Mercan situation went to shit, and now I have to be on-site to help the police with the sting."

"You fucking will not," he asserts.

"Um. I believe I just said I am. Mercan expects to see me outside the staging point. If

I'm not there, he'll walk."

"I don't give a shit. You're not being put in the crosshairs again."

My jaw clenches. I am not in the right state of mind to discuss this calmly. Not that the hardass is capable of being reasonable. To avoid one or both of us saying something we can't take back, I end the conversation by saying, "I'm going to get a muffin. I'll see you later."

I hang up with Bastien yelling my name and order my phone's voice assistant to turn on airplane mode.

Bastien

"What the fuck?!"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

I get that Birdie is compelled to do this, but the police should know better. Does that jackass detective not remember what happened just a few days ago? Has Birdie forgotten? That woman's got no business being used as bait for one asshole while another hunts her close by. Absolutely anything could happen while the cops are busy patting themselves on the back for bringing Mercan in. And Birdie's lost her mind if she thinks I'm going to let her stick her neck out again.

I keep on Birdie's back bumper the entire trip to work, including the drive-through of the small coffee shop and the security gate at the Knot compound. Birdie parks in her reserved spot, and I screech to a stop behind her car.

Leaving the engine running, I jump out to intercept her, keeping my distance. "What the hell are you doing, Birdie?! There's no way you're making yourself up to be bait again with this guy still out there. Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

I've held myself out of arms reach to avoid the temptation of putting my hands on her. Birdie, however, has no such reservations. She marches up to me, engine fully revved. I expect a mouth full of vitriol, but after a deep breath, she gently touches my chest and speaks softly. "I have only ever tried to do what someone should have done for your family. To stop the monster."

Clenching and unclenching my jaw, I look away for a moment, finally admitting to myself the ugly truth. "My mother was a grown woman. She chose to stay, even when I begged her to get us away from him."

Birdie refuses to back down. "Someone knew. Someone would have seen signs, bruises, skittish child. Someone should have saved you."

She turns to leave then, and the wall around my heart shudders. It's too late to save me, but it's not too late for her. "You can't go," I call after her. "You have to stay here where it's safe. You don't owe me a damned thing, but promise me this."

Birdie's shoulders slump, and she turns her head, showing me her profile. "I'll stay safe. I promise."

Birdie walks away, wilting like she's carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders. Funny. That's how I feel. After that display, she's probably afraid of me now.

I run a hand over my face, frustrated at every fucking thing, and jump back into the running vehicle to move it out of the way.

The gym is quiet when I finally make my way inside. My team isn't scheduled for sparring or workouts today since we'll deploy this afternoon. I'm not even obligated to stay on campus. But I'm here, so I get in a good workout to purge some of the tension left from this morning.

Just before five, when we're set to be driven to the airport, my conscience gets the best of me. You owe Birdie an apology. I've heard plenty of stories of men who beat their women and then begged for forgiveness, swearing it would never happen again. My father never did that. He was a prick who figured it was his right to do anything he wanted to his family. My apology probably won't mean anything to Birdie, but I need to make it for myself.

My heart is in my throat as I take the stairs to the executive level, heading toward Birdie's office. I rehearse in my head what I want to say to her. And how I'll respond when she rejects my appeal.

All the words I planned to say escape my head when I find Birdie's office dark. She

must have checked out early. I try calling her number but don't get her. She won't be able to answer if she's working with Spatch or in the gym.

Checking my watch, I still have a few minutes, so I head back downstairs, stopping by the women's dorm first just in case she's there.

Finding the dorm, gym, and training rooms empty, I jog back up to the executive floor. The receptionist is packing her bag to leave when I reach her desk. "Where's Birdie?"

The urgency in my voice stills the woman's fingers. "I don't know. She left."

"What do you mean, left? Went to get food? Work out?"

Fearing Birdie has done something stupid, my voice raises with each syllable. "When did she leave?!"

The heavy wooden door to my right opens, and Knot emerges from his office. "What the hell is going on out here?"

Knowing he'll be on my side, I turn to him for help. "I can't find Birdie."

"Calm down, Laurent. This is a big place with plenty of areas you can't check." The big man picks up the receptionist's phone and dials the security extension. "Has Birdie left the campus?"

Security's response has Knot's entire body tensing. "When?" he barks.

He places the phone back on the base and looks up at me. "She left an hour ago."

"Fuck!" I yell as I turn for the stairs.

Knot grabs my shoulder and spins me around. “I want to know what the fuck is going on, and I want to know right now.”

“Birdie’s gone to catch the man we had to abandon Saturday night. I need to stop her.”

Pushing me toward the stairs, Knot follows, even though he shakes his head. “You’re headed to DC in fifteen minutes. I’ll handle Birdie.”

“No, sir. You don’t know her system, how she hunts. I do. You’re going to have to send the team without me.”

The CEO nods his assent and flicks his wrist toward the exit. “Get out of here. And keep me updated!”

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

I'm outside in seconds, jumping the parking lot fence and sliding across my truck's hood to get to the door. The whole drive to Birdie's house, I'm cursing myself for deleting the app that would allow me to see her location. It's not like it's commercially available for me to download.

Birdie still isn't answering her phone, which only fuels the fire swirling in my gut. Thankfully, Birdie's car is still in the driveway when I arrive at her house. I park diagonally behind her so she can't leave and shove the door out of my way in a hurry to get to her.

There's virtually no chance of convincing myself to take a walk to calm down before confronting Birdie. Quite frankly, I'm enjoying being good and pissed off. I take her front steps in one leap and immediately begin pounding on her door. "Birdie!"

I don't hear anything inside and begin checking windows. She might not be here, idiot. The screen is down over her office windows. She doesn't leave it down unless she's using it. Birdie's here.

Jumping right back to the door, I start pounding again. "Birdie, I know you're in there. Open the damned door."

Seconds later, the click of a latch sounds, and the door swings open. Birdie looks like a kid, just like she did that night in the garden. She's holding a wet cloth smeared with makeup, and her face is freshly scrubbed.

I shove my way inside and slam the door behind me. Then, pausing just long enough to take a deep breath, I round on her and advance. "What the hell do you think you're

doing?! You promised me you'd stay safe on campus, but the minute I turn my back, you sneak off to do the opposite."

Birdie stands her ground, though I'm toe to toe with her and leaning down. She doesn't defend herself at all. "Answer me, dammit!"

She shoves her hands against my chest, only succeeding in backing herself up. "First of all, I didn't promise to stay on campus. I promised to stay safe, which I did."

"You'll be safe because you aren't going!"

Birdie's lips curl into an angry smile. "I hate to break it to you, but I already did. Cooper met me right outside of the Knot Corp compound. He escorted me home to change, to the meet-up, and back here when it was all over. Mercan is already in a cell."

"I don't give two fucks about Mercan! The bastard that drugged you is still out there and knows where you live. You aren't supposed to be here! You sure as fuck aren't supposed to be alone outside of the compound. Now, I don't know what went through your head, but you're done hunting until this bastard is caught!"

Birdie laughs. She actually, fucking laughs. "I don't know who you think you are, but not even Dillan Knot can exert that kind of control over me. I don't belong to you. I don't answer to you. You know what else? I'll hunt as much as I damned well please, and you won't stop me. You'll want to, but you won't. I could walk out that door right now, and you'd let me because you're scared."

"If I'm afraid of anything, it's of you ending up in some psycho's crosshairs and disappearing."

"Bullshit. You talk a good game because that's your only weapon. Look at yourself.

You won't even come near me." Birdie skirts around me, proving her point. "You're afraid of what you might do if you tried to stop me, but you are not your father. He was a coward, which you are not.

"Bastien, you've been banking your future on a theory that you might turn out like your father when I actually did cause someone to die. That makes me a real monster, not a theoretical one. Why is it that you don't hold me to the same standard as yourself?"

"You were just a kid, Birdie."

"Yeah? Well, so were you."

Birdie throws the wet cloth at me and marches for the door. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Wherever the hell I want, and you won't do anything about it."

Birdie

My heart races as I cross the floor. This is it. You're either about to die or break through some of Bastien's chains.

A sharp tug on my ponytail stops me from reaching the door handle. Bastien rushes me, caging my body against the door. "You're not leaving this fucking house. Do you hear me?" he growls into my ear.

"Yes. I. Am."

Bastien roars and slams a hand against the solid wood door. His temper tantrum doesn't scare me. My only reaction is to smile against the sturdy panel. "You won't

hit me. You're not capable."

I duck out of his arms, arms that still aren't touching me. "See, Bash. I'm not afraid of you. Never have been and never will be, so take your snarling and gnashing of teeth and take a hike. I've got places to be." Shaking out my arms, I add, "I'm feeling some pent-up sexual frustration that I need to let out."

Bastien grabs my arm and holds it in an iron grip. Almost there.

"You're going to regret provoking me."

I slap him for good measure. "My only regret is not doing it sooner."

His eyes turn feral, and his growl is lethal. "Birdie, knock it the fuck off."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

Of course, I keep on pushing. I have to prove to Bastien that he's a lot stronger than the imaginary beast he fears. "Let go of me. I need to find a new hunting partner. I wonder if Jackson would be interested."

And that right there did it. Breaking the laws of physics and time, Bastien has me against the wall with his hand at my throat before I realize I'm moving. "The hell you are. You fucking belong to me."

His lips crush against mine, wasting no time claiming every part of my mouth with his tongue. Bastien's kiss is frantic, but I don't dare try to calm him down. He needs this, needs to exorcise his demons. Besides, I want this. Oh god, do I want this.

I moan into his mouth until his fingers squeeze slightly around my neck. I bite his bottom lip, and his pelvis thrusts forward automatically. The hand clutching my throat lets go, making me whimper, but I'm soon singing a different tune when his fingers trail down my shoulder and then grip my breast.

Too much fabric in the way. I would love to tell him that, but talking would mean pulling my lips away, possibly breaking the spell. Can't risk it. Bastien must read my mind and thankfully agrees. Hungry fingers slip beneath my sweatshirt, ripping upward without warning.

I reach for Bastien's uniform top, pulling it from his belt to do the same, but all I get for my effort is my hands pinned above my head. Bastien pulls a knife from his pocket and flashes the blade at me.

My chin lifts in defiance, knowing what he's trying to do. "You won't hurt me."

The cold metal slides down my arm and quickly cuts one bra strap, then the other. I hold my breath when the blade slips between my breasts. One swift pull slices the fabric, reducing the bra to scrap.

Bastien shoves the wicked knife back into its holster and pulls the wasted fabric from my body. His free hand closes over a breast, and I hiss with the contact, arching my back to press harder into his hand.

His hot mouth finds mine again, slower, more controlled this time. Bastien forces my legs open with a knee between my thighs, but his leg doesn't touch me where I need it. I tug against his grip, wanting to ride his leg to ease some of the pressure building. "Need something, Petit Oiseau?"

"I need you to either touch me or let me touch myself."

Bastien presses his lips to my ear and whispers, "No one touches what's mine."

His hand leaves my breast to join the other, sliding down my back. Together, they shove into the back of my leggings and panties, squeezing my ass. Bastien lifts me, forcing my legs to wrap around his waist. And then, he starts to move.

Bastien thrusts against me once before turning toward the hallway leading to my room. I wrap my arms around his neck to keep from falling, only letting go when we've reached my bed and he commands me to.

The next thing I know, I'm freefalling, and Bastien's hands in my leggings execute a brilliant move, stripping off my clothes as I fall. Glad I wasn't wearing any shoes.

So now, I'm lying naked on my bed, aching to be filled while Bastien stands and stares. So far, he's run this show, but I'm ready to start pushing him again.

Since he's only watching, I lift a hand and glide it over my stomach toward my center. I've just dipped a finger between my lips when Bastien lunges. He straddles my body, still fully clothed, once again pinning my hands above my head. "Keep them there," he orders in a strangled voice.

I tug against his hold, and Bastien snarls. "I've got reason enough to redden your ass. Don't push me, brat."

Bastien stands upright again without waiting for an acknowledgment and removes his boots. His Knot Corp shirt goes next, and then he releases the belt of his black tactical pants. Before stripping them off, he reaches back and pulls out his wallet, fishing for a condom.

I can't take my eyes off his remarkable body. Sculpted abs and chest compete with flexing biceps and arm veins. All those fine physical attributes pale as Bastien shoves his pants down slowly. My eyes follow the happy trail of hair and the V-cut muscles all the way down to the massive dick that springs free.

All I can think at that moment is, thank god for college stupidity. On a dare, a few girls in my sorority bought dildos to dispatch our virginity. Bastien will still be my first, but at least I won't have to worry about the awkward conversation or pain.

After the mental detour, I want to smack myself for allowing my mind to stray from the male perfection before me for even a moment. Bastien drops his pants carefully on the floor in consideration of his many weapons and finally turns to face me fully.

All the spit in my mouth dries up at the sight, but I don't get to appreciate the view for long. Seeing my hands where he commanded them, Bastien smiles darkly. "Hmm. Good girl."

Bastien props a knee on the bed between my open thighs and hovers over me, staring.

He lowers to take my lips in a brief yet sensual kiss. His mouth quickly strays, latching onto a hardened nipple.

Each swipe of his tongue and pull of his mouth sends lightning straight to my core. I want so badly to reach down and touch myself. I might just burst into flames if something doesn't happen there soon.

Bastien gives each breast equal attention, and by now, I'm writhing. My eyes scrunch closed, and I bite my lip to keep from calling out in frustration. I end up calling out anyway when something warm and wet latches onto my throbbing clit.

My eyes fly open to see Bastien's head between my thighs, and I fight off yelling a string of curses that would embarrass even Sadie. I think I'm going to chain this man to my bed.

God, the things he's doing with that tongue. I knew in theory how this might work and feel, but never in my wildest imagination had I even come close to the real thing. I've completely lost control of my body.

Bastien feasts on the magical nub, swirling and flicking his tongue against it and occasionally sucking it into his mouth. My body responds by bucking and thrashing until he locks me in place with his massive arms. The delicious pressure builds until I'm mewling and then yelling as a powerful orgasm rocks my soul. I'm pretty sure I dubbed Bastien a god in the aftermath.

Bastien releases his grip on my legs to caress the delicate skin of my inner thighs as he applies softer strokes to my pulsing clit. My body is on fire. Sated but ravenous at the same time. I need him inside me.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

Trying to control my arms is like operating a marionette, but I somehow get them to Bastien. I claw and grab whatever I can reach. “Bastien. Inside.”

The sexy man shoots up the length of me, wiping his glistening chin as he rises. I only get a second to enjoy the visual of him hovering over me as he lifts away to roll on the condom. Then, like a predator stalking his prey, Bastien slowly crawls toward me again, settling between my open thighs. Before his lips touch mine again, he warns, “Take a deep breath, baby.”

I shiver at his words and at his kiss laced with a salty essence, but all my focus shifts down as the head of his big cock begins pushing into me.

Bastien

Birdie stops kissing me, so I pull up to study her face. Her eyes are closed, and she’s completely lost in the moment, and I’ve barely begun. I have to fight for every inch in her tight sheath. “Take it, Birdie. Take every fucking bit of me.”

Beads of sweat dot my brow with the effort to go slow. It’s been a long time for her if she’s this tight. Birdie whimpers. “Does it hurt, baby?”

She bites her lip and nods. “It’ll feel better soon.”

I bottom out and hold, allowing Birdie the chance to adjust to me. “Fuck, baby. That’s my good girl. I knew you could take all of me.”

I dip my head and take her lips again, knowing she can taste herself on my tongue.

Birdie sighs into the kiss this time, just lets go. Her surrender does something to me. Something profound. My fate is sealed.

As I begin moving within her, Birdie makes the most beautiful sounds. Her pleased moans and the absolute contentment on her face disarm me completely. With every stroke, the rage fades. All that's left is a desire to keep that look on Birdie's face. "You feel so good."

Her body is heaven, soft and warm. I take her slowly, wanting to draw this out as long as possible. When Birdie starts lifting her hips to meet my thrusts, I pick up the pace, rolling my pelvis to hit everything that needs to be hit to make her crazy.

Birdie calls out my name, drunk on lust. The sound pushes me over the edge. I push up onto my hands and rocket into her repeatedly until she's screaming through another orgasm. My back is coated in sweat, but I can't stop, not if there's any chance I can do that to her again.

Birdie goes limp beneath me, and her beautiful eyes open and lock onto mine. Wearing the most beautiful smile I've ever seen, she reaches up and touches my cheek. The moment her fingertips brush my jaw, I erupt into the most powerful release of my life.

Every bit of my strength vanishes, and I collapse onto her chest, sucking wind. Birdie's hands move to my head, now resting between her breasts. "You're no monster," she whispers.

I am very much still a monster, but no match for the power of this siren.

The two of us lie as we are for a long time, not speaking. Birdie draws her fingers over my scalp while I do nothing more than hold onto her. Eventually, knowing I need to deal with the condom, I pull out of her and walk to the bathroom to dispose of

it.

Birdie's covered up with a sheet when I return. I pull it back long enough to slide into the bed beside her. Lying on my side, propped on an elbow, I use the other hand to explore all the soft curves I haven't gotten to experience yet. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No way," she declares, then with a dreamy smile, she says, "I had no idea."

Birdie's face flushes red as her voice trails off. I can't guess what's making her feel embarrassed. Unless... this was her first time. "Have you never done this before?"

Birdie squeezes her eyes shut and shakes her head. I reach over and tap her cheek to make her look at me. "You're crazy brave to take me on like you did. But why didn't you tell me?"

Her eyes turn serious. "If I had said something, you would have retreated into your box, and we would have had to start all over again."

Like I said, brave.

"So, what happens now?" she timidly asks. "I think I've kind of proven that you're not going to beat up an innocent."

Narrowing my eyes, I lean close. "Don't think I've forgotten your little stunt this afternoon."

Birdie flops to her back and crosses her arms. "No stunt. I had a job to do, and I did it. All I promised you was that I'd be safe, which I was. But we're not starting that argument again unless the end result will be the same."

She wants this again. Shaking my head from the shock, I reply, “Sorry, Petit Oiseau. That was my only condom.”

She shrugs. “I’m on birth control. What does Petit Oiseau mean?”

“Little bird,” I answer softly, still hung up on her desire for a repeat performance. Then, remembering her statement before that, I add, “And unless you want to be caged, you’re going to stay safe on campus when I join my team in DC tomorrow.”

“I promise to stay safe on campus and only leave if I’m followed—”

“Accompanied,” he interrupts.

“Accompanied by Knot security personnel.”

Considering the matter closed, I nod in approval and resume exploring her soft curves. Birdie sighs at my touch and, after a while, tentatively speaks my name. “Bastien?”

I still my hand on her stomach at her tone and lift my eyes to meet hers. Eyes blazing, earnest, and sincere, she says, “You’re a good man in spite of him. Don’t let his memory diminish what you’re capable of being. I want to do this with you. I know you want me. I don’t want your father to take you away from me. Do you understand?”

I give her a solemn nod. Voice rough, I answer, “I’ve wanted you since that day in the woods, but before we go any further, you have to promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“Keep training. Learn to shoot. If I ever lay a hand on you other than to bring you pleasure, I want you to kill me.”

Birdie recoils at what I’m asking, but I won’t budge. I have to have this from her. She reads the sincerity in my eyes and yields. “I don’t think I need to, but I swear it. And, in case you still have doubts, I want you to think about this. Your dad didn’t kill your mom the first time he hit her. If you were to ever lay a hand on me, you wouldn’t have to worry about doing it again. Knot would make you disappear before you ever

got the chance. How's that for insurance?"

"I'd say you've got a deal."

"Good. Now, kiss me."

I'll do more than that.

Birdie

A large hand glides over my ass as I bend to retrieve the cinnamon rolls from the oven. Dreamy thoughts of Bastien's performance last night have my body humming. I don't think Bastien realizes it, but I suspect his dominance in the bedroom is a safe way for him to channel his rage.

If that truly is the case, I'll gladly play sub to his dom. Just not right now. "Down, boy. I'm already going to be exhausted after last night. I don't need to add being late to the equation."

Bastien lets go of my ass and runs his fingers through my flat-ironed hair. "How come you only wear your hair this way for stings?"

I didn't wash and return it to my typical style this morning, instead spending a few extra minutes wrapped up with Bastien. "I don't know. I always thought it made me look younger, and I had a hard enough time being taken seriously."

"You don't look like a kid now. You look pretty damned hot."

My cheeks heat, and I turn away to hide my smile. I'm dressed as usual for work, including my glasses, and Bastien thinks my pudgy little ass is hot.

The two of us sit at the bar with our pastries and coffee, and Bastien brings up our strategy for the morning. “I’ll follow you into work. Both our cars need to get screened just to be safe. I’ll shower and change before taking one of the fleet SUVs to the DC hangar. My team will fly back sometime between Friday and Sunday, whenever we’re dismissed.”

For a moment, I worry about what things will be like between us after all this. I fear Bastien might do some thinking while he’s away and go right back to being stubborn and distant.

Bastien must know what’s going through my head as he grabs my chin, coming nose to nose with me. “And as soon as my feet touch the ground, I’m coming for you. You’re mine, baby girl. You couldn’t escape now if you wanted to.”

The possessiveness in his words and the dirty promise in his eyes send a shiver down my spine. I can’t wait.

Bastien helps me load my re-packed bags into the back of my car, and we set off for the Knot Corporation compound. He must have called ahead as the gate guard directs me straight to the motor pool.

We both hand over our keys to Frank, and Bastien grabs my bags from the back. The hallways are eerily quiet, which is always the case when all teams are deployed. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t tempted to make good use of the empty space with Bastien... any empty space.

Once we’ve reached the women’s dorm, we set my bags inside, and I walk with Bastien down the hall since the men’s locker room is on the way to my office.

He stops in the open doorway and turns around, pinning me to the frame and resting his forearm above my head. “You’re a brave one, Birdie Crenshaw.”

“Just stubborn,” I reply with a shrug.

Bastien slowly dips his mouth toward mine and whispers, “I’m glad.”

I’m treated to a toe-curling kiss before Bastien disappears inside to shower and change. Then, I practically float to my office, already looking forward to the weekend.

I haven’t even powered on my computer before a knock sounds at my door. “Nice to have you back safe and sound.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

“Now, don’t you start.”

My head shoots up, realizing what I just said and to whom I just said it. Knot sits across from me, trying and failing to cover a smirk. He clears his throat, regaining some of his formidable bearing. “Care to fill me in on what happened? Why a team leader was forced to abandon his mission because our intel architect went rogue?”

Shit. When you put it like that... “The police needed me to make an appearance to stage an arrest. I didn’t announce my intentions because I knew Bastien would disapprove, but that doesn’t mean I went rogue. I had a police escort from the time I left here until I was delivered home after the suspect was arrested.”

“But not the suspect that put you in the hospital.”

“Look. I see your point, okay? But I was careful. The only time I was alone was when I was locked safely inside my house. You’ll recall it was your people that secured my home. If I can’t be safe there, perhaps you need to reevaluate the contractors you’re using.”

Knot’s eyes widen, but I’m too wound up to stop now. “You know me. I’m not reckless. It’s just that Bastien is a little overprotective. And I’ll tell you like I told him last night. I’ll be careful. I’ll take precautions, but I won’t stop bringing these monsters to justice.”

“Even at the risk of yourself?”

“I owe it to—” I slam my mouth shut, realizing I almost screwed up.

Knot leans forward, casting a shadow over my desk. “You owe it to who? To Amelia?”

He knows. My heart pounds in my chest over my secret being spilled, and I worry about how Knot might see me now. “Bastien told you?”

Knot leans back, waving away the accusation. “He didn’t have to. You got in trouble for accessing the sex offender database at fifteen. A friend of yours was killed by a child predator. It wasn’t hard to connect the dots. It took my people about five minutes to figure out your motive for the hacking incident. I can appreciate your dedication to getting these monsters off the street. I just don’t know how you’ll do it if you’re dead.”

I’m dizzy with relief. He knows about Amelia but not the role I played in her death. “Sir, it’s enough that I had Bastien riding my ass all night about this. I promised him I wouldn’t step one toe off campus without Knot security until he gets back from DC. If my alchemist stalker hasn’t been arrested by then, we’ll figure out what to do at that point.”

“Fair enough.”

“Good. Now, is that all?”

“Just one more thing.” Knot tries to look serious, but the slight lift to the corners of his mouth gives him away. “You said Bastien was on your case all night?”

Ugh. Kill me now.

Bastien

I lick my lips and taste Birdie’s lip gloss as she walks away. I snuck back out of the

locker room to watch her leave, and I don't stop watching until she turns a corner, out of sight. Then, I'm shaking my head in shame. I shouldn't have kissed her. I definitely had no business fucking her.

She's owned me for months without the first touch. Now that I've had her, there's no way I can let her go. I'm just not that strong. Birdie will have to be strong enough for both of us and walk away before it's too late.

Still watching the empty hallway, I bang my head against the door frame several times and finally duck inside to clean up. I grab my bag once I'm finished and walk straight for the motor pool, though I have an incredible urge to detour by Birdie's office first.

If I leave now, it'll be half past eleven when I arrive to meet up with my team in DC. An earlier check-in with Chelsea revealed that my crew was not on the roster for today. That means, technically, I haven't missed any work.

The whole setup is inefficient, a horrible waste of manpower resources, not to mention a hell of a lot of money. But I guess when I own a fifty-million-dollar rock, I can run security as I see fit. As much as I hate the system for this particular job, I'll reluctantly admit that it makes sense.

Nobody could hijack a security team and stage an elaborate inside heist if the duty roster is entirely random and consists of players across multiple firms.

So, for the rest of the week, we'll get paid to sit on our asses, waiting for the phone to ring. For some people, this is dream job territory. For paramilitary types like us, it's torture.

The drive from Norfolk to DC takes about four hours. I check in with Chelsea on the way, psyching myself up for the razzing that's sure to come. She answers my call in

an overly cheerful voice. “This is Chelsea with the Knot Corporation. How may I be of service today?”

Oh god. “Would you cut the shit? I’m not in the mood.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. My partner is the shit-cutting expert and is not here today.”

“I take it that you’ve not been assigned yet.”

Still in the annoying customer service character, she answers, “Our schedule is not known at—shit. This hurts my jaw. No. Our number wasn’t drawn. We’re sitting around on our asses. What are you doing?”

“The same. I’m headed your way.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

“Hmm. Does this mean I’m gonna find out why you bailed on us?”

“I didn’t bail. A problem came up regarding Birdie’s security, and I handled it.”

“A problem?” Concerned, she asks, “Birdie’s okay, isn’t she?”

“She’s fine and sequestered at the compound. I’ll explain the details later.”

“There’s no rush to get here. We won’t get tomorrow’s assignment until five. I’ve got you booked into a two-bedroom suite with a conference room. We’re roomies. You’re in the room on the left.”

Four hours later, I drop my stuff on the bed in my designated room and return to the living area. No one’s here, and I’ve got a few hours to kill before five. The picture window next to the TV overlooks the Washington Monument, but I’m not interested in DC’s prestige. For the first time in my career, more than anything, I want to go home.

I sit at the conference table in the suite, and my thoughts go to Birdie. To be such a quiet soul, she blows me away with her resolve. She’s such an unusual creature but in the best ways.

I’ve never known anyone like her and never wanted anyone like I want her. I’ve never been driven to protect someone like I am with Birdie. I don’t want to just stop this man from trying to hurt her. I want to deal with him personally, in the sickest, most painful ways, which reminds me to check in with base.

I pull out my phone and dial the number I've had to use too often lately. "Frank, this is Bastien. What have you got for me?"

He doesn't waste time on pleasantries. "Two new devices. Same type. Untraceable."

"Dammit. Have you told Knot?"

"He knows. He's already ordered additional cameras to be installed around Birdie's property. They'll go in first thing in the morning."

I get a crazy idea about a way to catch this bastard and ask, "Have you destroyed the devices?"

"Just did."

Shit. There went that. "Thanks, man."

I slam the phone down, but I'm not angry at Frank. I'm fuming at myself. The fucker was at Birdie's house last night. I let him get that close—for the third time. I'm even more pissed that my brain isn't working right. If I had any sense, I would have waited for Frank to complete his scan and brought the devices with me, or at least the one found on Birdie's car. Her stalker might have followed me to DC, and I would have had a shot at catching him.

It won't work now. Since the bastard had to replace the first set, he has to know that we've found and disabled the new ones. And unless he's a complete moron, he won't fall for a setup at an empty warehouse, even if he is stupid enough to place more trackers.

It's time for a new strategy. So far, Birdie and I have spent all our efforts looking for this blue car. It's time we try something else. Birdie sounds surprised when she

answers my call. “Um. Hi Bastien. What’s up?”

Birdie’s shy greeting warms my blood, but after last night, I much prefer the sound of her screaming my name. Without thinking, I ask, “Do you still feel me inside you, Little Bird?”

Birdie makes a choking sound and laughs nervously. “Is this why you called?”

“No. Answer the question, Birdie.” Damn. I have no idea where any of this is coming from.

She clears her throat. “Um. Yes.”

My voice drops low, loaded with desire. “Hmm. My cock or my tongue?”

“Both,” she squeaks.

“Good.”

I adjust my stiffening dick straining behind my fly and take a deep breath. “I called because I have an idea. We were spinning our wheels, looking for the car following you. What we should have been doing is looking into each of your previous targets and how they may have found you.”

“Before you ask,” Birdie pipes in. “I wasn’t hacked, and I’ve already confirmed all my arrested targets still occupy cells.”

Strike one, Bash. You should have known she’d be smart enough to check out those possibilities. Tapping the table, I think through what I know of her hunting methods and come up with a long shot. “You mentioned being concerned about losing a target. How many have you lost?”

“I’d guess a few each year.”

“What are the chances one of these lost targets noticed you chatting up someone else and figured out what you’re doing?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

“None whatsoever. I’ve only ever shown my picture to what I call confirmed targets—targets that I agreed to meet—and I’ve never lost a confirmed target. Regardless, I create new profiles across the board after each case.”

Strike two, and you’re running out of ideas. “You must have a stalker, then. Someone local you’ve interacted with that has become obsessed.”

Birdie must take her glasses off. The plastic frames clunk when she plops them on her desk.

“Only if he works for the government, and I’ve already looked into those contacts. Otherwise, I don’t get out much.”

Strike out, Bash. So much for me being the security expert. Birdie’s more on top of things than I am, and probably Knot as well. Time for an appeal to the Ump. “Past boyfriends?”

“I doubt it. It was always the guy that ended things.”

Her admission completely derails my train of thought. “Why?” I question immediately.

“Well, by their accounts, I’m boring and prudish.”

I don’t understand that at all. “You are never boring, and you weren’t prudish last night.”

“I guess it’s because you’re a better man than them,” she says confidently.

She’s wrong, but I ignore the statement. “I’ll check in periodically. Let me know if something pops up. Stay safe, Birdie.”

“You, too.”

I hang up and toss the phone on the table. How the hell does anyone label this woman boring and prudish? Birdie Crenshaw is full of piss and fire, and judging by what I saw yesterday, she likes things a little rough.

That means the men she dated before just weren’t man enough to know how to handle such a live wire. Since she was out of their league, they treated Birdie like she wasn’t good enough. That explains why she comes across as shy.

I grab my phone and call Birdie right back. “Bastien, what’s wrong?”

“There’s not a damned thing wrong with you. Those other guys were fucking morons to give you up.”

“I could say the same about the women you dated.”

“No, because I’ve never let a woman hang around that long. Until you. And you don’t even know what you’ve unleashed.”

“Oh, I know exactly what I’m getting with you. And I’ll keep pushing until you figure it out for yourself.”

I just bet she will. Since I have no answer for that, I cop out. “Birdie?”

“Yes, Bastien?”

“Get back to work.”

I tuck my phone away, smiling despite myself. Piss and fire.

A thick file resting in the center of the suite’s conference table finally catches my attention. The label identifies it as the security briefing for the diamond. With nothing better to do, I pull it to me and read through every page.

The suite door opens before I finish. “Fun reading, isn’t it?” Chelsea asks.

My reply is caustic. “Riveting.”

Our remaining crew follows her inside the suite’s common area, though it’s not even four yet. “Where the hell have you been?” Kai asks.

“Like I told Chelsea,” I answer, “there was an issue with Birdie’s security.”

Dunder snags the chair to my left. “What kind of an issue?” he asks.

“Birdie left the compound yesterday without telling anyone.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

Given that we all rotated in round-the-clock security shifts before deploying, the whole team voices their disappointment. “And I thought she was smart,” Kai comments. “What happened? How did you find out?”

“She wasn’t in her office when I checked before five. The executive receptionist said she had left a while earlier. Knot didn’t even know. He called gate security, who outed her.”

“This is why civilians piss me off. We’re asked to risk our asses to protect someone, and at the same time, they’re sneaking out. Birdie, of all people, should know better,” Dunder rumbles.

Chelsea is quiet during the exchange, which is odd. She only watches with a strange little smirk tugging at her lips. In Birdie’s defense, I explain, “I found out later that she had a police escort from the compound.”

“Yeah? And who told you that?” Chelsea needles.

“Birdie did when I cornered her at home.”

“What did Knot’s little pet have to say for herself?”

“Watch it, Dunder.”

“Seriously. We all know Birdie is good at what she does, but she also has the boss’s special protection. I hope you spanked that sweet ass for pulling such a stunt. If not, I can do it when we get back.”

“Shut your fucking mouth!” I roar.

At my outburst, the room falls silent. My eyes dart over to Chelsea, whose smirk has grown to a full-on grin. Kai bravely pipes up again when no one else does. “Is there, ah, something going on between you and Birdie?”

The tension in the room peaks, and I weigh the consequences before nodding to confirm. My teammates’ reactions are anything but quiet afterward. The demanding questions range from when this started to when I was planning to tell anyone.

I’m not used to being under a microscope and shut my teammates down quickly. “First of all, it’s none of your damned business. Second, it’s none of your damned business. All you need to know is that Birdie guaranteed me that she would not leave the compound without Frank or one of his men.”

The group accepts the news and that they’ll get no juicy gossip and move on to separate conversations. All except Chelsea, who’s the quietest I’ve ever seen her. She’s still wearing that impish little grin as she leans over from her seat to my right. “This is kind of a big thing for you,” she whispers. “Must be pretty new.”

It’s been a couple of months for me, since that day in the woods, but I keep that to myself. “About a week.”

“You’re not just grump stalking from afar? Birdie’s a party to this?” She asks with a teasing smile.

If it were anyone else, I’d ignore the question, but Chelsea is a trustworthy and reliable partner. Besides, I live for the moments I can shock and shut her up. They don’t happen often. “It sure felt that way when she had a handful of my ass this morning.”

“You dog.”

She turns away to open her computer and, a few seconds later, leans toward me again, whispering. “I’m happy for you.”

Chelsea returns her focus to her computer, and I lean back and observe my team. I’m honestly surprised by their response. Well, lack of reaction to the news about Birdie and me. After getting over the shock, no one was bothered by the development.

What their reactions tell me is they’re not afraid for Birdie. Of all of them, only Chelsea knows about my father. The rest think I’m a hard ass, just not enough of an ass to be a threat to our intel genius. Interesting.

A few minutes later, Chelsea shuts the group up and gestures to her screen. “Looks like good news comes early today. We’re on duty tomorrow, but only three of us. Bash, Kai, and Casanova. The rest of us get to enjoy another day of Netflix and room service.”

I make eye contact with the two men, who tip their chins in acknowledgment. Kai Phillips. He’s half Samoan, half regular white guy, all badass. Former Marine and SWAT bomb disposal with one brown eye and one blue. It’s like nature couldn’t decide which part of him to make dominant, so each culture’s features were split down the middle.

Brett Love, Casanova because of his name, is third-generation Army who left his post when politicians decided woke political shit was more important than keeping soldiers alive.

Both are good men and likely to make anyone think twice before trying to touch the stone’s protective case. That is if we’re even in the room. We don’t have our assignments, only a time to report to the security station. We’ll learn the details in the

morning.

Our shift the next day rotates with a half-hour overlap to have a short break over the six hours we're on duty. Kai's the only one of us who gets to be in the same room as the diamond.

Casanova's in the main lobby, and I'm outside the exhibition space with a metal detector, checking visitors' bags and persons. It's not a job I would have chosen, and I'm sure to catch hell from my team. The teasing will be much worse once they learn about all the jokes from horny old women wanting to get felt up by big, bad security contractors. They won't hear about it from me, but Birdie was right. Contractors gossip like little girls.

Birdie

My desk phone rings, pulling me from an especially delicious memory from two nights ago. I can't wait for Bastien to get back from DC. Seeing the in-house extension number, I pick up the handset and answer, "Birdie here."

"This is gate security. You've got a flower delivery. I can't let the driver in, so I'll bring it to the front desk at shift change."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

Bastien sent flowers? I'm almost giddy when I say, "That would be great."

I do a little dance in my seat, anxious for three o'clock to get here. I haven't spoken to Bastien since Monday, two days ago. We'd spent so much time together before this deployment that not seeing or talking to him has been weird. Simmer down, Birdie. He may be only in DC, but the next time he deploys, it'll be to bum-fuck nowhere. May as well get used to it.

I keep myself busy, waiting until three-thirty to go downstairs to avoid seeming too eager. The large arrangement is hard to miss when I step off the elevator. It's beautiful, even if unusual. The bouquet is filled with white camellias, white lilies, yellow roses, and yellow carnations.

Finding the card in the top, I pluck it out of the blank envelope. The message inside is sweet.

It should have been you from the start.

Wow. Maybe Bastien's getting over this thinking-he's-a-monster shit. It happened faster than I would have imagined. I tuck the card back into the envelope, pick up the vase, and return to my office.

Stepping off the elevator, I run into my boss at the receptionist's desk. Knot, of course, follows me into my office. "What's the occasion?"

"Nothing special. They're just a sweet gesture from Bastien."

Dillan Knot doesn't seem the least bit surprised. "You two are together?"

I reach out and adjust one of the flowers, nervous about his opinion. "Yes, we are."

"Good."

"Good? That's it?"

He nods. "That's it."

"I... well... of course, that's it. That's really it?"

Knot chuckles and takes a candy from my bowl. "If you say that's it, then that's it. Yours is the only opinion that matters." He ignores my gawping and raps on the door frame. "Back to work, Birdie."

My jaw remains unhinged until I'm in danger of drooling all over myself. The exchange with Knot might have been simple, but his words spoke volumes. My boss not only has confidence in my abilities, but I also have his respect personally. That means a lot.

After getting turned down by every organization except this one, confidence and a secure footing were never things I thought were attainable. Despite how I felt, I've gone a long way to earn Knot's respect, and having it feels great.

Even more important is that he approves of Bastien.

The rest of the workday passes quickly, and I decide to go for a run and have a late dinner. Remembering how Bastien's eyes ate up my body, I guess I'm not running to get cut any longer. I'm running to build up stamina because Bastien is beast mode. I'll need all the help I can get to keep up with him in bed.

The compound's secure track is quiet and a little creepy this evening, with a dense fog settled over the area. The track lights glow eerily in the thick cloud, and dampness seeps into my skin, making me shiver. At the end of my second lap, the creep factor gets to me, and I figure two miles will have to be enough. The only reason I lasted two miles in this horror scene is Knot's obsession with security. Not even the devil himself could get to me here.

On my way back in, I pick up a packaged sandwich from the cafeteria and go straight to the dorm to eat before a quick shower. My phone flashes steadily from its location on the bed when I open the door. The screen indicates I have a new message waiting. Since Sadie is still overseas, it has to be from Bastien.

Hearing from him takes precedence over replacing lost glycogen, and the ham sandwich gets tossed onto the blanket. I rush to unlock the phone and read his text, swooning at his simple message. Sweet dreams.

I type in and back out half a dozen replies, each sounding elementary and stupid. So, instead, I send a picture I took of the flowers with a heart emoji. It's still kind of weird, but better than sending you too.

With my phone resting on my leg, I open the sandwich and take a bite. The device vibrates with a new message soon after, and I stop chewing as I read it. Nice flowers. Where'd they come from?

The food in my mouth goes down like concrete when I swallow. They're not from you? I message back.

My phone rings barely five seconds later. "Where did the flowers come from, Birdie?"

Bastien's tone wasn't jealous but alarmed. By the time I open my mouth, I've moved

way beyond alarmed. “I ... they were delivered to the security gate. I picked them up at reception. No one’s ever sent me flowers before. I’m sorry. I thought they were from you.”

“Hey, don’t worry about that now. We’ll figure this out. What can you tell me about the delivery? There had to have been a card with the flowers. What did it say?”

“It um...” From the start... From the start of what? I tap the phone against my forehead, trying to come up with any answer that makes sense. “Birdie! What did the note say?”

“The note said, ‘It should have been you from the start.’”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

“Ok. What else can you tell me about it?”

I close my eyes and picture the envelope and small white card. “Nothing. That’s all it said. There was no signature or florist logo on the card or envelope.”

“What do you think the message means?” Bastien asks.

My heart lurches, and my ears ring, but I still can’t come up with any ideas. My voice trembles when I answer, “I don’t know. I thought you’d sent it.”

“Hey. Breathe, Birdie,” Bastien croons. “You’re safe. No one can get to you inside the compound. First thing in the morning, I’ll call Frank. He’ll access the gate logs and get me some information on the delivery driver.”

“I can do it tonight,” I rush to say. “Just... please don’t hang up.”

“I’m not going anywhere, but you do not have to do this right now.”

Abandoning my sandwich, I race barefoot to my office upstairs. “You know by now that if I don’t, I won’t sleep.”

My ungraceful footsteps are loud in the stairwell, and soon, so is my breathing. “You don’t have to run, Birdie. Slow down and take some deep breaths.”

I don’t slow down, and I’m already sucking as much wind as I can get. A funny thought occurs to me about what might happen if security spots me racing through the hallways of the executive floor. Dismissing the concern, I lift shaking fingers to the

code panel at my office door.

The lights come on automatically, illuminating the large flower arrangement still on my desk. They're no longer beautiful but a bad omen, and I want them gone.

I power up my computer, and, so I'll have both my hands free, I pop in my Bluetooth earbuds and get to work. My fingers fly across the keyboard until I get what I need from our security server. "Gate security logged the delivery van as belonging to Stem and Petal. They accepted delivery instead of allowing the driver entry, which I already knew."

"Good. The gate guys did what they were supposed to do. What about footage?"

"I'm pulling it up now."

I find the right feed and advance the video to the time shown on the security log. The van comes into view right when it's supposed to be there. "I got the van."

"Great. That means we're one step closer."

I cycle through the footage until the van leaves, then check the footage from another camera, showing a different angle. As I'm scanning, I work through my next steps out loud. "Just to be thorough, I'll run the tag and also get into the florist's system."

Bastien voices his approval, and before long, I forget he's still in my ear. "Dammit."

"What? What is it?"

"The delivery van is an old, converted mail truck. The driver is on the right, so the camera never gets a good look."

“Don’t worry about that,” Bastien says. “We know who the florist is. Finding the driver isn’t important. We want the customer.”

I find a good shot of the delivery van tag, talking myself through the process, something I’ve always done. “Ok. The van registration checks out. The florist is a little mom-and-pop shop in Virginia Beach.”

After several more minutes of not-quite-legal searching, I learn the shop has an online point-of-sale account but nothing else. “Shit. They don’t even take online orders.”

A few minutes pass, bringing more bad news. “If these guys have security cameras, they feed to an offline system. I can’t find what I need without asking them directly.”

“Not a problem. Since they’re not a franchise, we won’t have to worry about corporate red tape. We’ll be able to get what we need from them over the phone tomorrow. You’ve taken this as far as it can go tonight. You should try to get some rest.”

“Not yet. I can check cameras from other businesses in the area from today and a few days prior. Maybe one has a view of the florist.”

“Birdie.”

“If not, I’ll try traffic cams. Maybe I’ll spot the blue car. If nothing else, I might be able to get shots of people coming and going to see if I recognize anyone.”

“Birdie, listen to me!”

Bastien’s voice cuts through the noise in my head, but he doesn’t get it. “Please don’t ask me to stop. I’ve already given up my life because of one monster. I don’t want another to take what little sanity I have left.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

My request comes out as a half sob, half whisper, but I think Bastien got the point. His voice rumbles in my ears, oddly comforting. “I’m not asking you to stop, Birdie. I’m asking you to let me help. The florist is our surest bet, but they must be closed by now. If this guy is smart, he would have paid cash anyway, so there’s no point in trying to run cards on their payment system. We’ll handle the florist tomorrow as soon as they open. For now, I want you to relax and catch your breath.”

“But—”

“No buts. Stop working.”

The part of me that isn’t used to being bossed around wants to say something, but I don’t. The other part realizes how nice it feels to have someone looking out for me. Softly, I give in to Bastien’s caring demand. “Okay.”

Then, because I can’t help it, I copy the video and log files as quietly as I can, bookmarking the section where the driver is seen. All this will need to go to Detective Cooper.

“I can still hear you tapping your keyboard, Little Bird. Change this to a video call. You’ve got five seconds to shut down your computer.”

Hovering my mouse over the search button, I hesitate. Bastien’s voice comes low and lethal. “Birdie, I may be a hundred and fifty miles away, but I could still drive there, spank your ass, and be back before morning.”

His warning gives me good shivers, but I release my mouse and hit the video button

on my phone screen. Bastien's face and all-black Knot uniform come into view as he walks from a large conference table into a bedroom. The door closes behind him, and he sets the lock. "Is that them?"

The flowers are visible in the selfie image of my office. "Yes."

"Put the card in your desk, but don't remove it from the envelope. We'll need to have it checked for prints."

I do as he says, and his voice drops down low. "Good girl. Now, get up and lock your door."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to settle you down so you can sleep tonight."

As I move to obey, my shivers give way to a flutter in my stomach—way beyond butterflies—waiting for Bastien's next order. We're talking albatross flying around in there. "Take off your clothes, Birdie."

Bastien's shirt is already off by the time I'm in front of my phone again. He's releasing his belt, and the fire in his eyes means he's one hundred percent serious. "But I'm in my office!"

"Are there cameras in your office?"

"No."

"Everyone is gone, right?"

"Yes," I squeak.

“I heard your door lock engage, so take off your clothes.”

Bastien sits on the bed and removes his boots before sliding off his tactical pants. “Do I need to repeat myself?”

Fear and embarrassment have blood rushing in my ears, but excitement is also there. Reaching for the hem of my shirt, I grumble, “If I get caught and fired, I’m going to be pissed.”

I reposition my phone so Bastien can watch me instead of my computer screens. The move puts the flowers in my line of sight and the selfie box, meaning Bastien can see them as well. Nope. I let go of my shirt, pick up the vase, and set them on the floor outside my office door. When I reach my office chair again, Bastien is down to his boxers, sitting in a club chair in his dimly lit hotel room. I don’t know if I’m stalling or what, but I turn on my lamp and rush back to the door to turn off the overhead light.

With the flowers gone and the light off, I run out of excuses. All that’s left to do now is strip.

Bastien

Birdie is slow in returning to the camera after flipping off her primary office light. “I hope you’re not trying to hide that beautiful body from me.”

“Honestly, I don’t know what I’m doing,” she says. “Couldn’t I just go back to the dorm real quick?”

She finally comes back into view, and I wonder if I’m screwing up by making her do this. I forge ahead only because of her words to me yesterday. “No. I want you on edge and on fire to the point you forget everything else. Like you said last night, if I

let you leave, we'll just have to start all over again later. Now, strip."

Birdie grumbles as she pulls down her leggings, but I don't miss the sparkle of excitement in her eyes. I'd rather see her angry than quivering in fear like she was a short time ago, but I'll take adventurous Birdie all day long.

Her shirt goes next, and I'm already hard by the time her tits jiggle free of the sports bra she was wearing. "Sit in your chair and lean all the way back. Good girl. Now, spread your legs for me."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

A tremor works its way down her body at my command. Birdie obeys without question, lifting her feet to the desktop. The phone's camera is right where I'd be if I were kneeling in front of her. Fuck. The only way to make this better is to be there in person.

I get up from the chair, approach the bed, and position my phone at the edge, kneeling before it. "Spit on your fingers and touch yourself. I want you to imagine me licking up your slit and teasing that cute little nub."

Birdie does as she's told, and despite my earlier determination, I have a sobering thought. What if she's only doing this out of fear? "Birdie, stop."

Her eyes fly open, and her head lifts from the reclined chair. "What?! Why?"

"You don't have to do this just because I told you to. I only wanted to distract you."

Birdie's eyes lock onto mine, her lips curl into a slow grin, and her fingers go right back to her pussy. "I may not be a badass like Chelsea, Sadie, or the other female operatives, but you—don't—scare—me."

Her eyes close again, and she drops her head back. "The sooner you learn that, the sooner you'll quit interrupting each time we fool around."

And just like that, Birdie signed the papers and took ownership. My heart wouldn't let me walk away even if my mind wanted to. Picking myself off the floor and my phone off the bed, I return to the guest chair and prop the phone on a side table.

The soft glow of the lamp in Birdie's office washes over her bare skin, giving just enough light to let me watch her pleasure herself. She's no longer hesitant, having completely forgotten about the risk of security patrolling Knot's building.

Two fingers swirl slowly around her clit, but my eyes return to her face and remain. I wish I knew what it is about Birdie that lights my world on fire. Or what it is about me that does the same for her. The shy woman is a rare flower that only blooms for me.

Her eyes open to fix on mine, and at Birdie's soft smile, I'm a goner.

"Something's missing," she breathes while holding my gaze.

"What's that?"

"You."

"Oui, Petit Oiseau. I'll be back soon, and it'll be my hands and mouth doing filthy things to you."

Birdie moans at the dirty promise, and her fingers find another gear. Panting, she says, "I like it when you speak French."

"I don't know much, and what little I do know only comes out around you."

Her breath quickens, telling me she's close to climax. It's time to push her over the edge. "Be a good girl, and show me how you like to be fucked."

Birdie's fingers dip inside her core, glistening as they return to her clit. I let my dick out of my shorts and spit in my hand, fisting around the head. Slowly, I slide my hand down, squeezing as hard as Birdie's tight body did.

My speed increases as Birdie's does, but I have to slow down a few times to keep from blowing before her. Not easy. The image on the screen is almost too much. "Mmm. You're doing so good, Petit Oiseau."

Birdie's body jerks suddenly as her orgasm hits. Her fingers still as she shudders and whimpers my name, both music to my ears. "Give me one more, Birdie. I need it."

She winces as her fingers again touch her clit, still sensitive from her first release. She soon finds the right rhythm, and in less than half the time, Birdie's singing again.

With this orgasm, Birdie's whole body goes limp, and her feet drop from the desk. Now, she's right.

"Watch me, Birdie."

Languid eyes open, focusing on the hand fisting my cock. The tip glistens, and Birdie licks her lips, sated but still game. God help me. I keep up the slow pace for a bit longer to ensure she's recovered enough to give me her full attention.

When Birdie sits up and adjusts her glasses, I go all in, speeding up to return the favor. "Oh fuuuck. See what you do to me?"

Birdie's rapt attention and innocent curiosity, aided by the sexy show she put on, drive me to the brink. In sixty seconds flat, I lean back, body bowstring tight, and jet all over my stomach and chest. I drop my hand, not even bothering to tuck myself away.

Birdie's face is a picture of astonishment and wonder. I'd give anything if I could touch her right now.

Yep. You're fucked.

Birdie

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

“Sweet dreams, Birdie.”

If they feature Bastien, then god, I hope not. I clear my throat and reply, “Sleep well, Bash.”

“I mean it. No more working tonight.”

Tempting fate, I bite my lip before teasing, “I’ll go straight to bed, Daddy.”

“Grr.”

I end the call before Bastien can complain, and the screen goes black. The following silence reminds me that I’m naked in my office on the executive floor of the illustrious Knot Corporation. I scramble for my clothes, pulling them on quickly. And then, true to my word, I close up my office, leaving the flowers in the hallway.

Walking back to the dorms feels weird. I didn’t realize I was barefoot, but thankfully, I don’t run into any security on my way back down. While my shoeless condition is easily explained, I don’t want to have to answer for my flushed appearance.

The stillness of the empty dorm doesn’t bother me since I’m used to living alone. I pick up my abandoned sandwich and munch my way through gathering stuff for a shower and the trip to the locker room.

Though anticipating Bastien’s return keeps me up for a while, I sleep well thanks to his brand of relaxation. My only disappointment is that I don’t dream of him during the night.

Morning brings news of three consultation requests from the Department of Justice. It's pretty standard stuff regarding the need for my skills, but one involves finding a child kidnapper. Despite having an initial lead, police lost the perpetrator, whose digital signature has gone cold after starting out erratic.

Arriving at my office, I'm glad to see the flowers are gone

I get started on the kidnapping case first. Protecting and saving kids is the most important thing I do, and I wouldn't be able to focus on anything else anyway. Thankfully, we don't have any teams needing logistical help right now.

The whole morning is spent studying the information the feds had on Roger Willis, the thirty-eight-year-old who took ten-year-old Jaxis Bishop. The two are unrelated, which makes the situation more dire. Jaxis was taken from a city soccer complex in Ohio, where his younger sister's team was having practice.

The huge complex features eight full-size soccer fields roped off as needed for younger age groups. Jaxis was in the adjacent playground with some kids he'd gotten to know during the season. They were playing Pokémon, something they do often.

One of the boys in the group reported a man in a red truck grabbed Jaxis and took off. The boy couldn't say if he'd seen the man in the red truck before. None of the kids recognized him either. That was four days ago.

Since Jaxis was taken, no contact has been made with the family, and no ransom demands have been called in to the police—all bad signs.

Early on, the Feds thought they'd found Willis, but he managed to evade them in the backwoods town he'd been traced to. He has no known family, and work associates report that he's mentally underdeveloped.

Several sightings have been called in over the last two days, but the patterns are so erratic the FBI didn't deem them credible. They followed up on the few within thirty miles of the soccer park, but no trace was ever found.

Some in the bureau think Willis himself called in the tips to impede the investigation. After looking through his medical records and watching videos of therapy sessions, I don't think he's capable of that level of planning. Still, if I've learned anything working here, it's that you never take anything for granted.

My assignment is to find Willis or at least give the police an idea of where to look. Since he took Jaxis, he hasn't used any credit cards and doesn't have a phone to track, or at least not with him. That leaves the random tips reported to the authorities as the only place to start.

I draw up a map of the Midwest and tag every sighting, no matter how unlikely, trying to establish a pattern. In my career, I've tracked people who wouldn't make a left turn, no matter how much time it added to their route. Once, a woman wouldn't drive on any road with the letter R in the name. The possibilities are as unpredictable as they are endless.

The therapist's notes don't list any obsessive-compulsive disorder habits for Willis, but I assume it's because being OCD is secondary to Willis' overall development.

After an hour of checking reports and mapping, I lean back in my seat and study the big picture I've created. I hate to admit it, but I'm just as stumped as the feds. I don't see any letter or number patterns or other attributes occurring consistently.

Zooming out to a distance of five hundred miles, I stare at the screen, clearing my mind of any biased thoughts. Willis' sightings are entirely random, crisscrossing state lines back and forth without rhyme or reason.

Or are they?

I pull up the initial report again, reviewing witness statements. The boys were playing Pokémon. Pokémon. No way.

A quick internet search brings up several cute characters featured in the game. Bouncing back and forth between the search results and the map, I think I might have just figured out a pattern. I sketch a crude outline on screen, lining it up with the map sightings. I'll be damned.

I'm dialing my contact three seconds later. "You'll find Willis in Lancaster or Lansing next."

The agent is stunned. "How the hell did you find him?"

"I didn't. Willis drew me a map. One of those two places is next."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

I explain what I found, and confident with my methodology, Agent Silver offers me a sincere thanks and announces the FBI can take over the search from here on out. Hopefully, they'll get people in place to capture Willis before sundown. Hopefully, the kid's alright.

Agent Silver signs off to coordinate the operation, and I'm just about to begin my report for Knot on the case when my phone rings. Hoping to see Bastien's name on the screen, I deflate when it's just my optometrist. "Hello. Birdie Crenshaw here."

"Hi, Ms. Crenshaw. I'm calling to cancel your appointment for tomorrow afternoon. Dr. Tipton was just in a car accident and is in the hospital."

"Oh, wow. Of course. I hope he'll be ok. Honestly, I'd forgotten I even had an appointment this week."

"I'm sorry about this," The cheerful receptionist says. "I'm afraid I don't know how his schedule is going to work out for the next couple of weeks. If you're okay with it, you can come in today to see our new optometrist, Dr. Lee. He has an opening at four."

With two other DOJ cases and this psycho stalker to deal with, I'd rather put this off, but I know from experience there's always going to be too much to do to miss work. Since our operatives are quiet, this is probably the best possible time. "I'll take this afternoon."

"Ok. See you at four."

I put my cell phone away and do what I promised. I pick up my desk phone, dial the security extension, and tell Frank I need a ride. After I explained what for, he offered to act as chauffeur.

With that detail handled, I resume work on my report for the Willis case and forward it to my boss, along with a comment about me going out this afternoon.

Around noon, Sadie emails me while I'm sitting in the unusually quiet cafeteria. Lunch for one is a premade grilled buffalo chicken wrap. No hot food today. Not even the chef is here with such a skeleton crew on site.

Spatch must be bored, and his retired military service dog, Piper, must be lonely. The empty room echoes as I laugh at myself for wondering if I should have invited Spatch and Piper to lunch.

Speaking of Spatch, I need to set up a recurring training schedule with him. I'd be way too tempted to misbehave if training with Bastien. I'll stop by the gym after lunch. For now, I take another bite of the wrap and open Sadie's message.

"We'll be flying home tonight and arriving in the morning."

Uh oh. My face reddens at the update I'll have to give her. I'll probably need ear protection for her reaction. I guess I'll worry about that tomorrow.

After lunch, I stop by the training room to speak with Spatch and pet Piper. The demanding trainer doesn't ask about the sudden change, and I don't volunteer. I don't expect the same discretion from Sadie.

I'm back at my desk a minute later, beginning work on the second DOJ case. This one's for the ATF. Apparently, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms' computer forensics team has a backlog, and they don't want to wait. They've

outsourced several cases to get caught up, but it's a fool's hope.

I work until three and shut down to have plenty of time to meet up with my security babysitter and get to my appointment on time. The lobby is a bit of a zoo when I step off the elevator, with Bastien's team walking in unexpectedly early. Spotting Chelsea, I rush over. "What's going on?"

"You won't believe it. The Smithsonian planted listening devices in all the public and service areas. In addition to all the security firms they'd contracted, they also had a team of people listening live, round the clock, to all the feeds. A few hours ago, they caught one of the owner's people joking about ways they might try to steal the stone, and the Smithsonian shut the whole damned thing down. We boarded the jet an hour ago."

Bastien walks through the entrance, and the area gets quiet. Not quiet like I'm lost in the moment and ignore everyone else, but quiet as in everyone stops and stares. Noticing my purse, Bastien drops his bag and stalks toward me. "Going somewhere?"

I glance around at the other contractors, each appearing oddly curious or grinning like fools. Even more peculiar is that all of them avoid making eye contact. "Frank, um." I stop to clear my throat. "Frank is taking me to an eye appointment."

"Frank," Bastien barks. "I think I've got this."

"Yes, sir," Frank says as he hands over a set of keys.

Peeking at the rest of the operatives' faces again, I whisper, "Bastien, they're all staring. Why?"

Bastien steps close enough that his body touches mine. He lifts a hand and cups my jaw. "Well, Petit Oiseau, I guess they're waiting to see if I'll do this."

He lifts my face, and his lips touch mine. I lean into him, not caring about our audience. The kiss is brief but still surprising. I never thought Bastien would be ashamed of a relationship with me. I just didn't expect him to make it known so early or in such a public way.

We separate to a chorus of catcalls and whistles, and Bastien guides me through the crowd to the door, ignoring the slaps to his back. The key fob chirps an armored SUV sitting at the curb, and Bastien places his bag in the back before opening my door. Once he's behind the wheel, he looks me over and devours me with his eyes. "Where are we headed?"

I'd love to say to bed, but squeak out, "Eye doctor."

Bastien chuckles, and I feel it down low. "You'll have to be a little more specific."

I stutter through telling him where it is, and we roll in that direction. "I heard about the exhibit."

Bastien shakes his head. "Some people are born stupid. You can't educate it out of them."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

Despite our session last night and the kiss just now, I'm still insecure and don't want to assume my standing with Bastien. After clearing my throat to build up some nerve, I say, "I'm glad you're back. I'm kind of tired of staying in the dorms. Is going home out of the question?" Not to mention, the dorms aren't coed.

"Probably not the best idea. My place is out because of the tracker found on my truck, but Jackson's got a studio over his garage he rents out like a hotel room. We can stay there."

He said we. I turn my face to the window to hide my stupid grin, and we arrive at the optometrist's office a short time later. Bastien goes in with me, unwilling to let me stray far from his side, and I get checked in. Instead of sitting in the waiting area, I wander to the wall of glasses. Studying my reflection in one of the mirrors, I think it might be time for a change.

Bastien sticks close, keeping his body between me and the door as I try on dozens of frames, waiting for my name to be called. I don't like any of the new styles I try on and angrily toss pair number twenty on the counter. Bastien takes my old frames and places them back on my face. "I know what you're doing, Birdie. Stop it. You don't need to change, not for me or anyone. Not even your glasses."

He touches my cheek and starts to say something else when my name is called. "Want me to go with you?" he asks.

"Nah. The rooms are pretty small. And with you there, I wouldn't be able to focus on the letters."

I follow the lady tech to a dark room in the back, where she uses two different machines to take images of my eyes. When she's satisfied, she brings me to an exam room to do other preliminary stuff before the doctor does his exam.

Dr. Lee walks in a short while later and introduces himself. Once he runs through some early checks, he stands and gestures for me to follow. "Because this is my first time seeing you, I'd like to check your eyes after dilation."

We go to another dark room set up like a secondary waiting area, where he puts the mydriatic drops in my eyes. "I'll be back to get you in about ten minutes."

Dr. Lee leaves to deal with other patients while the medicine does its thing. I lounge in the comfy seat, eyes closed, and fantasize about tonight with Bastien.

A few minutes later, a plastic popping sound draws my eyes open in time to watch a gloved hand slam over my mouth. I fight but can't dislodge the much stronger grip. All I accomplish is shifting my attacker's grasp, leaving my nose covered as well. Now I can't scream or breathe, so I reach for my purse and the phone inside.

Just as my fingers brush against the protective case, the sting of a needle in my neck rockets me into a full-blown panic. I barely manage to slip the phone out using two fingers right before the bag slides from my lap onto the floor.

The man above me slaps the device out of my hand before I can hit the panic button on the lock screen, leaving me to fight for the few remaining seconds before I black out.

Bastien

I check my watch again and pull out my phone, wondering what's taking so long. It's been years since I had an eye exam, having twenty-twenty vision, but I don't

remember ever spending this much time in an eye clinic.

A male in a lab coat catches my attention, walking down the hallway of the small practice. He peeks in every door in the hall before finally entering the waiting room. After scratching his head, he leans over the reception desk, whispering to the woman there.

She looks around and gets up, walking to the back. A few seconds later, she returns, heading straight for me with the male on her heels. “You came in with Ms. Crenshaw, right?”

I’m on my feet in an instant. “Yes. Why?”

The man with the name Dr. Whittman Lee embroidered on his lab coat explains, “I put Ms. Crenshaw in the dark room for her eyes to dilate. Now I can’t find her.”

“I checked the bathroom,” the lady explains. “She’s not there.”

My skin turns ice cold.

After staring down the doctor briefly, I race to the front door and lock it before wheeling around on the female staffer. “No one goes in or out. Check every room. Every closet.” I turn to the doctor next and order, “You! Show me the back door!”

He jumps at my command but quickly pivots and darts down the hall. At the end is a T-crossing, with bathrooms and offices to the left. The right side has more rooms and the rear exit.

Looking up, I turn in a circle, noting the lack of cameras. “You have no security back here?”

“Ah, no. All our cameras are out front in the merchandise area.”

My heart pounds in my throat as I drag the doctor with me and shove through the back door of the small building. Outside is a concrete patio with a couple of tables and chairs, a gravel parking lot for staff, and access to a side street because this building sits on a corner. There are no cameras out here, either. “Fuck! Are none of you worried about security?”

“I’m sorry. We don’t have drugs here or cash, and there isn’t much of a criminal market for our non-prescription frames on display.”

“Dammit!” I yell before focusing on him once again. “How many men do you have on staff?”

The doc puffs out his chest, attempting to come across as superior. “You don’t think one of us is responsible?!”

I get up in his face, “HOW. MANY. MEN?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

“Three plus me. I’m going to call the police.”

He starts for the door, but I grab a fistful of his shirt to keep him from leaving. “You can do it right here.”

My phone is out, and I’m calling Knot as I make my point clear to the doctor.

“Knot,” the powerful CEO answers.

“Sir, Birdie’s gone. She’s disappeared from the eye clinic. No one has seen her for at least fifteen minutes, and no cameras cover the exam areas or rear exit.”

Knot is quiet for a full five seconds. I know because I held my breath and counted the whole time. “I’ve got to make a call. Do not hang up this phone.”

He must pick up his desk line, as in seconds, I’m listening to another call on speaker. A woman’s voice answers, “I’m going to assume this isn’t a social call.”

“I need your help, Cle.”

“You’ve got it. Link me up with Birdie, and let’s get started.”

“I can’t,” he chokes. “That’s what I need your help with. Birdie’s been taken, and we have no idea how or by whom.”

“Not exactly,” I call out. “I found out last night that the flowers sent to Birdie were from the bastard. She didn’t say anything sooner because she thought I sent them.”

“What told you the flowers came from Birdie’s stalker?”

“Birdie did.”

I notice the doctor hanging up his call to emergency services, and I finally let him go. As he scrambles back inside, I continue, “We checked the florist that delivered them, but they’re old school. Their only online presence is some pictures on social media. Birdie couldn’t find any digital retail records. I called the place this morning. They understood our concern but didn’t have any information to ID the sender and have no cameras.”

“What about a message, a card?” Cle asks.

“The message was dark when you consider it came from an unknown. I had Birdie put it in her desk for us to take to the cops when I returned.”

“Hang on. I’ll get it,” Knot says.

He rushes out of his office, leaving Cle and me on speaker. “Who are you?” she asks, not wanting to miss an opportunity.

“Bastien Laurent. Former SEAL. You’re Cle Maxwell, right? I’ve heard about you through my old team and boss, Tim O’Reilly.”

“Tim’s a good man.”

Knot returns at that point, cutting our get-to-know-you session short. “I got the card. It reads, ‘It should have been you from the start.’”

“I can see how the message could be construed if she thought it came from a lover,” Cle offers. “What do you think it means?”

Knot sighs. "I have no idea."

"I think I do."

The possibility has been eating at me since I spoke with Birdie last night. I didn't share it then because I knew she would have lost her mind in the search if I did. Now, I regret keeping my mouth shut.

Since it's academic now, I sacrifice Birdie's privacy to save her life. "There's something the two of you need to know, but I need you to swear it won't go any further."

"As long as secrecy doesn't keep us from finding her, you have my word," Knot vows.

Cle echoes his sentiment, so I tell them what happened the night Amelia Quarles was raped and murdered. Afterward, Cle asks, "What do we know about this guy?"

"Never caught," Knot reports.

"So, we're thinking this bastard wanted Birdie, and when he couldn't get her, he took Amelia instead?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

Cle's question gives me pause. "It has to be considered. We've ruled out this being a revenge plot from a previous or even potential target. I know I sound crazy, basing my theory on something that happened fifteen years ago."

The approaching wail of sirens signifies our time is up, and Knot begins wrapping up our conjecture. "Look, the reasons of the bastard don't matter. Finding him does. Laurent, you deal with the cops. Cle and I will do everything we can on our end. Get your ass back here as soon as you're cut loose."

The call ends, and I shove my phone in my pocket and rush inside. A pair of uniforms are just walking in when I reach the front. I approach the lead, wanting to get things moving fast. "The kidnapped woman is a civilian asset to Detective Cooper. Her kidnapping is related to the work they do. He needs to get here."

The lead cop takes in my Knot uniform and my explanation. Deciding I must be credible, he points to the other officer and orders, "Get his statement."

As the lead walks away, I listen to him contacting dispatch and asking for Cooper.

"Sir... Sir?" the younger officer says to get my attention.

I recite for him everything that happened since Birdie and I arrived, as well as my role here. The first cop has since rejoined us and asks a few of his own questions when I'm done. Additional officers arrive during that exchange and are sent to question the staff individually.

Meanwhile, I keep checking my watch, needing to be looking for Birdie. The only

reason I'm not tearing shit up is because I know Knot has called down the lightning. He's likely already deployed every resource in his arsenal and probably drafted several others.

Cooper walks in at the twenty-five-minute mark and comes straight to me. "What do we know?"

After hearing my report and other witness statements, he issues orders to the cops waiting around. "Search every inch of the premises. And no one leaves." He tosses his thumb in my direction. "Except this guy."

Cooper demands Dr. Lee show him to the room where he left Birdie, and I follow, dropping to my knees as soon as I clear the door frame. I move chairs and side tables, looking for anything that might lead me to Birdie.

Beneath the farthest reclining seat, I find her phone. I slide the chair out of the way and tap the screen with a pen, waking up the device that displays a panic button front and center. Since Knot found out through me that Birdie was taken, she never got to hit the alarm. Someone caught her by surprise.

I move the chair to the side for Cooper to get close and wait until he notices the safety feature. "She never had a chance," he says, mirroring my thoughts.

Cooper shakes his head and pulls a plastic bag from his pocket. Though I'd wanted to take the phone, I get that he'll need to check it for prints in case the suspect touched it.

"Her purse isn't here," he reports. "That means he took it. There's nothing else I can do here."

Pushing off the floor, I lean close to Cooper to keep the conversation private. "The

only people other than me and one more in Knot's organization knew Birdie would be here are in this building. You have protocols and shit, but Knot will turn these guys' lives inside out. If we find who took her, we won't wait for you."

Birdie

Stripes of bright light assail my eyes through my closed lids, making a bitch of a headache a whole lot worse. I breathe through the pain and nausea, trying to figure out where I am. I'm not at work. The dorms don't have windows. This isn't my house, either. Wherever this is, it's cold and musty.

Opening my eyes slowly, I study my surroundings, which consist of aging wood slat walls. This looks to be a barn or some other type of outbuilding. Besides the light coming in between the wallboards, everything else is dark. And blurry. I don't have my glasses.

The bed I'm lying on is unexpectedly fresh and comfortable. I raise my hands to roll over carefully, considering my pounding head, but get tangled up in a chain attached to my left ankle. Shit. Shielding my eyes from the intrusive light shining on my face, I look down to see how securely I'm anchored.

The chain is attached to this old iron bed, which sits on a wood plank floor. I'm convinced now that it's a barn, but I can't see well enough to know for sure. On a positive note—now, that's a stupid thought—at least I'm still fully dressed.

Wanting to make sure it stays that way, I gingerly sit up and scoot to the edge of the bed, tugging at the bar of the footboard where the chain is attached. The metal bar doesn't budge. Picking up my foot, I inspect the heavy iron cuff and the padlock keeping it closed. Unlike the bed and barn, those look new. "Don't panic, Birdie," I whisper.

Yeah. You're way past the point of panic, I think bleakly. I stand up, testing my legs and finding them only slightly unsteady. Stepping a few paces away from the bed, I grab the chain and yank as hard as I can. Again, nothing.

At this point, I give up removing the chain. I'll take the damned bed apart and drag the footboard behind me if I have to. I shove the thick mattress off the frame to expose an old-fashioned spring base. It fits into the headboard and footboard through cone-shaped connectors. That's it. The bed comes apart in three pieces.

I try to lift the spring base, but it doesn't budge. The damned thing is probably rusted in place. Maybe a good solid impact will knock it loose. Banking on that theory, I kick at one of the legs, but the heavy bed doesn't move at all. That's not possible.

Dropping to the old plank surface, I check the feet and let out a sob. The bed has been bolted to the floor. I'd need a saw or an ax to bust out of here.

"Seems pretty hopeless, doesn't it?" a voice from the dark asks.

I jump back up, turning in the direction of the sound. "Stay away from me!"

"I can't do that. I've waited for this moment far too long."

A figure steps out of the shadows, blurry until closing to within six feet of the bed. The face that comes into focus isn't that of a monster but is still out of place for such a rustic environment.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

The classically handsome man leers over my body, and I strain my eyes and brain to see if I know this guy. He wears stylishly long brown hair, a trim beard, a perfect face, and a fit body. If I saw the guy on the street, I'd probably give him a second look... until I saw his eyes. His eyes are dead and soulless.

“Who the hell are you, and why am I here?”

The man smiles, shoves up the sleeves of his cream cable knit sweater, and steps closer. Ignoring my question, he says, “My name is Dolion. Did you like the flowers I sent? They reminded me of you.”

“What are you talking about? I don't know you.”

“But I know you, Birdie. The first time I saw you was at a science fair. You were wearing white shorts with yellow flowers. Your demonstration was about manipulating dye colors with various PH levels. You used flowers and plants to make the base dyes. I think you had plans to become an artist.”

All the air whooshes out of my lungs, and I struggle to draw more in. “That... that was fifteen years ago.”

Dolion licks his lips, moaning. “Yes, it was.”

He comes closer, propping an arm on the headboard, sending me to the extent of my tether. “I was in the community center and saw you setting up for your presentation. I decided to stick around and wait to see how you placed. After you won, I followed you home. That friend of yours was with you.”

Meals. And it wasn't my house. It was hers.

"You were such a special, smart girl that I had to get closer. I hacked into your home's network and learned your digital habits. I reached out to you and cultivated the perfect cover. You were practically eating out of my hand."

"It wasn't my house," I whisper. It should have been you from the start. Oh god, Amelia.

"I know. Imagine my surprise when I showed up to meet you, only to learn I had been grooming the wrong girl. By the time I figured it out, your friend knew I wasn't a teenage boy. I couldn't let her live. At the same time, I didn't want my effort to be a complete waste. Even though my first toy didn't turn out to be you, I enjoyed my time with Amelia. Sadly, she didn't."

No. No. No. No. "You bastard! You're just another fucking pedophile."

"Now, Birdie," he chides. "Name calling is so childlike. I simply prefer to pick fruit when it's ripe, juicy, and still firm instead of rotting and falling off the tree."

"You are one sick motherfucker. Let me GO!" I yank desperately at the chain, wishing I could choke him with it.

"That's no way to talk to a partner. Especially after all the help I've given to your cause."

I don't get his fucked-up delusion, so I keep my mouth shut and keep tugging.

"Of course, you wouldn't know about my work. I'm a vigilante hunter, just like you. I find men who entice girls and get them off the streets. When one gets close enough, I take his victim and set him up to take the fall. Bam. Another predator behind bars."

My arms tire, and I freeze at his revelation. “How fucked up do you have to be for that to make sense? You’re still victimizing these children.”

Dolion shrugs as though that particular detail is insignificant. “They would have been anyway. At least when I’m finished with them, their suffering is over.”

“God, I can’t... I can’t hear this. Why am I here? If you’re a monster that preys on young girls, I must be practically rancid to you.”

“On the contrary. I see you like a fine wine that’s been put up to age, only to find that you’re still as fresh and youthful as when you were hidden away. You’re the fruit I never got to taste. You should have been my first, and I’ve never gotten over losing you.”

I back away as Dolion advances a step toward me. The closer he gets, the more he comes into focus. Spying my only weapon, I gather up the chain, dropping a loop long enough to swing like a bat. Unfortunately, taking up the length to do this brings me nearer to the bed and Amelia’s killer. “Don’t come any closer,” I yell.

Dolion walks a wide circle around me, bending to pick up the mattress and placing it back on the bed. “It doesn’t have to hurt, Birdie, but I will make sure it does if you don’t obey.”

Bastien

I warn security that I’m coming in hot and blow through the open gate once I turn into the drive. I skid to a stop at the curb beneath the portico. Two seconds later, I’m yanking open the stairwell door.

The executive reception area is full of people. I shove them out of my path to Knot’s office. His tie is on the floor next to the sofa, and his shirtsleeves have been rolled up.

Birdie's been missing for almost an hour and a half. "What'd the cop say? What'd you find?" he demands.

"We found her phone. Nothing else. What about you?"

"Cle's gotten into the clinic's employee records. She's running down everyone, starting with the males."

"I've traced two back to childhood. Neither is our guy. I'm working on Dr. Lee now." Her voice draws my eyes to the large screen across the room. The woman with pale skin, strawberry blond curls, and black frame glasses is seated at a large desk with multiple computer screens. Two large males fill the space behind Cle, and one other is seated behind a laptop.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

“What about the one that had the accident? Is he really in the hospital?”

The man on the laptop lifts his head, showing me a Pantera Security logo on his shirt.

“Dude’s in surgery getting pins put in a fucked-up arm.”

“Bastien Laurent, meet Nate Erickson. Squid. Squid, meet Bash.”

I gloss over the introduction, diving right back into the business of finding Birdie.

“What about cameras in the area? There had to be at least one to catch someone leaving the eye clinic.”

“I’m sorry,” she answers sadly. “The closest one is to the west, two intersections away, and we can’t know what direction our guy took once he left the clinic.”

Knot swears under his breath and straightens like I didn’t just see a chink in his armor. “I hate to say it, Laurent, but this guy picked the perfect place to nab Birdie.”

Knot may sound controlled, but the tightness around his eyes gives him away. He’s scared. “I don’t get it. You’re Dillan fucking Knot. How do you not already have this guy’s ass roasting over a spit?”

He doesn’t answer, but he doesn’t have to. Birdie’s the reason. She’s the one that finds people. I’ve heard about Cle’s reputation, but she’s only been on this case for ninety minutes. Birdie and I have been looking for this guy for a week.

My nerves and my need to hunt get the best of me, and I head for the door. “I can’t just sit here,” I announce over my shoulder. “I’m going to see if I can find anything at

her place.”

I blow through the door, stopping at the entrance to the stairs. “Frank!”

“Yo,” he answers, stepping forward, the arms of the gray-haired Jarhead straining his uniform shirt.

“You can get me past Birdie’s security at home, right?”

He nods. “Yeah. I have the overrides.”

“You’re with me then.”

He doesn’t question the order or ask to confirm with the boss. At this point, everyone wearing a Knot uniform knows about Birdie and that finding her is our only priority.

When we reach the bottom floor, I toss the security manager my keys since my truck is the closest vehicle. He starts the engine and contacts gate security as he races toward the exit. After we’ve left the compound, I put in a call to Detective Cooper, who answers on the first ring.

“I’m going to Birdie’s house,” I bark before he can speak. “I’ve got someone that can deactivate her security.”

“I’ll meet you there. Has Knot found anything?”

“He’s cleared two of the staff, but that’s it. What about your team? What have you found?”

The cop sighs, telling me everything I don’t want to hear. “Nothing.”

“What about prints?”

“We’ve got a shit ton because it’s a fucking clinic. We’re running them, but it’ll take a while. You have to know that we won’t get a match on everything, and it’s possible our guy didn’t leave prints at all.”

The update isn’t anything I couldn’t have guessed, but having it confirmed still sucks. Biting off a string of curses, I snarl, “I’ll be at Birdie’s in ten.”

Frank remains silent during the trip, apparently not having any wisdom to offer, not that I’m in the state of mind to listen to reason anyway. The clock on the dash reads six seventeen. Nearly two hours. Fuck.

Cooper is waiting in Birdie’s driveway when we pull in beside the unmarked police cruiser. The two of us rush to the porch, led by Frank. He punches in a master code to Birdie’s door panel, which unlocks the door and disarms the security system all at once.

As a cop wired to be the first to face danger, Cooper slides Frank out of the way and enters the house with his gun drawn. I’m on his six, with Frank bringing up the rear. “You two clear the house, and I’ll get into Birdie’s computer,” I whisper.

I gave the order because I know the house hasn’t been breached. Knot’s system is better than top-notch, and any unauthorized entry would have called down an army of Knot security agents.

The two men continue past Birdie’s office off the entry while I step inside and holster my Glock. I have her computer up and running in seconds, and the other two men walk in as I log into one of Birdie’s hunting programs. “What are you looking for?” Cooper asks.

Between me and the mouse, I don't have the first fucking clue. "Won't know until I see it."

What are you doing, Bash? On a hunch, I call up her message board in this program. What I find is a lot of unanswered activity. My gut clenches at what that means. She kept her word and left this alone until we could work together again.

Page 70

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

If I can find her, we will work together again. Hunt pedophiles, make French pastries, fuck like rabbits, and do whatever she wants for the rest of her life. Only if you find her alive.

Shaking off the doubts, I skim over the board at the senders' names and then open each one, beginning with the oldest.

All of the messages start out basically the same. Are you still looking for a daddy? I'll give you a good time. I read every line of every sick message from these bastards wanting to fuck a kid. The longer it goes on, the harder it is to remain calm until I finally reach the end.

One sender stuck out among the others, his messages beginning like the rest but quickly turning dark. You're not playing with me, are you?... Teasing little bitch..., and finally, Ready or not, here I come.

Isolating this guy's messages, I pull up Birdie's monster directory, as she calls it, and search for the username. Cooper zeroes in on the screen.

"Who's this?" Cooper demands, pointing at the collection of messages.

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

The search in Birdie's database returns a single entry. Based on what I've seen of many others, this one only contains a fraction of the information she usually records. The system shows a name, address, and a note of Birdie's observations.

Cooper leans in close, reading Birdie's comment on the guy. "'Likes to talk dirty to girls but shows no willingness to entertain face to face meet.' We'll see about that."

He pulls a handheld radio from his jacket and keys up. "Dispatch, I need info on Stephen Hiller. One twelve Hickory. Berkley."

The radio goes on the desk, and Cooper leans over again, studying the other names and info on the list. "Birdie doesn't miss. How did she get this guy wrong?"

I can't answer because I haven't worked with her long enough to know. Before I can say so, the cop's radio chirps. "Stephen Hiller. No record. Loan executive at First National. Blue Nissan Maxima."

My eyes snap to the cop's. "Blue sedan," we say at the same time.

He yells into the radio. "Issue a state-wide BOLO. This man is a person of interest in the Crenshaw kidnapping. Send someone to the bank and his house."

By the time dispatch answers, I've dialed Knot. "We have a suspect."

I recite for him all the information we've found, and Cle confirms that she got it. Cooper turns to leave, and I follow, ending the call with Knot. At the front door, Cooper stops me. "You're not a cop. Leave this to me."

I lift my hands in mock surrender. "That's fine. My people will find Hiller before yours do, anyway. I'll make sure to leave enough of him for you to interrogate."

"Shit." Cooper scrubs a hand over his face. "All right, you're with me but only as a relay with Knot. The other guy can fuck off. I don't need two of you up my ass."

I jump in the passenger seat of Cooper's car just before he squeals out of the

driveway. “Where are we headed?” I ask.

“The bank is closed by now. Our best chance is to catch him at home.”

Five minutes into the breakneck trip, my phone rings. “Laurent,” I answer, placing the call on speaker.

“It’s Knot. Hiller wasn’t at work today. His wife reports that he didn’t come home last night. Cle and Squid are looking into financials, but nothing’s popping.”

“Damn, you people move fast,” Cooper mumbles.

“Have them run his cards through the florist’s system,” I say.

“I had Squid do that first. Nothing came up, but he could have paid cash. I’ll get a picture of Hiller to the owner.”

“Let me handle that,” Cooper barks. “They’ll be more inclined to help if a badge asks.”

No one else offers any updates, but I don’t end the call right away. Speaking to any and all that can hear, I plead, “Please find Hiller.” I don’t even care that I’m practically begging at this point.

“Everyone I know is doing all we can to find her,” Knot promises. “Birdie means as much to me as she does to you.”

“I know, Boss.”

The call ends, and I focus out the window at the landscape flying by, listening as Cooper yells out orders for various search warrants. The radio chatter is nearly

constant, but I block it out in favor of my frayed nerves.

Page 71

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

A teenage boy and his distraught mother wait on the sidewalk, guarded by uniforms, when Cooper rolls to a stop at Hiller's house. Cooper surprisingly lets me out of the car, and we follow a uniform into the house, listening to his report as we walk.

"The kid and mom have laptops. Hiller's computer is password-protected in his office. The wife doesn't know the password."

"That's red flag number one," the detective says.

"There's no physical evidence linking him to the victim, so we'll have to wait for the lab to crack his computer. As far as they're concerned, every case is a priority. It won't be fast."

Cooper shocks the hell out of me by saying, "Birdie's an authorized resource. You got any others acceptable for a chain of evidence?"

"How about a CIA contractor? That official enough?"

"Give me a name."

I write it down on the pad he hands me, and Cooper orders the uniform to take the computer tower to Knot Corp, just on my word. I send a message to Knot for him to expect the delivery and follow the detective back outside. His phone rings, and after listening to whatever news is delivered, the man swears.

Rounding on him, I wait until the call ends before I jump. "What?! What's happening?"

“Hiller’s car either doesn’t have GPS, or it’s disabled. We can’t track the car, and his phone isn’t pinging.”

Swallowing down the despair threatening to cripple me, I ask, “What now?”

“Now we wait for the BOLO.”

“I can’t do that.”

I walk away from the detective, ready to call Frank to come pick me up when I spot the officer from inside exiting the house carrying Hiller’s computer. He’s going where I need to be, so I abandon Cooper and jog over to the man. “I’m going with you. I’ll get you through security.”

The uniform looks to the detective. Cooper wants to be where I’m going, knowing we’ll use resources and tactics unavailable and possibly illegal for him. But being a good cop, he sighs, knowing he’s bound by the laws he swore to uphold. Cooper nods to the uniform, resigned.

The drive to Knot Corp only takes twenty minutes since rush hour traffic has mostly cleared. Seeing the squad car with me in the front seat, security doesn’t stop us. They open the gate and wave us through.

Frank, who’s returned long before now, meets us at the entrance with a rolling cart. The cop retrieves the tower from the trunk and places it on the cart, following Frank to the elevator and, ultimately, Knot’s office.

The former SEAL turned executive rushes to meet us when we walk in and quickly signs the chain of evidence form. He barely acknowledges the officer or me before pushing the cart right back out the door. No doubt, he’s on his way to the war room.

I thank the cop and leave Frank to escort him back downstairs and then jog to catch up with Knot. “Good work, Bash,” he says when I reach the elevator where he’s waiting.

“Only if it leads us to Birdie,” I fire back.

Cle and Squid’s faces fill the giant screen when we enter Knot’s battle planning room. The two look like they’ve been anxiously awaiting the computer’s arrival and are now waiting for Knot to hook up Hiller’s system. Once that’s done, the Pantera people dive in, leaving Knot and me standing around with our thumbs up our asses again.

Birdie’s now been missing for almost three hours. I pace the floor, waiting for anyone to find something that will tell me where this bastard has taken my woman.

“Guys, not that it’s bothering me, but there’s no use in you waiting around,” Squid announces. “Breaking into this thing is going to take a while. Why don’t you go get some food? We’ll call when we get in.”

Knot steps in front of me to answer. “We won’t be far.”

He essentially pushes me toward the door, though I would rather stay. “Leave them to it. They are the best, I swear. I can’t tell you how many times I tried to hire them both away from Pantera, but they’re all related by marriage or some shit and won’t split up. Believe it or not, Cle Maxwell is who Birdie wants to be when she grows up, or so Birdie says.”

“Don’t patronize me, Knot. I don’t need you trying to calm me down.”

The defense powerhouse chuckles, but there’s no humor in the sound. His tough front fades just a little when he says, “I think I’m saying it for myself just as much as you.”

Dammit. If he has doubts... Pulling a one-eighty, I'm returning to the war room when Knot grabs my shoulder and practically frog-marches me to the cafeteria. Once there, he shoves a cup of coffee in my hands and my ass into a chair.

He gives me one hell of a warning glare, pinning me to the seat before walking toward the cold storage. A minute later, he returns with a steaming cup for himself and two sandwiches. Knot sits down, sliding one of the sandwiches over to me, and orders, "Talk me through it."

I get the idea he's not referring to the investigation into Hiller. "What do you want to know?"

Page 72

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

Knot takes a long draw from his coffee before speaking. “I’ve been doing this shit for a long time. Long enough to recognize when a man is blaming himself for something he couldn’t control.”

“Bullshit. I let him get to her. I was thirty feet away and let the bastard take Birdie right from under my fucking nose.”

“Maybe, but we still wouldn’t have a lead without you. Not even Birdie had this guy on her radar.”

I shake my head in denial, knowing I caused that, too. “She would have seen him coming if I hadn’t told her to stop hunting without me. I found him easily once I got into her computer, and I’m a dumbass.”

Knot doesn’t argue. He shoves the untouched sandwich at me and says, “Eat. That’s an order, sailor.”

I choke down a few bites, but that’s it. Something about finding Hiller so easily gnaws at me. I can’t put my finger on it, so I stow the feeling away for another time. Finding Birdie is all that matters right now. Anything else to come up will have to be dealt with as it happens.

My eyes shift to check my watch again. Three and a half hours that bastard’s had her.

Birdie

With the flick of his wrist, Dolion unbuckles his heavy alligator belt, pulling it free in

one motion. “Despite my earlier fine wine comment, my palette prefers a different taste. Let’s transform you into the fifteen-year-old you like to flaunt online.”

Transfixed on that belt and worried about how he’ll use it, I almost missed what he said. “Wait. How do you even know about that?”

He shrugs as though he’s got all the time in the world. “When you hunt as the bigger fish instead of as bait, you get bigger prey. I scroll through places where like-minded individuals share their stories, their conquests. I hit the jackpot one night when someone shared your picture with the online group. He bragged about how he had you begging for his cock and that he convinced you to meet with him. The idiot even gave up the location and time.

“Imagine my surprise when I saw every fantasy I ever had in that dark web forum. On top of that, to learn that you never left the area. What can a man do when presented with such temptation, I ask? I moved back to my hometown and went to the meeting location. I saw you arrive with a team of cops, and I swear, I was transported back fifteen years. I’ve been studying you ever since.”

If it weren’t for holding onto the chain, my hand would be at my mouth. “It was you. You’re the one in the blue car. You drugged me at the dog park.”

Again, with the shrugging. “The sudden appearance of the big ape made me a little crazy, and I got careless. When I tracked you to work Tuesday morning and the guy left a short while later, I kept an eye on things. You didn’t return home, so I figured he was gone for a while. That’s when I delivered the flowers.”

“You delivered them?”

“That’s the fun part. When visiting my parents, I sometimes help them out in their flower shop like I did growing up.”

Shit. The florist shop was always going to be a dead end. This guy has been in this game for fifteen years, perfecting his craft. Everything about the flowers was expertly planned with the mind of a brilliant psychopath.

We couldn't get a photo of him at Knot's security gate, but I don't think it would have mattered. This guy was ready for anything. He's not listed as one of the florist employees, and I'm betting there aren't any photos of him in the shop.

Even if the police thought to take a closer look at the florist, Dolion could have claimed that the order went to Knot Corp as a mistake. It's not like my name was on the card or anything. Dolion just gave my name to the guard. Or he could have set up a cash order under a fake name and address to back up his story. That would mean the police would waste more time chasing a false lead.

I'm guessing Dolion, the successful businessman, has been a model son, and neither the police nor his parents would have no reason to question his story. The florist angle would then be dismissed, and there would be no trace to lead Bastien to me.

To sum it all up, I have no chance in hell of being found.

"You beat me with flowers."

"And what a sweet victory, though I never expected it to work out so well. Right now, half the city is chasing their tails, looking into a lead I handed them on a silver platter. Don't worry. They'll find their suspect, but they won't find you."

Dolion straightens the blanket on the bed. "That's enough talking now. You need a bath so we can do something about your hair."

Dolion walks to a deeper part of the room where an old, clawfoot tub stands near an open bathroom. He turns on the taps to fill the ancient tub and crooks two fingers at

me. “Your chain will reach.”

I don’t move. I can’t. My feet simply will not budge. Wrapping the belt around his closed fist, Dolion warns, “I suggest you do not keep me waiting.”

No part of me wants to get an inch closer, but I recall Bastien’s and Spatch’s advice. Wait for the best time to strike. A fight at the wrong time is too easily lost. I drop the chain, jumping at the loud sound it makes hitting the floor. And then I force my feet to move, shuffling toward the steaming tub.

Arriving at the edge, I play my only strategy. “I can’t get undressed with this chain on. You’ll have to unshackle me.”

Dolion’s answering grin is fucking scary. “Nice try.”

He produces a pair of scissors from his pocket and dangles some of the thick leather belt to emphasize his point. “Don’t move, or I will stripe your ass.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

Entirely too slow to be practical, my pants and panties are cut off. I shiver when they fall away, keeping my eyes squeezed shut. My hands instinctively move to cover myself, but the leather belt tapping my bare skin has them lowering again.

My shirt and bra soon join my pants on the floor, and I'm left naked in full view of a monster. "Get into the bath, Birdie."

The spoken command startles me, and I rush to hide in the tub. The water is a welcome relief from the cold air but is quickly overshadowed when Dolion moves to the foot of the tub to watch.

With the products he's provided, I wash my hair, using enough shampoo and conditioner to cloud the water. After I've washed my body, Dolion hands me a razor. "Shave that patch off your cunt. I want it bare."

"And you can go fuck yourself."

Before I draw my next breath, the leather belt whistles through the air, landing with a loud, stinging slap on my forearm. A scream tears from my lips, and a tear leaks from my eye. "Ohh. Look what you made me do."

Tears and sniffles continue as I reach for the razor. Keep your head, Birdie. Outsmart this guy. Gain your freedom, and Bastien will rip his brain out through his nose.

I finish the shave job quickly, and Dolion reaches into the water to pull the plug. As the warm water drains, the cold returns, raising chill bumps all over my skin. Dolion turns the water on again, filling a bowl and pouring it over my head. "Stand up and

rinse off.”

I do as he says, teeth chattering in the freezing air. Dolion retrieves a towel, tossing it to me. “Dry yourself and get out.”

The red welt on my arm reminds me to keep my mouth shut, and I run the towel over my skin before wrapping it around my hair. The chain clanks over the side of the tub as I climb out and thunks on the wood floor when I step down. “Much better,” he coos.

From the tub, I’m led to a vanity, still naked and dragging the chain behind me. I’m forced to sit on a stool while Dolion stands at my back. His crotch is at my shoulder, and in the mirror’s reflection, his erection is obvious.

I close my eyes and think about Bastien, wishing we could have had more time and hoping he won’t go back to hating himself again. A blow dryer turns on, and before long, my hair is straight and smooth.

My lip wobbles when an unwelcome touch shifts the hair away from my neck, and a monster’s lips touch the spot. Not yet, Birdie. Just a little longer.

I’m ordered up afterward, and Dolion presses his front to my back and demands that I open my eyes. “Beautiful,” he says as he trails his hand over my hip to my bare mons.

“I’ve got to go take care of something, but I’ll be back and bring food with me.”

I jerk away from his touch and shiver. “I’m freezing,” I whimper, trying to sound pitiful instead of disgusted by his revolting touch.

“Don’t worry, Kitten. I have clothes for you.”

Dolion grips my shoulder, turning me back toward the bed. He shoves me down, forcing me to sit on the mattress, and walks away to retrieve a duffel bag. Fishing around inside, Dolion brings out a skirt, white with yellow flowers. He tosses it at me and then returns to his search.

The bag drops to the floor once he finds what he wants, and Dolion brings a white tank top over. “These aren’t exactly right, but they’re close enough. Stand.”

He slides the skirt over my head, securing the zipper once the fabric is settled on my hips. The damned thing barely covers my ass. He dresses me in the tank and stands back to view his handiwork. “Just like the first time I saw you.”

My skin crawls under his scrutiny, but there’s nowhere to hide. I’m still cold, but at least I’m covered. “I’ll be back, Birdie. I’ve got to deliver a man in a blue car to the police. Then we’ll have all the time in the world to play.”

Dolion pulls on a pair of gloves and retrieves my clothes. Only now, I realize he never touched them. He’s going to frame someone else for my kidnapping. Knot and the police will waste hours or even days on a wild goose chase. By the time they figure it out—if they ever do—I’ll be long gone.

Bastien

Knot and I are back upstairs in fifteen minutes, but Cle is nowhere to be seen. A dark-haired woman with emerald eyes sets food on the desk for Squid while a small child flies a toy plane through the air. “Did you get in Hiller’s computer yet? Where’s Cle?!”

The brunette lifts her face, wearing a murderous frown at my harried tone. “Erin, don’t,” Squid warns.

The woman ignores him. “Excuse me. I don’t know who the hell you are, but Cle has been working her ass off all day. In case you hadn’t noticed, she’s seven months pregnant and has a three-year-old to care for.”

Squid stands to calm the woman, whom I assume is his wife. “No. Leave her alone, Squid,” I call out. “She’s right. I’m sorry. I’m only afraid of what could be happening to Birdie. These men she hunts, they’re sick.”

A door in Pantera’s conference room blows open, and Cle rushes in with her rounded belly. “I’m sorry. I had to put my toddler to bed at a friend’s house.”

I hang my head, feeling like an ass. “Cle. Stop. You should be resting.”

“No. Birdie’s my friend. I’m not stopping until I find her.” She gestures over her shoulder as another man steps into view. “Or until he makes me.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

“Hyper,” Knot addresses the man in greeting.

“Sir.”

“I’m in!” Squid declares.

In response, the room erupts into a flurry of activity, starting with Erin bending down to kiss her husband’s temple. “We’re going to Sam’s house since Chase is coming here. Don’t forget to eat.”

Two hours later, security escorts Detective Cooper to the war room. Eyes glued to the people on the screen, he asks, “What have you found?”

Knot makes introductions while Cle rubs her eyes and yawns. “So far, we’ve only confirmed Hiller’s penchant for sexting young girls through online gaming chats. I haven’t yet found anything tying him to Birdie’s disappearance.”

“Anything from the BOLO?” Knot asks.

“Nothing,” Cooper answers. “And the florist denied ever seeing Hiller.”

Cle yawns again, and her husband steps up and places his hands on her shoulders as she speaks. “Guys, I don’t think there’s anything more to learn from Hiller’s computer. He’s still not used any of his cards, either. I’m confident he’s involved, but he’s covered his tracks well. I followed Hiller’s car on traffic cams, but there are too many places in the city that the cameras don’t follow. I lost him quickly after he left work yesterday.”

Squid pipes in with an update of his own. “We’ve got no family properties on Hiller’s or his wife’s side that aren’t populated areas. I checked cameras around both areas and never spotted Hiller’s car or Hiller himself.”

Cooper lowers to one of the task chairs in the room. “I hate to say it, but you all may as well get some sleep. Our hands are tied until he surfaces. Tomorrow is Friday. More people will be out. We’ll get a sighting then.”

Cooper’s expression tells me his words are total bullshit. In his mind, Birdie’s death certificate is already signed. He’s wrong, but I don’t disagree audibly. Surprising Knot, I say, “Get some sleep. We’re all going to need it.”

I get up and turn for the door, but Knot grabs my arm, pulling my eyes his way. His face is tired and haunted, about like I feel. I can’t imagine how I look.

Whatever Knot was thinking, he’s decided to keep it to himself. I shrug off his grip and walk to the basement to retrieve my truck.

It makes me fucking sick to be walking away, but I have nothing to contribute to the computer geniuses in the room. Still, I can’t just go home to rest, knowing Birdie is living a nightmare.

For the next two hours, I drive around Norfolk, visiting the areas Birdie frequents in her sting ops. The last stop takes me to Main Street in my part of the military city. Logically, I know there’s nothing here to find, but I need to look so guilt doesn’t swallow me whole.

At home, I’m awake just long enough to kick off my boots and weapon belt, and I’d swear I’ve only been asleep for five minutes when someone starts banging on my door. I’m on my feet in the next heartbeat, racing to see who it is. I don’t even check the peephole before swinging the door wide open.

Jackson shoves past me to pace the living room floor. “Why the fuck did I find out from Commander O’Reilly that Birdie was kidnapped yesterday?!”

My friend finally looks at me, and his eyes widen in alarm. “You look like shit.”

I don’t reply.

“What can I do?” he asks.

I wish I could tell him something, but guilt is like a vice, squeezing the air out of my chest, rendering me unable to breathe, much less speak. Jackson’s shoulders slump when I only stare blankly past him. After a beat, he straightens again, storms to the kitchen, and starts a pot of coffee. “Sit,” he orders. “This ain’t fucking over.”

My heart is still pounding from the rude awakening. I’m disgusted with myself for sleeping while Birdie is still missing and disappointed that it wasn’t her at my door. I need to get moving, to rejoin the search, but I’m rooted to the spot, paralyzed.

When I’m not in the kitchen as the coffee finishes, Navy SEAL Lieutenant Bennet straightens his shoulders and barks, “I can still kick your ass if I need to.”

I shake my head, trying to clear some of the fog. Moving feels like an insurmountable undertaking. My body is frozen as if I’m encased in ice. I fight to break free, knowing Birdie is out there somewhere, praying for me to find her.

Thoughts of Birdie’s bright smile and warm body gradually melt away the icy grip, allowing me the strength to move. Since I’m no longer a husk staring vacantly out the door, Jackson places a couple of mugs on the kitchen table and gestures for me to sit. “What happened?” he asks.

I drop into the nearest chair and rest my head in my hands. The coffee goes

untouched as I run through the story for the fiftieth time. Once I'm done, Jackson slides the steaming mug under my nose, and I finally lift my head.

Jackson sits in the seat across from me, concern weighing down his brow. "So, the cops think this Hiller guy snuck in the back of the eye clinic and waited for her."

He leans back and crosses his arms while shaking his head. "That's some stretch. The most obvious question has to be why anyone would think some random pedophile would know about Birdie's medical appointments."

I finally sit upright but still ignore the coffee. "That's just it. Birdie's appointment wasn't supposed to be until today. It was a last-minute change due to her doctor being in a car accident. She would have been put off for weeks except for the new doctor on staff."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

Arms crossed, Jackson works through his own mental suspect list but shakes his head again. “It can’t be that simple. I assume the police looked into all the clinic staff. I mean, how would anyone outside the clinic know about the schedule change?”

“I don’t know about the cops, but Cle Maxwell cleared the staff.”

“Shit. Can’t get any clearer than that.”

Jackson releases his arms to prop his elbows on the table, still deep in thought. “The only way Hiller could have set things up so cleanly would have been to know about the new doctor and set up the car crash himself.”

I look up slowly from the wood surface, meeting Jackson’s eyes. “Shit.”

Jumping up, I knock over my chair, going for my phone. The instant the call connects, I yell into the speaker. “Look into the car accident. Who hit the doc?”

“Give me a minute.”

Thankfully, Detective Cooper is up early and at his desk. He clicks a keyboard several times and then silence before, “Holy fuck.”

“Spit it out, dammit!”

“A delivery van failed to stop at a red light, pushing the doctor’s Mercedes into oncoming traffic. The van was registered to a local florist, Stem and Petal.”

Bastien

We had it all wrong. I had it wrong. I stomp my feet into my boots and sling on my belt on my way out.

“What is it?” Jackson yells as he chases after me.

“You were right. The wreck was a setup. I know who has Birdie.”

“I know your ass isn’t trying to leave without me!” Jackson jumps in my truck, and we speed off toward the flower shop in downtown Norfolk.

The street is clogged with cop cars, still too early for any of the businesses to be open. I park haphazardly beside two of them, yelling out when I spot Detective Cooper at the shop’s entrance.

He waits behind two officers with a battering ram, ready to break through the old door. “Go!” he orders right before gesturing me forward.

The door gives on the first shot, and a half dozen cops spill through the opening. An older couple comes rushing up with two officers just as the men inside yell that the place is clear. “What is the meaning of this?” the older man demands.

“Mr. Savile, someone associated with your shop is suspected of stalking, kidnapping, and attempted murder. I need a list of all your employees and for you to explain how you know Stephen Hiller.”

The pair share a worried look before Mr. Savile explains, “But it’s only the two of us, and I told you yesterday. I don’t know any Stephen Hiller.”

“Detective!” an officer yells as he jogs toward the shop.

The young cop hands a note to Cooper, and I lean over to read the message. Stephen Hiller's car found. Hiller inside. Dead by apparent suicide. Destroyed clothes matching the description of the missing female's last-worn found in trunk. Pictures of missing woman scattered around car. Syringes and bottle of ketamine found in glove box.

Cooper looks up, fury darkening his face. "Cuff these two and put them in a car."

Two officers rush to obey the order and march the married couple to separate cars. My mind is reeling. The shop, the wreck, and now Hiller were handed to us on a silver platter. That gnawing feeling is back, and I can't ignore it this time. "This is too easy," I tell the group.

"I agree, but we have a problem," Cooper says. "These guys have to be telling the truth about Hiller. Even if they knew him, he wasn't driving when the eye doctor was hit. The accident report lists the old man's name, Dolion Savile. Even if my cops had fucked up the ID in the crash report, there's no way that old man attacked Birdie."

"So where does that leave us?" Jackson asks.

"Savile has an accomplice or is covering for someone," I answer.

Cooper agrees and turns to another officer. "Tear this place apart. I want employment records to check against their stories. See if you can get a driver list from their insurance company."

The officers split off to do the detective's bidding, and I follow when Cooper storms off toward the car holding Mr. Dolion Savile. Cooper opens the door and announces, "Dolion Savile, you're under arrest for the attempted murder of Dr. Horace Tipton and suspected kidnapping."

Mr. Savile's mouth hangs open as Cooper Mirandizes him and begins hurling questions into the open door. "Where is Birdie Crenshaw?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

“I... I don’t know any Birdie Crenshaw.”

“Why did you try to kill Dr. Tipton yesterday?”

“I didn’t. Why are you accusing me?”

“Because you drove your delivery van into the back of Dr. Tipton’s car, shoving him into traffic. Where did you take Birdie after kidnapping her from Dr. Tipton’s office?”

The old man’s face pales. “I didn’t drive the van yesterday. My... son did.”

A deafening quiet falls over the area after Savile’s admission. “Your son?”

“Yes. My son, Dolion Porter Savile. I’m Dolion Ernest. He helps us out sometimes when he’s not busy. I knew he had a wreck yesterday. He’s sore and resting today.”

I’ve heard enough. I turn away from the group in an all-out sprint, calling Knot as soon as I clear the chaos. “What have you got?”

“I know who took Birdie! Get Cle to find everything she can on Dolion Savile—the florist. There’s two of them, father and son. The son has Birdie.”

Jackson and Cooper both yell for me, but I don’t stop. Jackson is lucky even to make it inside the cab before the truck moves. I’m not waiting at all for Cooper. He and his police procedure will just slow me down.

Right as I've maneuvered the truck past the cops and news vans, Knot is calling me back. "The younger Savile has a high-end apartment in Chic's Beach, but there's no way he took Birdie there. Savile Senior has a large plot of land in Chesapeake."

"Send me the address."

"No. You come here. We'll take the chopper and get there a hell of a lot faster."

Security waves me through when I arrive at the compound, and I steer straight for the helipad. Kai and Chelsea jog toward the chopper as I skid to a stop and jump out with Jackson hot on my trail.

"You stay here, Bennett," Knot orders. "It's not that I don't respect your abilities, but I don't want your involvement to create a problem for Stone."

Jackson swears but nods. "I don't like it, but I understand." To me, he says, "You get that girl back alive. She's the only reason you don't need your ass kicked anymore."

We're airborne thirty seconds later.

Each of us dons headsets that are patched into communications with Cle. "What have we got?" Knot asks.

"Small farmhouse in a hay field. Three outbuildings spread out in adjacent woods. Twenty minutes by car, three in the air."

"Have Squid get in touch with Cooper. Tell him where we're going. You send me property maps, satellite views, the works."

"On it."

Knot takes a minute to update Chelsea and Kai on the situation, and then we take the next few to study the images Cle sent. “We check the farthest building first and work toward the house.”

“Hiller was a setup, no doubt a frame job to keep us from looking at the Saviles,” I tell them. “So we suspect Dolion has killed at least twice now. Probably more.”

The CEO nods and shoves a spare magazine into his belt. “Do not make any more victims today unless it’s Dolion himself.”

After the brief flight, Knot directs the pilot where to land. We’re headed to the opposite side of the tree line, far enough away that Savile will think ours was just another passing helo. They’re pretty common in this area with all the military presence.

As the bird lands, we trade our powered headsets for field radios, all set to transmit automatically so our hands stay free. “Monitor our communications,” Knot orders the pilot. “If we need medical evac, find a place to land as close to the house as possible.”

The four of us jump out of the craft. We stand out in our all-black uniforms against the golden field but don’t have time for stealth. Savile has had Birdie for nearly eighteen hours.

We rush through the trees toward the closest building but freeze when we hear screaming coming from the hay field. A barbed-wire fence separates us from the pasture behind the house, and as I jump over it, I hear another scream coming from behind me. “What the fuck?” I whisper into the radio.

“It’s goats,” Knot answers.

“They sound human,” Kai complains.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

Another scream coming from the barn turns all our heads. “That one was human.”

I take off, jumping back over the fence with Knot in my ear. “Work with your head, Laurent, not your heart.”

The others form up as I approach the barn soundlessly. The rolling doors are closed, and the track looks rusty. These will make a hell of a racket when I open them. “Spread out,” I order the team. “See if you can find another way in.”

“Suck it,” I hear growled from inside.

Birdie’s refusal is tearful but firm, followed by the slap of leather and more screams.

Knot’s plea is desperate. “Go, Laurent! Now!”

Birdie

The minute Dolion leaves, I’m on my bare feet searching the barn as far as my chain will reach. I can’t see well enough to look for weaknesses in the walls, so I focus on finding something useful to get this chain off me.

The small cabinet in the bathroom area holds only towels and toiletries. I move on from there quickly, but the radius afforded to me by the chain doesn’t let me get close to anything else. One side of the room contains a long table. Maybe it’s covered with tools. I can’t tell. It doesn’t matter anyway if I can’t reach it.

I scream in frustration and then do it again in case someone can hear me. The

answering screams coming from outside the barn confuse me. “Is there someone else out there?”

The screams start up again, giving me pause, especially as they move closer to my prison. The sound mingles with bleating, and an involuntary sob rattles my chest. It’s just animals. I’m alone here.

The noise of the chain echoes loudly in the cavernous room as I finish my small circuit around the room. There’s nothing useful here.

I return to the bed, sitting heavily. The newer mattress, soft bedding, and protective cover are out of place in this dusty barn. The bed frame and bath setup have obviously been here a while. He’s brought many girls here over the years. Wherever here is.

Despite the excellent condition of the mattress, the old spring support still creaks and groans with every movement. That gives me an idea. I jump up and shove the mattress off the bed, inspecting the springs for any that I could pry loose. Finding them all about the same, I try pushing on one of the hooked ends, but it hurts my fingers.

I run to the bath and grab the bottle of shampoo. Maybe I can push the spring hook out using the hard plastic cap. Returning to the bed, I drop to my knees and place the lid at the spring’s hook. I shove hard, and the bottle slides off the metal, carrying my arm forward with the momentum.

The metal slices across my hand, but I quickly reset it to try again. This time, I center up the cap, holding it with both hands, and push as hard as I can. The bottle lid cracks, but I move the spring far enough that the hook clears the loop and hangs free from its other side.

The shampoo gets put back so Dolion won't see anything out of place. Next, I remove the spring and attach one end to the footboard and the other to the chain. Pulling as hard as I can, I stretch the spring out to about eight inches. I straighten the hook by placing it in a crevice in the footboard and pushing against the curve.

It's not much of a weapon, but it's better than nothing. I can easily take out an eyeball. Maybe stab Dolion through the throat. Now I have to find a place to hide it. Inside my clothes is out of the question since I'm not wearing anything underneath. I consider hiding the shiv in the bath area, but that would be stupid. The place I'll need it is the bed.

I tuck the improvised weapon under the left side of the mattress near the head and lie down to practice drawing it. It takes several tries to achieve a smooth retrieval, but I feel good about my ability to wield the stiff wire. My only worry is the cut on my hand revealing to Dolion that I've been up to something.

Thankfully, the cut has stopped bleeding. I walk to the sink with the chain thumping behind me to clean off the blood, careful not to irritate the cut again. All that's left to do now is wait. Whether it's waiting for the right time to strike, waiting to die, or waiting for a miracle, I don't know. I guess we'll see.

Thinking I'm as prepared as possible, I wander back to the only place to sit and try not to let my nerves get the best of me.

A short while later, I apologize to Spatch in my head because I'm losing the battle. It's impossible to keep a level head, knowing that when Dolion returns, I'll suffer the same end that Amelia faced.

I'm not ready to die. I just found someone who gets me. And despite what Bastien thinks of himself, he's no monster. He's a good man, and I love him. I hate that I missed my chance to tell him.

My breath catches as the creak of a barn door announces Dolion's return. The smell of butter wafts from the bag he's carrying, making my stomach rumble. Besides the few sips of water I took from the sink, I haven't had anything to eat or drink since lunch yesterday.

Dolion approaches with a sick grin and sits on the bed. He unpacks the bag, handing me a cup of fruit and a bottle of orange juice. He gets coffee and a pastry. "Is this drugged?" I ask, secretly hoping it is. I don't want to be awake for what comes next.

"No. That would take all the fun out of it."

The excitement in his voice nearly makes me vomit. Taking my fruit, I walk as far away as I can get, sitting on the edge of the tub to eat. I take my time, stalling the only way I can, by chewing every bite until it's mush before swallowing.

The rustle of fabric a short while later lets me know my time is up. I keep my eyes down, but chain links clinking together precede a tug at my ankle.

I reluctantly open my eyes to see Dolion standing beside the bed, holding the chain. He's undressed down to his pants, which are open at the fly. "Come here, Birdie."

A tear tracks down my cheek, and I shake my head. Dolion pulls that thick belt free and winds it around his hand again. I reach up to rub the place on my arm that received a strike earlier. The welt has gone down, but the spot is still red.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

I push up onto shaky legs, and Dolion pulls the chain, forcing me forward. At least I'll be closer to my weapon. A few feet away, I stall, unable to convince my body to get any closer.

Dolion jerks my tether, and I lose it, going completely berserk and making a split-second decision to rush him.

He stumbles back, allowing me to reach for my shiv. Because I'm drawing it from a different angle than I'd practiced, I'm not as smooth, and the stupid thing snags on the metal support.

Dolion realizes what I'm doing and strikes with the belt, sending me scrambling under the bed. He then shoves the mattress aside, finds the modified spring, and launches it. The metal whistles through the air until crashing into the wall a second later. I'm dragged out from under the bed by the chain, screaming and with my skirt riding up, and Dolion drops to straddle my stomach.

"Nice try."

He rips the thin shirt from my body, tossing the tattered fabric away. "I think I'm enjoying the challenge more mature prey presents."

Dolion stands me up again, and my skirt is wrenched off and joins what's left of my shirt. He shoves me to my knees and pulls his dick out of his open pants. "Suck it."

I shake my head and brace myself, knowing what my disobedience will bring. The first strike lands on my shoulder and the next on my back. I shriek and struggle to

escape, but Dolion's foot on the chain keeps me from taking shelter beneath the bed's metal support grid.

Dolion stops at the unexpected sound of the barn door opening, and I'm pulled to my feet in the next breath. He wraps the chain around my neck twice and spins me toward the blinding light pouring in through the open door. "Bastien!" I yell before the chain is pulled tight.

Bastien

Savile holds Birdie in front of him like a shield as I advance. She's naked and covered in angry red welts. "Let her go," I roar.

"I don't think so. Holding her is probably the only reason I'm still alive."

The asshole pulls out a knife, sliding the blade between the chain loops at Birdie's neck. "Tell you what. You let us leave here, and I promise to drop Birdie off somewhere alive. I also guarantee if I don't walk out of here, she won't either."

Knot sounds off through my earpiece. "LEOs are on their way. I've asked Cooper to hold them back and block all the roads. If we can't get a clean shot, you'll have to let him take her. We stand a better chance at getting to Birdie if they're out in the open."

I know the man's right, but the abject terror in Birdie's eyes won't let me make her wait a second longer than I have to. "I don't like that plan."

Dolion thinks I was speaking to him and responds. "Then I hope you brought two body bags."

"For the love of god, Laurent!" Knot pleads. "Stand down."

“Shit! Alright! Just don’t hurt her,” I say to Birdie’s boss and the man holding a knife to her throat.

Logic says Savile will demand I kick my gun over to him. That’s one thing I can’t allow him to get. So he doesn’t get the chance to ask, I toss the pistol to my right, in the opposite direction he wants to go.

Birdie lurches in fear, and Savile tightens the chain, making her gasp. “Stop! Birdie, be still!”

Fearing Savile is getting twitchy, I also remove the knife from my belt and toss it aside with the gun. “That’s more like it, Gorilla,” Savile taunts. Then, pressing his lips to Birdie’s ear, he adds, “Thanks to him, you just might live through this.”

Tears stream down Birdie’s face, and she shakes her head like she doesn’t believe him. I don’t either, but the cops and Knot think this is the best plan. “I’m unarmed now. What the hell is taking you so long?”

Savile responds as if I were talking to him, but the question was meant for Knot. Instead of our boss speaking up, Chelsea is the one who answers. “We’ve been all the way around this damned building. The only other entrance is chained shut. Unless we come in the way you did, we’re only getting in with a chainsaw.”

The chain around Birdie’s neck is still attached to her ankle and the bed. Savile places his knife on the bed, shuffles Birdie forward, and pulls a set of keys from his pocket. He releases the padlock securing the chain to the iron bar, and the heavy restraint slides off the bed to hang at Birdie’s side.

Knowing Knot will have already updated Cooper, I ask, “What am I supposed to do now?”

Birdie's eyes widen, realizing I've not been talking to Savile. "Well, Birdie and I are walking out of this barn. You will be staying here. Get on your knees. If you so much as sneeze, she's dead."

Through the radio, Knot sounds broken when he relays Cooper's order, "Let them go."

I drop to my knees as ordered, and Birdie begs, "Bastien, please. Help me."

Her terrified plea shreds me, whether she's playing along for the rescue team's sake or not. It kills me to do it, but I shake my head no. Birdie wilts before me, breaking my fucking heart. I can't let her think I'm letting her go.

"I can't do it," I whisper.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

Everyone who heard me interpreted the message differently. Knot swears, and then I hear him talking on his phone. Savile, who's halfway to the barn door walking backward, speeds up, thinking I've changed my mind. Birdie just gives up. Her pleading eyes fall away from mine as she shrinks into herself.

She's still wearing the ankle chain, which is still wrapped around her neck. The opposite end that had been attached to the bed now drags the ground.

The cold links brush against Birdie's right hand, and her eyes light up with an idea. She wraps her fingers around the chain and lifts her eyes to mine in a silent plea. Since this is her life, I figure it's her choice, and I'll be damned if I let her fight this bastard alone. I nod ever so slightly and get ready to launch.

Birdie pulls the chain up until it hangs in a loop. She grips the length in both hands and mouths a silent countdown. Three, two, one. On go, she slings the chain over her head as hard as she can, striking Savile's face and stunning him.

At the same time Birdie does, I notice that after the chain made contact, the loop fell around the back of Savile's neck.

"Birdie, drop!" I yell.

Birdie throws all her weight at the ground, yanking the chain downward as she falls. The move launches Savile over her shoulder, but the bastard still holds the loops around her neck.

She's no better off when she lands. Their momentum rolls her and Savile, and the

chain around her neck tightens. Birdie ends up partially on top of Savile, struggling to breathe. I push off the ground to free her and hear Cooper's voice through the radio. He must have been patched into our coms and is yelling over and over again, "Do not kill him, Laurent!"

No promises. Before I can cover the fifteen feet separating us, Savile rolls them over and straddles Birdie's stomach. He holds the chain in one hand and the knife over her heart with the other as blood trickles down his face. "Seems like we're right back where we started."

If it weren't for the knife, I'd rush him. I freeze, throwing my hands in the air. "You're killing her!" I yell for the benefit of those listening. Even though I understand why they can't rush the building, I'm out of options and need help.

"Does anybody have a clean shot at this mother fucker?!" Knot demands.

"I have a shot, but unless Bash moves, he's gonna eat it," Kai reports. "It would be bad but not fatal."

"If he twitches, that bastard will knife her," Knot says.

While they argue, Birdie's lips are turning blue. Her eyes aren't even open anymore. "She's fucking dying! Do it!" I yell.

Savile's eyes bulge in shock and confusion at my command right before Cooper yells, "Fire!"

The blast and searing pain in my side happen almost simultaneously. Savile goes limp, and the hand holding the knife slides off Birdie's chest. I suck in a deep breath and blow it out through gritted teeth. "Savile's down."

Ignoring the fire in my middle, I rush to Birdie's side, throwing Savile off her and loosening the chain from her neck. She isn't breathing.

The barn doors screech the rest of the way open, and Knot rushes through with Kai and Chelsea close behind. Ignoring them, I begin chest compressions on Birdie. My head swims as I bend down to breathe for her, and two extra hands join the fray, shoving me to the side. Chelsea checks for a pulse and yells. "We have a beat! Give her another breath!"

Fighting off lightheadedness, I bend down and blow into her mouth once more. Birdie coughs and sputters between gasps, but she's breathing on her own again.

I'm dizzy with relief to see her chest rise and fall and rip off my shirt to cover her bare torso. Birdie wouldn't like being seen like this. The fabric smears blood all over her thighs, pulling Chelsea's attention to me.

Several shouts in the background barely register as Birdie's eyes flutter open. The fear ripping at my chest starts to recede, and I reach down to pick up her hand, pressing it against my bare chest. Voice like glass because of her damaged vocal cords, she says, "You found me."

"I had to. I'm lost without you."

She moves the hand from my chest to wipe the wetness from my cheek and sits up. The shirt begins to fall, so I grab it and help her pull it on. Birdie's hand goes to her throat as Chelsea and I help her stand, but then she panics seeing my bloody wound.

Savile starts laughing then. I guess Kai's shot wasn't fatal. Kai holds a bandage to the bastard's chest below his collarbone, though he looks like he'd prefer to drill him.

"It must be nice to finally have a loyal friend. I didn't tell you, but your friend

Amelia, after I fucked her and before I strung her up by the swing set chain, I told her about you. I explained that I beat the shit out of her because I was angry she showed up instead of you. The funny thing is that she promised to deliver you to me if I let her live. Your friend wanted to sell you out to save her own ass.”

Birdie vibrates beside me in anger. I know why Cooper wants him alive, but I hope he dies. I would have liked for his end to be much more painful, but I’ll take what I can get.

I lift an arm to wrap it around Birdie’s shoulders, but she flings herself at Savile, grabbing the knife that was kicked away from his hand. She plunges the blade into his throat and whispers, “My friend was a scared kid trying anything she could to stay alive.”

Knot yanks Birdie off Savile, but the rest of us remain where we are. His wound isn’t survivable, not that anyone wants to save him. He tugs at the knife, somehow pulling it free but without the strength to do anything else.

His hand falls to the side, still gripping the blade, and little by little, he stops struggling, and his neck eventually stops bubbling. Now that I’ve seen with my own eyes that he’ll never threaten Birdie again, I turn to find her sobbing against Knot’s chest.

I walk over and take Birdie from Knot, pulling her into my arms. I can’t blame her for killing Savile, but worry about the ramifications. So, I stroke Birdie’s back, and I lie. “You’re safe now, Petit Oiseau.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

Cooper, having heard everything, rushes through the door less than a minute later, followed by a swarm of SWAT team members and medics. The seasoned detective takes in mine and Birdie's appearances and calls forward the paramedics. "Check him out and get them to a hospital. No one else leaves until I know exactly what happened. There seems to have been some radio interference over the last three minutes."

My eyes shoot over to Knot, who gives me a barely perceptible head shake.

The female medic touches Birdie's arm. "It's all right now. Let's get you out of here."

Birdie burrows tighter against me, not wanting to let go. Chelsea approaches and smooths a hand over Birdie's shoulder. "Birdie, I need you to let go of Bash. He's been shot and needs to get looked at."

She jumps away from me, remembering the blood, and cups my face. Her damaged whisper is firm. "You're going to be alright."

I nod and swallow the lump in my throat. "So will you."

My heart splinters in two, not knowing how anyone can help her after what this sick mother fucker put her through. The medic tugs Birdie's arm, but she refuses to leave my side. "Come on, Birdie," I plead. "Let them... help you."

Birdie's sob is a strangled, damaged sound. She moves to the side and whispers in my ear, "You stopped him before he could. Please don't let them take me."

I kiss the top of her head, silently thanking whatever deity intervened. “She stays with me.”

One medic gives Birdie a blanket, and the other kneels to inspect the wound in my side. “The bullet went through. Shallow, though. It only got muscle. You’ll need stitches, but you’ll be alright.”

“The bullet went through the other guy first,” Chelsea tells him.

The medic’s eyes widen, and he says, “We’ll take a sample of his blood for testing. At the minimum, you’ll need something to ward off infection.”

He tightly bandages my middle while another medic inspects Birdie’s throat. Everyone else waits around until the pair are done with their assessments. No one seems to care about the other crew drawing blood from the dead man.

“What’s the story on these two?” Cooper asks the crew when they’re finished.

“These two,” pointing to us, “are okay. The gunshot needs to get sewn up, but he’ll be fine. The woman will heal on her own. It’ll just take a while. Besides the strangulation and welts, she maintains there was no... other trauma.”

“I’ve got a doctor on staff. He’ll handle Laurent,” Knot announces. “We’ll need those blood results, though.”

Cooper nods and sends the paramedics away with only a blood sample. With a confirmed dead-on-arrival, the body will remain for the medical examiner to deal with. He releases the SWAT crew, and the small-town sheriff dismisses most of the other officers.

With the place mostly clear, Cooper braces his feet apart and crosses his arms. “Now,

somebody tell me what the fuck happened here.”

Knot leads the discussion, encouraging Birdie to start by walking us through what happened after she woke up this morning. Talking is painful and difficult, making me wish she would have gone to the hospital.

One of Cooper’s men gives Birdie a bottle of water, but it doesn’t help. Despite the obvious strain on her voice, she’s determined to get through this. “Dolion told me he killed Amelia and several others. I don’t have any other names for you.”

Cooper cuts his eyes to me, and I know what he’s thinking. This is why he wanted Savile alive. He can’t say so because he was the one who ordered Kai to fire, not knowing if he was set for a kill shot or not. “Don’t worry. We’re running through every area of his life. If Savile is a serial as he claimed, he’ll have kept records of some kind.”

Knot speaks up to finish the report, and this is where I get worried. I don’t know how Birdie will avoid leaving here in handcuffs after killing the incapacitated Savile. I don’t think she deserves to, but these cops wouldn’t be interested in my brand of justice.

“After the shot to Savile’s shoulder, he still held onto the chain around Birdie’s neck but was weak enough that Birdie wrestled the knife away. She knocked him back and stabbed him, allowing us to free her.”

The local sheriff bends down, inspecting Savile’s neck, and sniffs. “The way I see it, you wasted the effort. The shot should have gone between his eyes.”

Tucking Birdie’s head to my chest, I nod in thanks to my boss, who maintains his stony expression. His report explains why he didn’t disclose that we had to resuscitate Birdie. Cooper’s face suggests he expected a different story, but for whatever reason,

he accepts Knot's explanation at face value. "You guys get Birdie out of here. I'd still like her to get checked out. Wounds or no wounds, this isn't over for her."

Birdie finally lets go of me to approach Cooper. After stretching her sore throat, she struggles through saying, "If you find proof that he killed Amelia, please let me know. Her parents never got closure."

"I promise. Now, get out of here."

Knot calls the chopper pilot, who lands in the grassy field by the house a few minutes later. I carry Birdie past the screaming goats and set her inside the cabin, straightening her blanket. From the moment I sit beside her, Birdie's hand doesn't let go of mine.

The flight back to the compound is short, with Frank waiting by the helipad to drive us to headquarters. Considering the crowd of operatives and security waiting around the building's main entrance, Knot orders him to drive to the back.

Spatch holds open the gym door when we arrive, revealing an anxious Sadie waiting on the other side. Chelsea explains that Sadie's team arrived a short time ago, and the senior operative has been going batshit waiting for word.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

The two women embrace, and Sadie leads Birdie to the women's dorm, with me following close behind. I stand guard outside the door, knowing Sadie is tending to Birdie's abused skin and helping her dress. Knot and Aaron lean against the wall opposite me, but not before Aaron hands me a shirt. "Hold it," a new voice calls out as I lift the cotton.

Our staff doctor walks up carrying his medical bag. "Doc," Knot says in greeting.

"The hospital says that the other guy's blood was clean," Dr. Swells reports. His eyes go to the bandage around my middle, and he adds, "I'm told I have someone to stitch up."

Aaron retrieves a chair for the doctor, knowing I won't willingly leave my post. Dr. Swells cuts away the bandage, inspects the entry and exit wounds, and nods. "The medics were right. A shot of antibiotics and a few stitches are all you need."

Swells completes the task quickly and stands. "Now, about this strangulation. I want the victim to get scanned for vascular injury no later than tomorrow. Until then, I assume she's in capable hands."

"She won't be alone for a single breath," I vow.

The doctor nods and leaves, and I finally pull the shirt over my head and study my boss. "You lied to the cops. You aren't afraid of that coming back to bite you in the ass?"

Knot gets a gleam in his eye like he knows a secret. "No, I'm not worried at all."

Since I want him to be right, I don't press.

Birdie

Sadie scans me from head to toe as I step into the gym. "Oh shit. Are you ok?"

She reaches to hug me, and I hiss with the contact to a sore spot. "Let's go," she demands, taking my hand.

We're quiet as she pulls me toward the dorms. "How much do you know?" I whisper.

Sadie winces at my ruined voice and answers, "Not everything, but enough."

The men stop at the door, and as soon as it closes behind us, I say, "Don't yell at me."

Sadie flexes her neck and clears her throat. "I'm not going to yell. I'm just glad that you're all right."

She dusts some imaginary dirt off her clothes and adds, "I'm not even going to ask how you could hide something so monumental and dangerous from your best friend. Nope. Not gonna do it."

Somehow, this is worse, I think as I gather some panties and leggings from the locker. After using some makeup wipes to remove Bastien's blood, I slide the clean clothes on and sit on the bed. Next, I pull Bastien's shirt off, holding the fabric over my breasts. Sadie's hands drop from her hips, and the fire leaves her eyes at the sight of my abused skin.

"Oh, my god."

She retrieves the first-aid kit from the linen cabinet and sits behind me. I flinch at the

first touch of the cold cream to my back, but the medication in the ointment soon numbs the sting. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

Despite what I said, I spill everything, starting with fifteen years ago. Sadie doesn’t judge or comment and doesn’t treat me like a monster for my role in Amelia’s death. She finishes right as I do and reaches up to brush away a stray hair hanging over my face. “How have you carried this alone for all these years?”

She doesn’t wait for an answer, instead sifting through my locker for a T-shirt. “No bra is going to feel good on those stripes.”

Sadie helps me slide on the soft cotton shirt, and I croak, “Guess I get to jiggle for a while.”

My friend shakes her head sadly, not rising to the bait. “Let’s get you home to rest.”

“I don’t want to go home. Not yet. I kind of hoped I could go to Bastien’s for a while.”

She nods and chews on her lip before saying, “Chelsea told me Bash knew he was going to be shot.”

“What?!” I rasp.

“You were unconscious, and Savile wouldn’t let go. He also had a knife to your heart. The only shot anyone had was with Bastien lined up behind Savile. He told them to take it.”

I laugh quietly to myself. Some monster he is.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

Puzzled by my strange reaction, Sadie sits beside me on the bed. “So, you two really...?”

“Yes. I love him.”

“I’m happy for you. I’m happy for you both.” She gets up and moves to open the door. “Laurent, get her out of here.”

Sadie steps aside, allowing Bastien to enter while blocking anyone else from coming in. Bastien kneels when he reaches the bed and cups my cheek. “I’ve never been so scared in my life. You were gone, and I couldn’t find you. We all—”

“I love you,” I interrupt.

Bastien leans back and stares into my eyes, speechless.

“I thought I was going to die, having never gotten the chance to tell you, so I’m telling you now.”

Taking my face in both hands, Bastien touches his forehead to mine. “I don’t deserve the chance to love, but I’ll love you till the day I die. If I am a monster, I’ll be your monster.”

“Then take me home, monster. I’m sick of this place.”

Bastien smiles, a rare, magnificent sight. He helps me put on socks and shoes and collects the rest of my stuff.

The hallway crowd has grown by a couple of people when we exit the women's dorm. Aaron tips his chin, and Knot squeezes my hand, saying, "I'm glad you're still with us."

Bastien removes his keys from his pocket and tosses them to Jackson. What is he doing here? "You drive."

Jackson tips his chin to me. "Glad you made it back."

An hour later, we're both freshly showered and reclined on Bastien's sofa. I have the added comfort of lying on a large cooling pad while Bastien clears away the remnants of our take-out dinner. Jackson left after getting my stuff inside, his truck having been sitting in Bastien's driveway.

I tug the blanket higher to combat the chill of the cooling pad, and Bastien soon returns with two beers and a dose of ibuprofen. "Here. This ought to help."

He settles on the sofa beside me, and I swallow the pills with a sip of beer. "What about you?" I ask as I carefully touch his side.

"I'm fine. Come here."

Bastien pulls me against him, straightening the blanket and stroking my hair. I soak in his warmth, basking in the safety of being watched over so fiercely. When the pain medicine dulls the stinging, I clear my throat painfully and whisper, "How is it that you found me? No offense, but I figured if I couldn't find this guy, no one could."

"You were right. Knot brought in Cle's team, but they kept coming up with dead ends. I was no help, so I decided to check out your house. Frank went with me, and Cooper met us there. While they looked around, I checked your system and found some recent, disturbing messages from a potential target you dismissed. Cooper went

to look for the guy and found that he'd disappeared. That made him our prime suspect, but something about him didn't feel right."

He lifts my arm to inspect one of the marks left by Dolion's belt. "Then, this morning, Jackson came over and gave voice to my doubts. That's how we came to check the doctor's car wreck yesterday. Turns out, the florist's van is what hit him. That led us ultimately to Savile."

"What came of the other guy?"

"He was found dead in his blue sedan with your clothes. Savile set him up to be the fall guy for your abduction."

"He didn't plan on leaving my body to find then."

Bastien hesitates, not looking forward to sharing his suspicions. "Given his obsession, my fear was that he didn't plan to kill you at all."

I believe Bastien's right, and the thought makes me shiver. It also makes me glad the former SEAL showed up the night he had to scare Predator Tom away. "So, you're the one who figured it out."

Bastien shakes his head. "I only trusted your system and asked the right questions."

"Questions no one else thought of." I place my hand over Bastien's heart. "Thank you."

Lifting slightly, I touch my lips to his cheek and then skim my fingers over his middle to rest over the bulge in his sweats. I shift to reach his lips and wince as the skin on my shoulder pulls. Bastien gently pulls me onto his lap, and I expect to get scolded for my efforts. Neither one of us is in any condition for sex.

Bastien doesn't lecture me as I expect. He stands, wrapping my legs around his waist, and walks toward his bedroom. "Let me help you."

I'm genuinely surprised, and my face shows it, but Bastien only shrugs. He holds my gaze and gently places me on his bed. "I need your touch as much as you need mine, but you need to rest."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:33 am

“What about you? You took a bullet for me.”

“And I’d do it again,” he breathes.

We’re in our own little world. No abusive fathers or demons can touch us here, and the only monsters allowed are the two of us.

Light pours in through Bastien’s bedroom windows, but I no longer crave the dark unless it’s Bastien himself. My monster stands over me, beautiful and dangerous. He pulls his shirt over his head, revealing the same chest that I’ve fantasized about many times over the last six weeks.

He slowly and deliberately peels back the blanket and slides off my leggings and panties. Bastien’s gaze darkens after spotting my bare mons, and I look away in shame. “He made me.”

I don’t feel him move until he touches my cheek and directs me to look at him again. “It’ll come back, and he’ll still be just as dead.”

He helps me remove my shirt and stands over me again, drinking in my body, welts and all. I beg him with my eyes to return the favor, and Bastien shoves his sweats to the floor. God, he’s sexy. I shiver in anticipation, and my monster gives me a secret smile, acknowledging the hunger between us.

“Please touch me,” I whisper.

Bastien drops a knee to the bed and crawls to hover above me. Gentle fingers explore,

mapping all the contours and curves of my skin. Each touch to my sensitive areas elicits a gasp and sigh, heightening my desire.

My lover drops his head, tracing his lips over my collarbone, between my breasts, and down to my hip. At times, his touch is as light as butterfly wings, but the lower he goes, the more passionate his kisses.

Skirting past the place I need him most, Bastien picks up my leg, dragging his lips across the sensitive skin of my inner thighs. He swipes out with his tongue, and a rush of chill bumps erupts all over my body when he blows over the area with his hot breath. I whimper, a broken sound, as my body reacts, aching and burning to be filled. Bastien treats my other thigh to the same torture before finally dipping his head to my center.

Bastien slowly licks up my slit and circles my clit. Hoarse moans spill from my lips, sounding like glass shards grinding together. I arch off the bed as the pleasure intensifies, racing toward climax.

I'm glad to still be alive, relieved to experience this without fear, and thankful that Bastien showed up before—stop it, Birdie. Do not go there. To keep from returning to that barn, I force my eyes open and lift my head, watching Bastien plunder my body.

Bastien lifts his eyes, meeting mine, charging the air with electricity. His stare lingers as he spears me with his tongue and then drags it lazily back up my slit. Lightning strikes when Bastien latches onto my throbbing nub and sucks hard.

An orgasm slams into me with such force that it steals my breath. My mouth opens in a silent scream, and my body twitches with the lightning coursing through my veins.

Though I barely have the strength, I reach out and graze my fingernails over Bastien's scalp. He places one last sensual kiss on my sensitive clit and rolls his head

against my rasping nails.

The fire within me hasn't been quenched. Not even close. I should be sated by the powerful release, but I'm not. I want more. I need more. With my body still convulsing, I claw at Bastien to bring him closer. He comes willingly, rolling onto his back at my request and giving me free rein to explore.

Bastien groans and throws his head back at the first touch of my fingers to his rock-hard dick. Right then, I feel powerful and vulnerable in equal measures. Bastien surrenders to me, and soon, my soft touches settle into an instinctual rhythm.

Driven by my lover's ragged moans, I give in to curiosity and lower my head to taste him. A few shy licks have Bastien's whole body shuddering, and the next thing I know, I'm on my back again.

He powers inside me in one forceful thrust and then holds himself still as death. Though I had gasped at the sudden, violent intrusion, I now sigh and drop my head back.

This experience is more than physical. I've never felt more connected to another human being. Only Bastien knows the real me. And he accepts me anyway. "I love you, Bastien," I whisper.

Bastien lowers his head to murmur against my lips, "It's you and me now, Birdie."

"You and me," I agree. "Now, take me to heaven... or hell. I don't care."