



A Past Too Broken (Bloodstained Love #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: The holiday season means nothing to Zayid Moran, except running the risk of freezing whenever hes on the job. An accomplished sniper, he spends his days either lying in wait for his mark, or on the couch with his cat.

When a job goes wrong and someone steals his target from under his nose, Zayid finds himself trapped in a game of cat and mouse that he never asked for. Too bad his opponent doesnt care what Zayid thinks.

Minato Walsh has spent too long planning out his rightful revenge. He never intended on taunting Zayid, but the assassin is too easy to rile. Hes also the first person to ever get under Minato's skin.

As their game heats up and the sparks between them begin to ignite, the horrors of Minato's past catch up to him—leaving him shattered once more.

With survival on the line, the rules of the game have changed, leaving Zayid and Minato to decide if theyre ready to stop resisting their connection, and instead, start fighting for each other.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:02 am

The winter chill seeps into my bones, even through layers of warm clothing. Licking my chapped lips, I long for a cigarette—not because I crave the nicotine, but as something to stave off the boredom. Unfortunately, I'll have to make do with the lack of stimulation for my brain, as I can't risk dropping a butt and leaving DNA by way of saliva behind.

Checking the time on my watch, I see I have about twenty minutes before my mark should be in position, so I settle in for the wait. I'm glad I decided to bring a blanket with me because it's colder than originally predicted tonight, so much so that I can see my breath with every exhale.

Looking through the scope, I take in the already familiar sights, making sure everything is lined up perfectly. I have to adjust a few times when the wind comes up, ruffling my hair and making me shiver. When I'm sure I've accounted for all eventualities, I reach into my pocket, pulling out the piece of gum I'd brought. Carefully, I fold the wrapper and stick it back in my pocket after shoving the gum in my mouth. A last check of my watch shows I have five minutes, so I stop messing around and adjust my position, checking to make sure the angle of my rifle is placed perfectly.

My heart rate begins to slow, and I forget I'm freezing my ass off as my brain compartmentalizes all the trivial things so I can focus on the job at hand.

Through the scope, I watch as the door in the apartment opens and my mark walks in. I track him as he goes through his routine: tossing keys on the table in the entryway, kicking his shoes off under the same table, and crossing the space to the kitchen, where he disappears behind a wall. I can't see him, but I know him so well, I can

confidently say he's undoing his tie and grabbing a beer from the fridge.

Sure enough, a few moments after I lose sight of him, he returns with his tie undone, along with the first few buttons on his dress shirt. He has a can of Modelo clutched in his hand.

He doesn't hesitate to plop down in his recliner, which is perfectly positioned across from the window I'm looking in. He pops the tab of his beer and takes a healthy swing.

Blowing out a slow breath, I focus in on my target, watching his chest rise and fall as he breathes.

The world around me disappears, and I finger the trigger. I take slow, measured breaths, before one last deeper one. As I exhale, instincts honed on pulling the trigger, hell breaks loose.

Movement behind the mark takes my focus, and I quickly move my finger away from the trigger, watching in horror as the door to the apartment opens. My mark moves, looking behind him as someone walks through the door, but he's too slow to do anything. All I can do is watch as a blade flies through the air, almost too fast for my eyes to track, and hits the mark on the shoulder.

My heart races in my chest even as I curse out the bastard currently closing in on my mark.

He yanks the knife from the mark's shoulder and shoves him into his recliner, kicking the can of spilled beer out of his way.

I watch in equal parts impressed and rage, as he kills my mark. I can't see what exactly happens from the angle, but it's easy to figure he's not here to discuss

something over tea and cookies.

I should shoot him. As I stare at the dark hair at the back of the bastard's head, all I can think about is taking my shot, but the last thing I need is to gain a reputation of being messy. I'm not sure becoming known as having my kill stolen from me will be any better, though.

As if the kill stealer can read my thoughts, he spins around, smiles, and blows me a fucking kiss.

Cursing, I pull back and pack up my gun, only taking care to make sure it's broken down and put away properly because I don't want to damage it. Grabbing my blanket, I throw my hood up and stalk off the roof, making more noise than I should but unable to curb the anger rolling through me. My ears feel hot, and the need for a cigarette and something heavy to throw at that fucking bastard rushes through me.

Who fucking does that? Just waltzes in and steals a man's kill? It's not like he didn't know I was there. His actions at the end proved that.

The farther I walk to get back to my car, the more pissed I become. The utter fucking audacity of that motherfucker.

After putting my gun and blanket in the trunk, I climb into the driver's seat and slam my hands on the steering wheel.

"Punk ass motherfucker," I snarl. "Better not get within fifty feet of me. I'll blow his damn head off."

Unwilling to draw suspicion by having a tantrum in the car, I start it up and barely let it warm up before pulling away.

When I'm sure I'm not being followed, I press a button on the steering wheel and give a few short and clipped commands.

The call is picked up after a handful of rings. "It's done?"

"No," I growl. "Some asshole got there first."

Hollis, the hacker I pay very well to help with the research of each job, takes a moment to respond, "What the fuck does that mean?"

"Exactly what I said. I was all set to pull the trigger and bam! Some fucker strolls in and not only takes my kill but taunts me at the same time!"

"That's... concerning. Do you know who it was?"

"No, but he better hope I never find out because I will cut him into strips and feed them to Reggie."

"You can't feed people to your cat," Hollis says, though there's a hint of amusement in his voice. "I'll let Cash know. Expect a call from him soon. Any intel on the guy? I'm sure Cash will want to know, and I'll see what I can find on my end."

"Shorter than the mark, young, probably around Molly's age, Asian descent, dark hair and eyes, that's all I could see." Fine ass, but I don't think that's a detail Hollis wants.

"Not much to work with, but there's only so many people capable of pulling something like this off. I'll see what I can do. I'll even give you this one for free."

I snort. "How generous of you."

“I am, thanks for noticing. I’ll be in touch.”

Hollis hangs up, and I stop driving around in circles and head to my house. Adrenaline still rushes through me because of how utterly pissed and offended I am that some fucker took it upon themselves to steal a job from under me, but the distance has helped clear my mind.

Still, what is he, a fucking newb? No, he can’t be, not with how cocky and efficient he was. Either way, you don’t take someone’s kill; there aren’t many “rules and regulations” in this line of work, but that sure as hell is an important one. And he will pay for his audacity.

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“Try not to lose this one, eh,” Cash says, tossing a dossier onto the countertop between us.

“Fuck you,” I mutter, picking up the file folder and thumbing through it.

The information is standard, basic in all the ways Cash’s files usually are unless you’re willing to shell out extra for him to do the legwork for you. I don’t know anyone who takes him up on it, except Molly’s crazy ass—though Cash doesn’t charge him, as far as everyone knows.

“Hollis find anything on your kill stealer?”

Sneering, I toss the folder onto the counter and lean against it. “Not a damn thing.” I stare at the information broker. “You got anything for me?”

Cash smiles that annoying, know-it-all smile of his and shrugs. “I’ve been doing my own digging...”

“I swear to fuck, Cash, if he’s one of yours I will kill you both slowly.”

He laughs. “No, he’s not mine. I may be an asshole, but I don’t pit y’all against one another. That’s one of the fastest ways to get dead. Nah, I’m not quite sure who it is, but I have my suspicions. There are only a few people I know of that are active enough to pull off something like that: Elijah, you, Henry, and Aaron. Since it wasn’t any of you, that means it’s someone who works without an established network. But when I made the inquiry to our... friends, I barely escaped with my life for accusing them of shady business practices.”

Snorting, I push off the counter and head to the sink, filling up the kettle. “You’re not wrong there. I almost wish it was them—that I could respect and move on from—but this... It felt almost personal.”

Flicking on the burner, I leave the kettle to boil and hunt for the box of tea I want. It would be so much easier if it were the more established assassin network. I can’t call them rivals because that would imply Cash’s band of misfits is an actual organization. None of us like the idea of that, but we’re all close enough to support one another and have each other’s backs. For the right price or favor owed, of course.

But it’s the true freelancers, the ones who avoid even Cash despite him being the best damn information broker in the business, that are truly the worrisome ones. They’re the ones who usually have nothing to lose. They’re loose cannons because while the people I know thanks to Cash may have secrets and agendas, they also have some form of honor code. Those that don’t are the ones willing to take unnecessary risks, and they’re how you end up in prison or dead.

When the kettle clicks off, I pour the water into my mug and turn back to face Cash, who’s playing on his phone. He’s acting like he’s not aware of my every move—as if anyone who knows him would believe his relaxed, nonchalant act. I might kill people for a living, but I am far from the most dangerous man in this room.

“Aside from me and your other pets,” I begin, clutching my mug almost too tightly. “Who do you suspect?”

Cash snorts. “Pets,” he mutters, “I’m going to tell Henry you called him that.” I grimace but don’t get a chance to respond before Cash is setting his phone down on the countertop and sliding it my way.

Looking down at it, I find six images, but I don’t even need to study them all before picking out that bastard.

“Him.” I tap the photo and bring up the full image. “This is the guy I saw in the apartment.”

Cash leans over and grimaces. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

I bring my tea to my mouth, then take a deep breath through my nose, hoping the scent and heat will help keep me level-headed. “Who is he?”

Cash sighs. “All I got is a name: Min. He’s a slippery fucker. Both me and others have tried to entice him over the years, but he is... not a team player. Plus,” Cash’s silver eyes burn with a fire that usually means danger. “His kills aren’t just about turning a profit.”

I swallow as Cash takes the phone back and taps on it a few times before offering it again.

I don’t want to take it. Whatever is on the device won’t change that Min needs to be taught a lesson, but... killing for personal reasons and not for money makes you the worst type of loose cannon.

That’s not a road I want to go down again.

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The mall plays Christmas music overhead and, for a moment, I contemplate if it's worth the jail time of pulling my gun out and shooting the speakers. Christmas is still three weeks away, but you'd think it was tomorrow with the way the holiday is shoved in all our faces.

I should have chosen a different day or time to trail my mark, but this is the only time she's been without her snot-nosed kids in the last few weeks. I've already wasted precious time and resources tracking her down. I don't want to take any more by finding a time that's more convenient to me.

Besides, when I took up this endeavor, I knew it was with the caveat that nothing about this would be pleasant.

When my mark heads into a store, I follow a beat after her, internally crying at the fact that they're also playing Christmas music overhead. How anyone can work in a place like this and not go insane from the music after two seconds is a mystery to me. I'd rather let someone shoot me point blank than deal with that incessant noise for hours on end.

Lost in my thoughts, I almost miss my mark heading to the dressing room with her wares. Scanning the rack in front of me, I pull the least offensive items off the hangers and take it to the salesperson.

"Hi," they say, giving me a wide-tooth grin. "Would you like to try that on?"

Giving my best smile, I nod. "Please, I'm just not sure if I can pull it off, ya know?"

“Oh sweetie, as long as you feel comfortable, that’s all that matters. Come on, you can try them on in here.”

They lead me into a small dressing room and close the curtain. “Let me know if you need anything,” they say before walking away.

Their shoes give away their position as they walk away, and I count their steps, even as I toe out of my boots and socks. When I’m sure they’re far enough away, I reach into my pocket, pulling out the vial and carefully peeking around the edge of the curtain.

Seeing no one around, I slip out of my dressing area and make my way over to the other side, where my mark is behind the other closed curtain.

Without giving it much thought, I slip into her dressing area. My mark jumps when she sees me in the mirror, but I’m quicker than she is. Even as she opens her mouth to scream, I close in on her and clamp my free hand over her mouth. With my other hand, I break the seal on the vial with my thumbnail.

“This will be painless, so long as you do exactly as I say,” I whisper in her ear.

She nods, and I smile at her in the mirror. Her wide, terrified eyes look back at me, and the sight of them has me grinning wider, a true smile this time.

“Onto the floor now,” I tell her in a gentle voice. Carefully, I help her down, keeping my hand over her mouth as she whimpers and tears stream down her face.

“I’d say sorry,” I whisper, “but I’m not.”

As quickly as possible, I uncover her mouth and shove the vial in, forcing the contents down her throat.

She gasps and tries to sputter. It's futile, of course. We might be near the same height, but I'm stronger and far better trained.

Her head hits the wall of the dressing area, but I'm not concerned, it adds legitimacy to her "heart attack." Poor dear, she really should have seen a doctor for her symptoms...

The second her breathing stops, I slip out of the dressing area and hurry back to mine. Poison is never my favorite way to kill, but I can't deny that it's efficient.

As I slip back into my shoes and pick up a random piece of lingerie to purchase to curb suspicion, I add to my mental tally: two down... far too many to go.

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“I hate suburbia,” I bitch. “Do you know how fucking hard it is to set up a vantage point in the suburbs ?”

“Only every time your mark lives in one,” Hollis replies sardonically.

“I’d like to see you out here trying to kill someone where any little odd noise has everyone looking out their window or standing in their front yard while they pretend to water the already lush lawn.”

Hollis, the dickhead, laughs. “I’ll admit suburban life isn’t for me, but I never understood what your problem with it was? Besides the nosy neighbors and all. Get on the wrong side of an HOA at one point?”

“One day,” I say casually, “I am going to shoot you.”

He chuckles. “Get in line. I’m all set up, by the way. Cameras in all the houses on the block have been hacked and you’re good to go.”

“Thanks.”

“Yep. No need to pay extra. I’ll just help myself after the money hits your account.”

I curse as he laughs a bit evilly. If he wasn’t so damn good at his job, I really would try to track the fucker down and shoot him, just for the principle of it all.

Not that I have any hope of actually finding him. We all take precautions with our safehouses and how many people can put a face to our name, but aside from

H—another hacker—and Cash, I don't think anyone in our acquaintance has ever seen Hollis in person. To say he's careful is an understatement. I can understand. His skills are highly sought after, so I'm sure he has his fair share of enemies.

I also wouldn't put my money on myself if I did manage to track him down. No one in this life got here because their hands are clean, and just from talking to Hollis on the phone, I can sense the danger hiding beneath his quips and wit.

"The house next door should be empty," Hollis says. "Your timetable for packing up and getting out of dodge is tight, but I believe in you."

I snort. "I just hope the dude doesn't sleep naked. I hate seeing naked cock right before I kill someone."

Hollis laughs. "That sounds like a 'you' problem. I have things to do, so call me when you're finished."

"Yes, sir," I tease.

He hangs up, and I settle into what's going to be a long evening wait. Hollis and I have both done research on the mark—me on the ground, him virtually. We narrowed down the wait time to only a few hours, but having me in the house next door earlier than I need to be is important. It not only allows me the time to set up, but it isn't so suspicious as a quick in and out type of kill.

Being a sniper means I need to have more patience than other assassins who kill up close and personal. I can fight, and I like watching my marks die as much as the next person—mainly because the people I kill aren't "good" ones—but I prefer the distance and detachment of long range rather than any other method.

The distance between the room I'm set up in and my mark's bedroom is far from a

challenge. The only thing that would make this more interesting is if he bothered to close his curtains, but I guess he doesn't have to worry about that since his neighbors are snowbirds and are in Hawaii for the winter. Must be nice.

The position I'm in, lying across both the dresser already pushed against the window—convenient—and a chair, isn't the most comfortable, but I've been in worse situations. A few hours spent looking through the scope while I wait for my mark isn't my idea of a good time, but aside from watching Say Yes to the Dress with Reggie, I don't have anything else going on.

The lamp in the mark's room turns on automatically when it gets dark, giving me the perfect sight into the bedroom as the world turns to night around me. My lower back begins to ache, but I pop my gum into my mouth and tune out every non-essential thought and discomfort.

As predicted, around nine o'clock, the mark makes his way upstairs for his shower and bedtime routine. As the bedroom door opens, I take a slow breath, tightening my finger on the trigger. As soon as my mark comes into view and steps over the threshold, I sight my target and take the shot.

I pull up at the last second, making the shot go wide. The asshole that just jumped out of the closet was this close to getting hit. Luckily I'm better than that, or maybe unlucky depending on if you're asking me or him.

My heart pounds, and I don't bother watching to see if the dickhead kills the mark—my fucking mark —because I'm too pissed to hang around.

I'm less careful with my gun than I should be, but right now I just need to get out of this house.

After putting the chair back where I found it and making sure I didn't leave anything

behind, I rush out the back door and close it less than quietly behind me. My boots crunch through dead brush as I make my way to the fenceline.

It's easy to hop over into the other yard. The houses in this damned suburban neighborhood are so fucking identical, it's no hardship to find the backdoor to the mark's house and step into the warm kitchen.

I'm not quiet as I move through the house. I want this fucker to realize I'm here and I'm coming after him. Pulling a knife from my belt, I take the stairs two at a time and make my way to the mark's bedroom.

Blood stinks up the hallway, the thick metallic scent making the back of my throat taste of pennies.

The mark is lying in a pool of his own blood, half in and half out of his room. Gripping my knife, I cautiously move forward. I'm unable to hear or see the bastard, but if I've learned anything, it's that just because I can't see him doesn't mean he's not there.

Stilling for a moment, I hold my breath and strain my hearing, searching for any sign or hint of where the asshole could be. He doesn't make a move to show himself. After several long moments, I take another step into the room, careful not to step on the dead mark.

As I go to take another step, a door slams shut downstairs. Cursing, I spin on my heels and almost lose my footing in the pool of blood.

Motherfucker.

Uncaring that I'm now tracking blood through the house, I race back downstairs and stare at the closed but unlocked front door. That ballsy motherfucker.

I don't want to trust that he left, but the note pinned to the back of the door reads:

Better luck next time! :D x

Storming through the house so I can leave the way I came, I pull out my phone and make the call I was hoping I didn't have to.

"I don't care what it costs," I tell Cash as soon as he answers. "You will give me everything on that fucker Min, and you will do it before I make it home. You have one hour."

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I am surprised to be alive right now. I thought for sure Zay was going to shoot me in the head when I rushed out of the closet. But no. Zay might be known for not getting up close and personal with his kills, but this is twice now we've crossed paths. Of course he'd want to teach me a lesson.

It's laughable, really. I didn't get to where I am today because I'm easy to catch. Points for trying, though.

It should probably make me happy to know that the people who run the so-called assassins' rings are finally taking notice of those who need to die, since this is the second "mark" Zay was sent after from my list. Too bad they're about fifteen years too late. They're mine .

Three down, far too many to go. And they'll all die by my hands. I dare anyone else try to get in my way.

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Reggie sniffs the file folder sitting on the counter and looks up at me, blue eyes full of boredom.

“I agree,” I tell him. “It’s bullshit, but what can we do? The last thing we need is a vigilante out there, running amok and ruining years of carefully put-together plans and regulations. We might not be as organized and cohesive as that annoying organization, but we still take care of one another in our own ways. Though I’m almost tempted to toss him to that particular merry band of psychopaths. The chaos could be fun.”

Reggie sneezes, showing how unimpressed he is about the explanation, but I just shrug in response.

My phone buzzes, startling the cat, who jumps and hisses at the offending device. “Sorry,” I say absently, picking it up and reading the text.

MOLLY

In place. You owe me

ZAY

Name your price

MOLLY

Don’t worry, I will.

“I can’t wait until he’s no longer a teenager,” I tell Reggie, who seems to agree as he flops down onto the counter.

The only things the last three years have changed about Molly is that he’s now legally an adult at eighteen, and he started T last year. Otherwise, he’s still the same surly, bratty, pain in all our asses that Elijah rescued off the street.

Oh and now his crush on Cash isn’t creepy or frowned upon since, legal adult and all that—not that Cash will give the kid the time of day.

ZAY

Let me know if anything changes

I don’t get a response, but I didn’t expect one. Molly is very good at his job. Being young, cute, and used to surviving on the street, he’s the perfect person to send in to spy on wayward vigilantes.

“Daddy has to work today, but I promise once I’m done with pest control, we’ll spend the entire weekend together,” I tell Reggie, picking him up off the counter.

He purrs, and I cuddle him close, kissing the top of his head. “I know, I’ll miss you too, baby. I think there’s a new season of *Is It Cake?* we can watch during my off time.”

Setting Reggie on the ground, I go over to the treat cabinet and take two out, tossing them across the room and smiling as he runs after them.

With my cat entertained, I head into my bedroom for a quick shower and change of clothes. Deciding what to bring to this kidnapping is hard. It would be so much easier to just bring my rifle and snipe the bastard, but... Cash and Hollis are both convinced

there's more to the story, so I'm supposed to talk to him before shooting him.

At least they're willing to let me be the one to "interrogate" him, since it's my kills he's been stealing.

A few handguns and an array of knives should do the trick, though I lovingly run my hand across the case of my baby before locking the weapon's safe back up.

"See ya later, Reggie!" I call over my shoulder on the way out of the house.

* * *

The apartment Min lives in is nondescript. It's tricky since apartment buildings mean people, which translates to being unable to just waltz in and kidnap him.

Crossing the road, I enter the alley between two buildings and lean against the brick wall next to Molly.

"Anything interesting happen?"

"Nope. You got a plan? Because I got things to do and places to be, and stalking twinkies aren't on either of those lists."

Before I can respond, the front door to the apartment building opens, and Min walks out onto the street.

Without a glance at me, Molly leaves the alley, jogging across the street and almost getting himself hit by a car as he does so.

Good to see the bastard isn't a total asshole. He helps Molly out of the street and up onto the sidewalk. I am sadly not superhuman and can't hear what they're saying, but

I'm assuming Molly is assuring him that he's fine.

Min must not be convinced because he gestures to his building and turns his head as he does so, taking his eyes off the younger man just long enough to give Molly the opportunity to attack.

Taken off guard by the person he just helped, Min tries to fight Molly off, but it's futile. Molly's a slippery bastard when he wants to be, and whatever's in that needle of his has Min stumbling as Molly holds onto him.

Leaving the alley, I make sure to look both ways before crossing the street and helping Molly with Min. Putting him between us, the three of us stumble down the sidewalk, the drugs making Min seem drunk and like Molly and I are just his two good buddies helping him.

Molly's car is parked at the corner of the block, and we manage to get Min into it. I climb into the backseat, and Molly tosses some zip ties and rope at me before getting into the driver's seat.

Min is fading in and out of consciousness as I tie him up, and I try to ignore how pretty his dark eyes are even hazed over as they blink long and slow a few times.

When his eyes close all the way and he succumbs to the drugs, I breathe a sigh of relief and lean against the seat.

"Thanks, Molly."

"Don't mention it. Got a plan?"

I huff a laugh. "Not really. Let's just hope he gives us what we need quickly. Reggie will be pissed if I'm gone for too long."

He snorts. “Good luck with that.”

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Waking up with my head pounding, mouth dry, and arms secured to a chair after being drugged by some fucking twink isn't my idea of a good time.

The room I'm being held in is dim, which my head is thankful for. Ignoring the pain, I turn my head and scan my surroundings, hoping for some indication of where I am—or who grabbed me.

Locking eyes with the person in the corner of the space, I try to pretend I'm not affected, even as my breath catches and my heart begins to pound. Zay watches me silently as he brings a cigarette to his lips.

I wrinkle my nose as I watch him. "Those things will kill you," I rasp through my dry throat.

He takes another drag of his cigarette and smirks as he blows smoke out. "I'll take my chances."

Clearing my throat, I try to get my thoughts in order. "Having kids do your dirty work now? Clever."

Zay lets out a short bark of laughter. "I'll have to tell Molly you called him a kid. I'm sure he'll love that." He extinguishes his cigarette on the cement wall behind him before pocketing the butt. Making his way over, he stands directly in front of me. His golden brown eyes meet mine, and every instinct in me is screaming to look away, but I can't. Aside from the fact that looking away would show weakness, I find myself sucked into his gaze, hypnotized by the intense look in them.

“What do you want?” I ask, ignoring the tingly feelings his proximity creates in me.

“Oh, so many things, but for now, you can tell me whether it’s a coincidence that you keep showing up on the same jobs or if you’ve been stalking me.”

I smirk, though it feels false. “You’d like it if my answer was the latter, wouldn’t you? Want me to say you’re important enough to waste my time on?”

The pain of his fist to my face is expected, though my already aching head protests being hit. Pain is easier to absorb and deal with than talking, especially since I can’t—won’t—give Zay the answers he wants.

“You knew I was there both times,” he says. “What I want to know is if that was deliberate or not.”

I give him a bloody smile before spitting at him. He doesn’t react. He just waits for an answer, face impassive.

“It wasn’t on purpose,” I concede, hoping to move this along. “Though you should up your situational awareness. I saw you, yet you didn’t know I was there. I know I’m good, but for someone of your reputation, you should be better.”

He frowns, and his golden eyes seem to glow with frustration. “You should know better than to take someone else’s kill.” He pulls out a knife and taps it against my already aching face. “You don’t want to gain a reputation as a kill stealer, Min,” he says quietly. “In this business, our reputations are everything, and having a negative one... Well, I’d hate to see you end up dead.”

“Good thing I’m not easy to kill, then,” I reply.

He taps his knife against my cheek. “You sure about that?”

“Kill me then.”

“I should,” he mutters. “You’re a pain in the ass.”

Glaring at him, I bite out, “You had me fucking kidnapped, and I’m tied to a fucking chair. If you don’t kill me, you’re wasting both our time. I’m too tired and my head hurts too fucking much to play these games with you.”

He smirks, his eyes lighting up. “Oh? Not into games, are you? Does taunting me not count as a game?”

Wiggling in the ropes tying me to the chair, I try to determine how loose they are.

Zay watches me struggle for a moment before pulling the knife away from my face. “I won’t kill you if you tell me why you stole those marks.”

My heart races and I fight against my restraints again. “You don’t need to know that. So either kill me or let me go. I promise I’ll make your death easy and quick.”

Zay studies me, questions burning in his eyes, but his expression doesn’t tell me one way or the other which way he’ll go. “It’s almost kind of pathetic to do it like this,” he muses. “After all the work you did to not get caught. I didn’t even know who you were until Cash narrowed it down for me. That you’re almost as good as Molly is at staying under the radar makes me wonder why you’re not more established.”

I give him a feral grin. “I’d rather jump into a volcano than have any associates , or whatever you call each other.”

He tilts his head. “It’s not for money. My sources say you never contacted the contract holders for the money.”

This whole conversation is giving me a headache on top of the already existing one, and I'm not stupid enough to admit that that never occurred to me. I wouldn't even know how to go about something like that. I can navigate the dark web enough to pick up jobs when I need the cash, but I'm not entrenched enough to figure out how to steal more than the kill from someone.

It's not about the money, not for me. But I can't tell Zay that. I refuse to give him leverage over me.

"If your plan is to bore me to death, you'll be happy to know you're succeeding."

"Are you so quick to die, Min?"

"Anything is better than sitting here listening to your nonsense."

"Tell me what I want to know, and I'll give you what you want."

Eyeing him, I consider my words, unwilling to give up so easily, but wanting to end whatever this is. "I kill those who need to die. You can't tell me you're ignorant about the crimes your marks commit."

He studies me, his gaze unnerving, but I refuse to squirm under his scrutiny. "I know the guy the other night was a known and convicted child molester. Even after his prison time and all the warnings he got, he was still doing the same old shit.

"It's why I was there. The client was willing to pay a pretty penny to end his life." He leans in, gaze steadily on mine as he says in a low voice, "I don't do this for fun, Min. I'm not interested in justice, or avenging the victims like so many of the clients who hire me are. It's a job, one I happen to be very, very good at. That you're so willing to put yourself at risk to get rid of the scum on earth is admirable, if foolish. I'm not like you, though." He leans in even more, his lips a hair's breadth away from my own.

“Fuck with my job again, and you’ll never get the chance to regret it.”

I let out a gasp as he brushes his mouth ever so softly over mine, my aching, touch-starved body desperately begging for more.

Zay smiles, his teeth catching on my bottom lip, and then pain explodes through my head, making me dizzy and stealing the sight of his golden eyes as he pulls back.

* * *

I wake with a splitting skull on the floor of the room Zay’s been holding me in. I don’t know how much time has passed, but as I slowly glance around the room, I discover I’m alone.

Sitting up, I swallow back the nausea as movement makes my brain throb. When I’m sure I can stand without throwing up, I do so, almost falling over but managing to keep myself upright.

The room is thankfully still dim, and I take my time looking around. There’s not much here: the chair I was restrained to sits in the middle of the room, there’s a table against the wall behind the chair, along with a cot. Besides a cupboard with a few blankets and a bare bones first aid kit, there’s nothing else.

It’s clearly someplace to lie low for a few hours before moving to a safehouse, and now even that purpose has probably been blacklisted. There’s no way Zay or any of his associates would risk coming here now that I’m aware of it.

On the table, there’s a bottle of water and a sachet of pills, plus a note. It takes a moment for my eyes to focus enough on Zay’s messy scrawl to understand the words.

Better luck next time, Min... Until then, consider this your one free pass - Z

Crumpling the note, I stare at the pills and the water, trying to decide if I trust him not to tamper with them or not. The stabbing pain in my head decides for me. Fuck it, dying has to be better than trying to think through this pain.

Throwing back the pills, I take a long, much-needed drink of water and lay down on the cot. The world spins as I try to get comfortable, but I close my eyes and clutch Zay's crumpled note in my hand as I wait for either the headache to lessen, or for death to take me.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:02 am

Three Months After Kidnapping

The early spring air is damp from recent rain.

Looking up at the sky, I study the darkening clouds overhead. I can only hope the weather gods are on my side and I don't have to worry about shooting in the rain.

There are two different vantage points I can set up in, but only one would provide decent cover from impending rain. It's also the one with the less than ideal line of sight.

Fuck it. A little rain never hurt anyone, no matter what Reggie says.

Mind made up, I use the keycard Hollis made for me and sent via Molly to gain rooftop access and begin the ascent up the stairs.

I consider myself in good shape—you have to be in order to get the job done and then get out of dodge—but climbing thirteen flights of stairs is not my idea of a good time. Especially not when I have to carry my baby up as well.

Another reason I don't mind sitting out in the rain is thanks to the custom-built sniper rifle I paid a pretty penny for a few years ago. It's the best long-range weapon I've ever used and holds up well despite the hell I put it through. That doesn't mean I enjoy carrying it up and down fucking stairs.

Finally on the roof of the building across the street from my mark's office, I cross the space from the door to the ledge I already mapped out a few days ago.

Stopping in my tracks at the sight of the box sitting on the ledge right where I want to set up the rifle, I stare at it. Approaching with caution, I stare at the pack of cigarettes.

While rationally it can be explained away as being left by an employee who works in one of the offices downstairs, something tells me it's not. Especially since there's a note taped to the front of the box.

With a quiet sigh, I pick the package up, thankful I always wear leather gloves on a job, and read the note.

Don't say I never did anything for you - M

Rolling my eyes, I remove the note, shove it in my pocket, then toss the pack of smokes off to the side to deal with later. I don't have time or brainpower to figure out whatever game Min's playing now.

Part of me wants to toss the cigarettes off the roof, but I can't afford to be discovered because of them randomly falling from the sky. The other part is grateful I no longer need to make a stop on the way home. How Min figured out which brand I prefer is something I'd rather not think about, though it does prompt me to remove my phone from my pocket after I set up and send a text.

ZAY

I need a favor

MOLLY

You still owe me from the previous one.

ZAY

So I'll owe you two, or a big one, whatever.

MOLLY

Don't have to ask me twice. What's up?

ZAY

I need you to put your stalking skills to work

MOLLY

It's not stalking if they like it, but sure

I snort at that but quickly lay out what I want from him. He doesn't respond by the time I need to settle in behind the rifle, but that's fine. I'm not in any rush to show Min that if he wants to play games... Well, he'll get what he wished for.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:02 am

Five Months After Kidnapping

Contrary to what I'd led Zay to believe, I actually do work for a living sometimes. I might not have all the contacts and shit he does, but I can get things done. Which is how I find myself breaking into the vacation home of some investment banker.

I don't know who they are or what they did to piss the client off, but so long as someone pays for it, I'm happy to take care of their little problem.

Especially when the mark is someone stupid enough to have a house steps from the beach and doesn't even bother to lock their sliding door. Gated community or not, you can never be too careful.

The glass door slides easily on its track as I close it behind me. Staying still, I listen for any movement before soundlessly making my way through the open plan kitchen and front room to the back hall where the bedrooms are.

Getting plans for the house had been a bit difficult, but in the end, I'd managed, so it's an easy trek from the kitchen to the mark's office.

Despite the fact she's on "vacation," I've observed her spend more time in the office space here than sitting on the beach chairs right outside her kitchen door.

The hallway isn't that long, as this part of the house only holds a guest room, the office, and the main bedroom at the very end, but I still take my time going down it. I'm not nearly as good as stealth as I pretend to be. Every once in a while, I can hear the heels of my boots hitting the tiled floor, but my slow pace means it's barely

audible.

Pausing just outside the open office door, I listen for a moment to the sound of rapid keystrokes. I almost feel bad for her—not enough to not do my job, but anyone who comes to the beach just to lock themselves in their office lives a sad life.

Oh well, good thing it's about to be over soon.

There's a lull in the typing sounds coming from the office, so I take my chance, stepping into the doorway just as the window behind her breaks and a bullet hits the back of her skull.

I watch wide-eyed as she falls forward onto her keyboard. Not much surprises me anymore, but I did not see that coming.

Backing out into the hall, I try to calm my racing heart. My phone vibrates in my pocket and I fumble to pull it out. Staring at the screen, I watch as it rings, the display showing an unknown number.

Too stunned to think properly, I answer as I stand in the dark hall. Before I can even say hello, a voice I've only heard once before but will be hard pressed to forget comes over the line.

"How's it feel, Min?" he asks.

Gripping the phone tightly, I say his name between clenched teeth. "Zay. How'd you get this number?"

He chuckles. "As if I'd tell you that."

"Did you call to gloat?"

“No,” he says and, for some insane reason, I believe him. “I just wanted to let you know that it’s your turn.”

He hangs up. I bring the phone down from my ear, only to stare at it, as if that’ll give me the answers I want.

My turn? I smile as I put my phone away and finally make it out of the mark’s house. If Zay thinks this little show of his will put me off, well, he hasn’t been paying attention.

He wants to play? Fine. He hasn’t seen anything yet.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:02 am

Six Months After Kidnapping

Reggie meows at me when he sees me heading for the gun safe in my closet. “I know, baby. I’m sorry. I was looking forward to Bridgerton, too. But Uncle Cash doesn’t do favors often, so I can’t put this off.”

In response to that, I get a fluffy red backside as Reggie wanders off to some other part of the apartment. I don’t blame him. Our routines are important to us both. It helps having some sense of normalcy paired with the... odd job I have.

Most people might see watching TV with my cat as weird, but when all your other acquaintances are also morally gray and not the type of people you can just hang out with, it’s not so strange. With Reggie, I can be myself, and in this life of mine that’s important. So many times I’ve had to play a part to get myself where I needed to be so I could complete a job or get myself out of a sticky situation.

Letting Reggie see the human behind the assassin is needed, and I dare anyone try to tell me otherwise.

When I get my baby out of the safe, I check her over, making sure everything is as it should be before packing her away in the carrying case. I also grab a handgun and a few knives—not my weapons of choice, but if the last six months have taught me anything, it’s that it’s better to be safe than sorry.

* * *

Normally, I like a few days to scope out potential vantage points, but Cash gave me a

very limited timeframe for this one, so my one day of surveillance will have to be enough. It's a good thing I trust Cash—at least, as much as people in this life can trust one another. That this is a favor and not information I paid for goes a long way to helping me ease into the job at hand, lack or preparation or not.

Cash is good at his job and well worth the prices he sets for information, but when there's a transaction, you know you're on your own once the money changes hands. With a favor though... It's in everyone's best interest to make sure things go smoothly, because if not, how could he cash in on the favor I now owe him .

So, with a sigh, I shift my gun case higher on my shoulder and enter the building. No one pays me any mind, too absorbed in their own shit.

The keycard Cash left for me takes me to the rooftop, and thankfully it's empty this time of day. The intel I got said it should stay this way until after lunch, which isn't as much time as I would prefer, but it's still enough to complete this job.

I go around the large air conditioning unit in the middle of the roof and stop dead in my tracks. There, sitting cross-legged on the ground in the exact place I need to set up for this job, is Min.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I snarl, letting go of my hold of the gun case's strap and pulling my handgun out.

He smirks at the sight of me pointing a gun at him, like his life isn't in danger.

“You can't have this one,” he says just loud enough to be heard over the traffic fifteen stories below and the air conditioning off to the side of us.

“What?” My eyebrows furrow as I stare him down. “This is a job, like any other.”

He stands and crosses the short distance between us. “It is not a job,” he spits. “I don’t know what game you think you’re playing, but this is not one you want to pursue with me.”

Keeping the gun trained on him, I hold my ground. “Don’t take another step. I won’t hesitate to shoot you.”

His lips twist in a parody of a smile. “I dare you to try.”

Pressing my finger against the trigger, I glare at him. “Are you so ready to die, Min? Should I have finished you off when I had you in front of me six months ago?”

This time, his smile is more natural, bordering on friendly. “Why didn’t you?”

Question of the century right there. One I still don’t have an answer for half a year later. I should have taken the little shit out when I had the chance, but I can’t deny that I was intrigued.

As he stared at me with his dark eyes surrounded by long, equally dark eyelashes, something deep inside said No . I’ll admit he’s cute, in a slightly fucked-up homicidal way, but it wasn’t just his looks, but his lack of fear, that attracted me.

He didn’t beg for his life. He didn’t cry or show anything but annoyance at his predicament. Even when he tried to escape his bonds, his frustration levels had never risen above something he couldn’t manage. His control over his emotions, how he dealt with a life and death situation... It made me want to see more.

So, I let him live. I still don’t know if I regret it or not.

“What’s it going to be, Zay?” he asks, taking another step forward. “Are you going to deny me this kill?”

I sneer. “You stole plenty of mine in the last six months. Why shouldn’t I return the favor?”

His eyes are as dark as onyx, even in the late morning sun. His dark hair has a blue sheen to it, and I ache to run my fingers through the strands. It’s hard to focus when everything about him piques my curiosity.

“Because this one is personal,” he says so softly I almost don’t hear him.

The next second I’m forced to drop my gun as the burning pain of a knife embedding itself in my shoulder sears through me.

“Fucking hell!” I shout, grabbing for the knife. Min is faster, crossing the space between us and shoving me with a surprising amount of strength for someone nearly half a foot shorter than me.

He pushes me up against the AC unit and rips the knife out of my shoulder, making me swear again.

“Don’t fuck with me, Zay,” he hisses. “I enjoy our little cat and mouse games, but you’re skating too close to the line with this. Back. The. Fuck. Off.”

The knife ends up back in my shoulder and I reach for my own hidden blade, bringing it between us.

Min doesn’t look worried about the knife digging into his shirt. He holds me against the AC unit and stares into my eyes.

My breath hitches at our close proximity, the tension between us palpable. For a moment, time stands still as Min leans in and presses his lips against mine. I’m surprised at how soft his lips are, with how hard he’s pressing his mouth to mine. It’s

not a kiss, not really, but the feel of him opens up a floodgate of desire in me. When I gasp, he takes a hasty step back, dark eyes wide.

“I won’t be so nice next time,” he says in a rough voice before disappearing around the other end of the unit.

When the door to the roof slams closed, I close my eyes and thud my head against the unit, wondering what in the hell just happened—and why I liked it so much.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:02 am

Six Months After Stabbing

It's time. After years of planning, of even longer wishing for it to happen, it's finally time for the final name on my list.

The winter air is biting cold, and the sound of my boots crunching through the snow is loud in my ears. Anticipation thrums through me, and warmth spreads through my limbs from my core at the thought of how close I am to all of this finally being finished.

I have to take a few deep breaths when my excitement threatens to take over. If I'm not in complete control, it could lead to costly mistakes.

My heart flutters as the anticipation curls through me. It takes all of my concentration to breathe normally, but it's nothing to pick the lock and swing open the door leading off the laundry room into the side yard.

As quietly as possible, I creep into the room and close the door behind me. It latches with a quiet snick, but I still hear it; every sense is in overdrive and hyperaware.

Tentative steps take me to the door opposite the one I came in through. The rest of the house lies behind this door, and if I close my eyes, I can see the entire layout.

I have a gun and knife on me, as well as a vial of poison. I couldn't choose. There are so many ways I imagine this day, and choosing which is hard, so I brought them all. I'll decide when I'm face to face with him.

Pulling my knife out, I set my hand on the doorknob, take a slow, deep breath, and remind myself this is it. After tonight, I can lay my demons to rest.

Stepping into the kitchen has my heart racing. I close my eyes for a moment, shoving down the fear, anger, and despair that want to rise and consume me.

On quick but silent feet, I make my way through the kitchen to the living room. The smell of cigarettes hangs in the air and I wrinkle my nose. It's almost overpowering, choking me. Unlike the one time I was close enough to Zay to smell the cigarette smoke on him; then, it hadn't bothered me. Whether it was because I wasn't conscious long enough, or because it was Zay, I don't know. I'd rather not analyze it.

The living room is dark, the curtains opened just enough to let some of the light in. Thankfully, it's a clear winter night, so there's enough moonlight for me to navigate the room by.

The hallway leading to the bedrooms is short, with only a bathroom between the two rooms. Pausing at the first door, I slowly open it, taking a quick peek inside, but nothing but the smell of mildew greets me. I close the door, careful not to slam it closed.

Bypassing the bathroom, I head straight for the other bedroom, knife at the ready, body thrumming with the need for this to be over with already.

I'm a step away from reaching for the doorknob when I'm grabbed from behind. A large, meaty hand covers my mouth, and a gasp lodges in my throat.

"You thought you were so clever," he says into my ear. "You seem to have forgotten who taught you everything you know."

Flipping the knife in my hand, I change the grip, preparing for the fight ahead. He

chuckles, and the sound sends shivers down my spine. Every repressed emotion rises to the surface, and even though I struggle in his grip, he anticipates my moves and holds me tightly against him.

The feel of his body pressed to mine makes my stomach roll, and bile sears the back of my throat.

Being back here—at the scene of the crime, so to speak—is harder than I anticipated. I’ve spent years waiting for this moment. So much time spent training and planning on how to kill the literal monster in my nightmares, but nowhere in all those plans did I factor in the mental and emotional toll it would take.

I worked hard on becoming what I needed to be in order to kill those who deserved it, buried all the memories and emotions that didn’t suit me or my cause.

So lost in my own thoughts and impending meltdown, I’m not prepared for him. He disarms me, and searing hot pain rushes through my body, cutting through the building panic.

“You’re pathetic,” he snarls, pulling the knife out and throwing me to the ground. “I should have killed you years ago.”

He walks away, leaving me bleeding out in the hallway of my childhood home.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:02 am

“This is why we have streaming services,” I tell Reggie, shutting the TV off after running across another damn Christmas movie. Seriously, I know ‘tis the season and all that, but it’s ridiculous. We still have a week before the holiday is upon us.

Reggie purrs his agreement and lays next to me. Setting my hand on his back, I absentmindedly pet him while scrolling through social media. I don’t spend much time online, but it’s good to have for appearances. Keeping up the facade that I’m nothing but a boring cat dad with an equally boring consulting job that takes me away from home far more than I’d like is rather time consuming.

My phone rings, startling both me and Reggie, and we stare at the device for a long moment. The number is the same one I both look forward to and dread, and seeing it now has my stomach and heart doing weird things.

Before the call ends, I make up my mind and answer. “Hello?”

There’s a lot of static and then rustling, and just before I hang up, his voice comes over the line. “I... I need your help.”

Sitting forward, I grip my phone with one hand and my loose hanging hair with the other. Reggie protests that I’m no longer petting him, but right now my needy cat isn’t important.

“Where are you, Min?”

“I...” Heavy breathing and a few curses before he speaks again. “I think I got the wound cleaned, but fuck... it hurts.”

“Where. Are. You?” I grind out.

He rattles off an address that is, thankfully, in the city. “I’ll be there soon. Don’t fucking move.”

A strained laugh meets my ears. “Yeah, no plans of that. Hurry.”

I hang up, jump to my feet, and shove my phone in the pocket of my sweats. Reggie stares up at me, judgment in his blue eyes.

“Shut up. Something is wrong .” Gathering my hair, I use the hair tie around my wrist to tie it into a low tail at the base of my neck.

With my hair out of the way, I stride to my bedroom and grab some weapons before heading for the door. I don’t know what happened, but Min didn’t sound... right. It’s not like we spend any time on the phone, but I know his voice, know that something was off in his tone and the way he breathed.

Not only that, but I know what someone in pain sounds like.

* * *

The rundown motel Min gave me the address to makes me thankful I got a tetanus shot after he fucking stabbed me back in June.

I click the alarm button on my key fob twice, knowing it won’t provide extra security, but unwilling to leave my car in the dark parking lot otherwise. The stairs are at least reasonably sound as I climb to the second floor. Min’s room is at the end, close to the stairs. I wonder if he asked or just got lucky.

Knocking on the door, I try not to let the fear bubbling in me take over as two long

minutes tick down by the time Min answers. All it takes is one look at him to understand why.

He's not wearing a shirt, but the bloodsoaked bandage affixed crookedly to his side is all I can pay attention to.

"Get your shit," I order.

Min jumps, his black eyes a little hazy. I curse, gently pushing past him. There's a duffel bag spilled out on the bed, clothes and the contents of a first aid kit strewn about. Haphazardly, I toss things in the bag after putting all the medical supplies away. I find Min's gun underneath the pile of clothes and give him a disgusted look because he doesn't have it on hand. The state of him: pale, forehead and chest covered in a light sheen of sweat, and wounded, says he wouldn't have been able to use it anyway, though.

Giving the room the same thorough once over I give every room I stay in, I make sure nothing gets left behind, then I shrug out of my jacket and help Min into it.

"I... I have clothes," he says a little breathlessly.

"You have nothing appropriate to throw over that wound," I counter. "I don't want you to aggravate it by lifting your arms for a shirt. Deal with it."

Throwing his bag over my shoulder, I wrap my arm around Min's waist, fingers resting just above the bandage. Carefully but as quickly as possible, I help Min down the stairs and into my car. He's panting by the time I buckle him into the front seat and toss his bag into the back.

"Didn't... expect to see you... so soon," he says between heavy, panting breaths.

“Hush. Just rest and try not to die; it’s my privilege to kill you, no one else’s.”

“No promises,” he mutters, closing his eyes.

Without thinking too much, I pull onto the road, my only destination home. Hopefully Reggie isn’t too upset about our unexpected guest.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:02 am

When I open my eyes, I meet a pair of bright blue ones set in a squished, round face, with long red fur. The cat glares at me, despite the fact I've done nothing but lie here. Not that I know where here is, exactly.

I'm lying on a bed and my entire body is sore, but my wound doesn't feel like it's on fire anymore, so there's that. I'm assuming I've been cleaned up and properly cared for, but the confusion is high.

The cat and I stare at each other as I try to figure it out.

After that bastard stabbed me and left me to my misery, I'd managed to pull myself together long enough to get out of that hellhole. While the wound is rather deep, his angle was shit, so it didn't hit anything vital. I lasted long enough to find a motel to hole up in. No way was I going home in case he decided to follow me.

After trying to wash and dress my wound and almost passing out several times, I realized I was in trouble. The problem with being a loner and not having any close contacts is knowing whom to trust with something like this. Which is why I ended up calling... Oh fuck.

Just as I remember who I called, the man appears. Zay's shoulder-length, curly brown hair is loose and damp, as if he'd gotten out of the shower recently. The sight of him in gray sweatpants and a black T-shirt sells the theory. The clothes also outline how fucking hot he is.

I knew he was aesthetically pleasing; I'm not blind, and the few brief moments we were close to one another highlighted how well-put together and handsome he is. He

has a sharp jaw, golden brown eyes, and dark, expressive eyebrows. His broad shoulders and strong chest fill out his shirt nicely, leading to a tapered waist and strong legs.

His hands are shoved into the pockets of his pants and he stares at me for a long moment before moving his gaze to the cat. “I see you’ve met Reggie,” he says in a deep, smooth voice.

I look at the cat—Reggie—then back to Zay. “I don’t think he likes me.”

Zay chuckles a little. “Don’t take it personally. Reggie doesn’t like anyone on his side of the bed.”

“Th... this is your place?”

Zay moves closer and takes a seat on the edge of the bed. Reggie moves away from me and climbs onto his lap. “Yes, it is. I... I didn’t have any other options, Min. You didn’t give me another choice. You needed care, and it’s not like I could have taken you to the hospital. All the available safehouses are currently out of order or occupied. This was the only thing I could think to do.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to sound ungrateful or anything, I know I put you in a tough spot. Thank you, Zay. For coming to the rescue.”

He looks into my eyes for so long, I begin to squirm. His golden brown eyes seem to see far more than I ever want them to, and everything in me is screaming that I need to go. I can’t afford to let him get too close.

Except... he already is, isn’t he? From the very beginning, the moment I found out he wanted my kill and I started us down this path of cat and mouse last year... I let him in then, even if it was unintentionally.

Calling him in my hour of need only proved what I tried so hard to deny for so long. Zay's gotten under my skin, and I don't think there's any way of pushing him out—or if I even want to.

“Let me check your wound, and then we'll get some food in you.”

He helps me lay on my side, and I only flinch a little as he removes the bandage and pokes at the knife wound. “I'm not a medical professional, but I've been in this life long enough to know how to patch someone up,” he says.

“So what's the verdict?”

“You'll live, but you'll be out of commission for a while until it heals.”

“No.” I try to sit up, but he pushes me down, and I'm too weak to fight him. “I can't... I need to finish this, Zay.”

Our eyes meet and he must see my desperation because he sighs and goes back to affixing a new bandage over my side. “Finish what? What's going on, Min? You've spent a year being a bigger pain in my ass than his Royal Fluffy Butt over there, and I think I deserve to know why.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“Seriously?” He raises his arms in the air and then drops them to his sides. “You're in my fucking house. You slept next to my cat all night. What other proof do you need that I don't mean you any harm? If I wanted you dead, Min, you would have been. Last fucking year when I had you tied up in front of me, the perfect position for a little payback for all the money you cost me by stealing my kills.

“I have no ties to you other than the last year of ridiculousness. I owe you nothing.”

He leans over me, his face right over mine, so close his minty breath washes over me, and I breathe his scent in as deeply as I can. “So, you either tell me what the fuck you’re doing, and let me help you, or I’ll reopen that wound and toss you into the fucking snow.”

The tension between us crackles like electricity. My heart pounds hard enough that I wonder if Zay can hear it. His burning golden gaze sets my blood on fire, and I’m almost embarrassed to admit that my cock hardens under his stare.

He must feel it too, as the gold in his eyes turns almost molten, and his dusky pink lips part, tempting me because they’re so close .

Reggie chooses that moment to pounce on me, forcing a cry from my throat. Zay straightens up, cursing as he picks up the cat intent on murdering me.

“Fucking hell. I’m sorry, Min. It’s past his breakfast time.” Zay crosses the room to set Reggie on the ground just outside the door before closing it on him. By the time he makes it back to me, I’ve managed to flip onto my back, tears burning at the back of my eyes from the pain.

Zay doesn’t ask, but pulls the bandage back and inspecting my wound. “Nothing tore, which is good.” He covers me back up. “I have some pain meds that should help dull everything.”

I try to focus on my breathing while he rummages around in the attached bathroom. By the time he reappears with a glass of water and a bottle of pills, the pain has dissipated for the most part and I can breathe normally again.

Slowly, Zay helps me sit up. He shows me the bottle of pills. It’s just over the counter painkillers, but it’s better than nothing.

He shakes a few pills into his palm, and I toss them back with a swig of water.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. I’ll go get you some food.” He leaves the bedroom, closing the door behind him. The silence is deafening. I almost want to try my luck at getting up and moving to the living room, but some space will be good for us. It’s not like we’re friends or anything.

With a sigh, I try to find a position to lie in that’s comfortable enough and close my eyes. My brain is going a hundred miles a minute right now, questioning every decision I’ve made in the last year, but my body is weighed down by exhaustion. Getting stabbed is a lot of work.

One thing keeps running through my mind, no matter how many times I try to shut it up: despite my protests, I do trust Zay. I don’t know why or how it happened, but something in my lizard brain that was only focused on survival knew he wouldn’t let anything happen to me. It’s that thought that follows me back to sleep.

* * *

The next time I wake, it’s to the smell of coffee. I let out a sigh of relief, needing the caffeine more than I need to piss.

“Mrow,” Reggie says near my head.

I jump in surprise, which makes me gasp as it aggravates my wound.

“Good, you’re finally awake.” Zay appears next to the bed and helps me sit up. “Need anything?”

“Bathroom.”

“Let’s go.” He helps me out of bed, and if I didn’t wobble as soon as I was standing, I would protest. As it is, it takes all my concentration not to fall over as we shuffle over to the en suite.

He leaves me alone long enough for me to use the toilet, then helps me at the sink once I assure him I’m decent again. I don’t know why that matters. He literally already saw inside me when he sewed me up; there’s nothing left to hide, really.

When we’re back in the bedroom, he leaves for a few moments after I’m settled, only to come back with a cup of coffee and a plate.

“I’m not sure how you take it,” he says, setting the coffee on the nightstand and the plate on my lap.

“Black like my soul,” I mutter, staring down at the omelet in front of me. “You made this?”

“Well, Reggie sure didn’t.”

I laugh, then wince. I can feel Zay’s concerned gaze burning into me, but I don’t look at him. Instead, I pick up my fork and dig into the food.

Zay trades my plate for the mug and I sigh, drinking in the scent of the coffee before I even take a sip.

“So,” he says. “Want to tell me what happened?”

Bringing the mug to my lips, I take a long drink, ignoring the burning sensation of the still-hot liquid sliding down my throat.

“When my mother was nineteen,” I begin, “she emigrated to the States from Japan. She barely spoke English, but she was determined to get away from her too-strict parents. She managed to get a job cleaning offices and the like, one day, she filled in for someone who cleaned a police station.” I take a deep breath and another sip of coffee. “That’s where she met my father. He was older, a detective at the station, and one night, as she was working late, they got to talking. He managed to charm her off her feet, and they were married within six months.

“She thought she landed the American dream. Instead it was our worst nightmare. He kept the monster inside under lockdown until she told him about me. I don’t know if it was because he never wanted children and just conveniently left that part out during the wooing process, or if he got jealous of a yet-to-be born infant for taking up a lot of her time.”

Zay settles next to me on the bed, but I try hard not to focus on him, clutching my coffee like the lifeline it is. If I pretend he’s not here, then it’s like I’m not telling him this.

“Long story short, as I’m sure you can guess what happened once I was born, he turned into the big bad wolf, rather than the prince charming he pretended was. She died when I was nine. Everyone said it was a suicide, but I knew the truth.”

Zay sets his hand on my leg and I release a shaky breath. “Min...”

“No.” I shake my head. “I need to do this.”

“Okay,” he whispers, so low I barely hear it.

“I knew she didn’t kill herself. My mother was the strongest person I ever met. She believed in her dream of living free, and promised me we would, one day.” I swallow around the lump in my throat, letting the tears pooling behind my closed eyelids fall.

“I told the police and doctors, and anyone who would listen, what happened. How he beat us for years, and how he always threatened to kill us if we tried to leave.

“They took it seriously—at first. I was put in a foster home for a while so they could try to piece together what happened. And then my foster father started abusing me.”

I open my eyes and look at Zay as understanding dawns in his eyes. “Steve Larson,” he says. “The guy you hid in the closet for.”

I nod. “He had a good reputation with Social Services, but I’m sure that I wasn’t the first. Anyway, my social worker wasn’t too impressed when I told her. I don’t know if you heard last year about the woman who had the ‘heart attack’ in a dressing room at the mall?”

“Jody... something or other, I heard about it because we have a contact at the county coroner’s office who ran her tox screen. There were a few anomalies that he recognized from doing some... mixes for us. He put out a few feelers, but nothing came back, so he ruled it as natural causes and we washed our hands of it all.”

“Yeah. She didn’t believe me, thought I was making it up. And if I did that, then I must have made up the whole ‘my father killed my mother’ thing. She died because she decided I was a liar, as there was no way two people with good standings could both abuse me.”

My coffee is gone, and I look mournfully into the empty mug. Zay’s hand squeezes my thigh and I look up at him, meeting his golden eyes once more. I don’t see pity—thankfully—in them, but sympathy, and maybe a little understanding.

“The other two men were the cops on the case, and they stopped their investigation without second thought. I’ve spent so many years angry at everything and everyone for allowing him to get away with what he did. Not only did he take my mother away,

but he stole my childhood as well. The abuse stopped, but the training to be his perfect little soldier began as soon as he got me back—and beat me one last time for old time’s sake, of course.”

Reggie makes his way over to me and I scratch his head, smiling a little at the sound of him purring.

“I planned everything out and executed everything so perfectly. All the kills went off without a hitch... until I went after him.” My breath catches and I close my eyes once more, trying hard to shove my emotions to the side. “I’d gotten cocky, thought because he’s older now he’d be off his game and an easy target... That wasn’t the case, obviously.”

Zay is quiet for a long time after I finish speaking and I wonder if he thinks I’m as pathetic as I feel. When he finally speaks, his voice is gentle, though there’s a hardness to his tone that has me meeting his intense gaze. “Do you trust me?”

“I... Yeah, I do.” And I realize it must be true, after all, why else would I have told him my story?

“Then let me help you.”

“Zay...”

He places the fingers of his free hand against my lips. “Please.”

“Okay.”

He removes both of his hands and I mourn the loss as I watch him stand and pull his phone out. Reggie and I both stare as he makes a call and begins pacing the length of the room.

“Hey, Hollis, I have a job for you...” Zay begins outlining what he needs and... all I can do is hope I’m not making a mistake.

One Week After Rescue

Elijah and I wait outside the bastard's house, the winter chill seeping through our clothes, but neither of us moves. Min was pissed he wasn't allowed to be part of this plan, but he's still healing from what that asshole did to him, and I don't want to see him get hurt again. Instead, he's waiting at the safehouse that hasn't been used in a year—the same one I held him captive in for those few short hours.

“Not how I wanted to be spending my Christmas,” Elijah says.

“You got somewhere better to be, Hamilton?” I ask.

He doesn't respond because we both know the answer. Do any of us have a better way to spend the holiday? Maybe other people in our profession are able to live as normal lives as possible, but everyone I'm associated with does the bare minimum to keep up appearances. We're all fucked-up in our own ways, and anything “normal” is wistful thinking on our parts. Besides, what's a better Christmas present than getting to kidnap an abusive ex-cop?

Headlights on the street have us sinking deeper into the shadows at the back of the house, and we watch as Gary Walsh, Min's so-called father, stumbles out of the car.

We wait until he climbs the sagging porch steps before rushing out of hiding. We're not quiet or stealthy, as neither of us wants to give him the chance to figure out what's going on. The last thing we need is for him to get the drop on us like he did Min.

He fights because even drunk he's still a retired cop—but we're better trained, sober, and have him outnumbered. Elijah slips a needle into his neck and administers the sedative.

Together, and with a great deal of maneuvering, we get the bastard into the trunk of Elijah's car, and then make our way across the city to where Molly and Min are waiting for us.

* * *

It's a tense, silent ride. Elijah isn't one for small talk, which I can appreciate. Close to our destination, though, he speaks up. "You sure about this guy?"

I know he's not talking about Gary. "Yeah... and no. I wish I could explain it, but it's almost like when you took in Molly. Min might not be a helpless teenager, but he needs a guiding hand. Someone to be in his corner for everything life throws at him. He never had that after his mother died. This past year... He's shown he's not a bad guy, just lost."

"The difference is, I never have, and will never, want to fuck Molly."

I sputter. "I don't want to fuck him! I mean, he's cute and all, but not my type."

"Sure, keep telling yourself that."

I glare at him, but he keeps his attention on the road, even though there's no one else out here since it's Christmas.

The last few minutes to the safehouse are filled with anticipation, and I almost vibrate with the need to put eyes on Min. This past week, he's stayed with me so we could plan tonight—and for me to keep an eye on him.

I can't lie, I enjoyed having him in my space. His brand of sass fits in with my own, and after a few days, even Reggie warmed up to him.

I don't want to admit that Elijah may be right. The sexual tension between Min and I might be combustible, but that doesn't mean either of us is ready for that.

Thankfully, we get to the safehouse before my thoughts can get any further off track. It's easy getting Gary out of the trunk and into the one-room safehouse. The chair I tied Min to is in place, as are the ropes.

Molly sits on top of the tall cabinet, while Min is perched on the cot where I left him. I eye Molly as I tie Gary to the chair. "How'd you get up there?"

The little shit smiles and shrugs. "Trade secret," he says cheerfully.

I look to Min, who also shrugs. "He was there when I came back from the bathroom, so don't ask."

"Come on, spider monkey," Elijah tells his charge. "Let's leave the lovebirds alone."

Molly grins and dismounts, bending his knees to help absorb the impact. "It was nice meeting you properly, Min. We'll have to do it again soon."

With that, Molly and Elijah leave.

"He's weird," Min says.

"Yep," I reply absently, tugging at the bonds holding Gary to the chair. "Have a plan, Minni?" I ask.

His dark gaze snaps to me and he glares. "Did you call me a freaking mouse?" he

hisses.

I shrug. "I mean, after the past year... I thought it was fitting."

He huffs and struggles to stand from the cot, so I help him up. He wavers on his feet for a moment. When I steady him, he looks up at me, the ire of the nickname dissipating from his eyes while something akin to lust takes its place.

Quickly, he steps back and moves to the portable tray where an array of tools are set up, ready and waiting for what's to come.

While Min fiddles with his weapons of choice, I pull out my smokes and move to the far corner of the room. Min looks at me but doesn't say anything, so I light a cigarette and focus on the much-needed nicotine rather than the spark that's slowly been gaining strength between us.

Min slaps Gary's face a few times until the asshole jerks in his seat and wakes. He takes a few minutes to get his bearings, and when he sees his son, he fights his bonds.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Min tells him. "You're mine now, and you're not getting out of here until I make you pay."

"You have more balls than I thought, Minato," Gary spits. "Rather brave of you to have someone else do your dirty work." He turns his head and looks at me. "Gonna have him kill me, too?"

I laugh. "Your son is perfectly capable of getting his hands bloodied, sir. I'm just here for moral support." I take another drag of the cigarette and watch as his face turns red before he looks back at Min.

"Well? Are you going to do something? Or just stand there like the weakling you

are?”

“Mind if I borrow your lighter, Zay?”

“Certainly.” I toss it to him.

“I’m not going to bother with a speech; we both know what you did. What else is there to say?” Min flicks the lighter and holds the flame up for Gary to see. “Instead, I’m just going to show you.”

He moves faster than he should with his wound, but I stay silent, content to watch the show.

Min grabs the back of Gary’s thinning gray hair and holds tight. He flicks the lighter again, holding it to Gary’s face. The smell of burning flesh makes me glad I hadn’t eaten meat for dinner, as my stomach churns a little. I’ve seen and done a lot of shit, but fire hasn’t ever been part of that.

Min burns Gary’s face until his father’s voice goes hoarse from screaming, and the room is full of smoke and burnt flesh. I wrinkle my nose as I snuff out my cigarette on the wall behind me, pocketing the butt.

Min tosses the lighter onto the tray and picks up a paring knife. “I’ve thought about this for years,” he says just loud enough for me to hear. “I’ve thought about all the ways I can torture you, how many times I could get you to scream for me...”

I can’t see his expression from the angle I’m at, but I imagine it’s as dead as the tone of his voice. My heart aches for him, and instead of trying to shut that down, I allow it. The kinship we’ve been building over the last year means I want nothing more than to cross the room and comfort the man. I want to take the pain from him and do something to help ease this journey, but I also know this is something he has to do for

himself. This is Min's path of healing, and I have to let him have it.

He moves around his father and pulls his head back, exposing his throat and bringing the knife to it. "I should have killed you all those years ago," he says softly. "Should have taken your miserable life when I had the chance. But well... better late than never." Instead of slitting his throat, Min looks up at me. "Come hold him, please."

Quickly, I do as asked, gripping Gary's shoulders tight and holding him to the chair. Min releases his arms from the rope, then unties his hands from each other. I grip one of Gary's hands in mine, squeezing tight, while Min holds his other arm out, palm side up.

Gary struggles, and I have to exert enough pressure to his arm and shoulder that I feel the bone in his forearm break. It doesn't matter, not when Min slices Gary's wrist nice and deep, squeezing his forearm to make blood rush faster through the wound.

"Oh no," Min says in a hard voice. "How sad it is that he killed himself."

As realization dawns on Gary, Min moves to the other side and I hold Gary's arm steady as Min slices his other wrist. Min is trembling after completing the slash, and I take the knife from him, tossing it onto the tray, then pulling Min into my arms.

Holding him tightly, we watch as Gary bleeds out in front of us. Min shakes the entire time, but he doesn't look away as the light in Gary's eyes begins to die out.

"He made you watch... didn't he?" I ask, not sure if I want the answer or not.

Min rubs at his wrists. "I still have marks from fighting against the cuffs. He tightened them so much, they cut into my skin and bled; I needed stitches. It's why they listened to me when I told them what he did. They couldn't ignore the proof right in front of them."

I press a kiss to his hair. “It’s over.”

“Yeah.” He turns in my arms and throws his arms around my neck, wincing as the move aggravates his wound. “It is, thank you.”

I stare down into endless black eyes and give him the only truth I can right now. “Anytime, Minni. I’ll slay your monsters with you whenever you need me to.”

His lips part and I close the distance, leaving just a few scant inches between us. “Always?” he whispers.

“If that’s what you want.”

In response, he presses his soft lips to mine.

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One Year After Justice Served

I kneel in front of the grave marker, pissed that—after all her sacrifices—this is all she gets. Though, I’m mostly mad at myself, for knowing where she was for almost a year now and not making time to come see her.

Zay says it’s okay, that she would understand, but that doesn’t make the guilt any easier to bear. When I asked if he could get Hollis to track down her burial site, I thought I would rush here as soon as I had the information, since he sure as hell had never told me where she was, no matter how many times I asked. Turns out, I’m more fucked-up from what happened than I thought.

“Hey, Mama,” I whisper, brushing my fingers over the simple marker. “I’m sorry it’s taken so long to find you, but I’m here, and I come bearing news.”

The snow seeps into my pants, but I don’t mind the cold, it’s the least I can endure for her.

“I did it, Mama,” I say, voice cracking despite desperately trying to hold it together.

Closing my eyes, I try to gather the courage to say the words I’ve choked on every day for a year now, unable to believe they’re true.

“We’re free,” I say, so softly I can barely hear myself, but that’s okay. They’re out there now. “I did it, Mama. I freed us from him. I’m sorry it took longer than expected, but it’s done. He paid for what he did to us, and now you can rest easy. We can both live our dreams now, Mama, free from the pain and burden of having to live

with what he did to us.”

Bringing my fingers to my lips, I kiss them, and then press them into the cold stone.

“I love you, Mama. Merry Christmas. I’ll be back soon, promise.” Looking up, I meet Zay’s intense gaze from where he stands far enough away to give me privacy, but close enough to be my support. “We’ll be back,” I amend.

When I stand, Zay makes his way over and helps me brush the snow from my pants. “You good, Minni?”

I roll my eyes at the stupid nickname and grip one end of his scarf, tugging until he dips his head enough it’s not much of a stretch for me to lift my face to his and kiss him. Maybe I should be embarrassed about kissing my boyfriend in front of my mother’s grave, but I know she only ever wanted me to be happy. Now, without the heavy weight of her death and broken dreams on my shoulders, I can be.

“I’m perfect,” I tell him when we finally break apart. “Now, come on. Reggie is waiting.”

Zay steals one more kiss before grabbing my hand and leading me back the way we came. With every step I take, I feel lighter, the purpose I shaped my whole life around finally gone. The possibilities of the life Zay and I are building, now that my past has been put to rest, is endless, and I can’t wait to explore it with him.

And Reggie.