



Hard (Out for Justice)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Their story started with a glimpse, but its not all sunshine.

It was the talk of the hotel.

The broken elevator doors.

Some said they were haunted and others said they were possessed.

The gossip only made Phoenix Operative Caleb Robertson shoot a knowing look at his husband. But, the elevator door was the least of their worries. Wolf had some explaining to do.

Former Special Forces Soldier Wolfgang Everett Brandt gave his husband a look that said to behave, but he knew without a doubt Caleb wouldn't. So what if a bunch of romance writers wanted to embellish what really happened?

Wolf had more important things to do, like owning his part in their current disagreement.

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“Get lost.”

Wolf didn't move when the angrily hissed words came from the mouth of the man he loved.

He reached over and slapped the button that would bring the elevator to an emergency stop.

“No.”

Furious blue eyes glared at him as they stood toe to toe inside the elevator of a high-rise hotel in Virginia. The mirror behind Caleb showed not only how tense his husband was, but also his fine ass and incredibly long legs.

An ass Wolf had been searching forty-eight hours long for. Wait, it had to be over that... fifty-three hours, to be exact. Of course, he was the reason Caleb had left their home without a word, but it still irritated the hell out of him.

Wolf had only been gone two hours! And during that time, Caleb had disappeared. Imagine his surprise when he had walked back into their happy home and found Caleb gone.

Anger still lingered over the fact Caleb had packed a fucking bag.

“You left,” Wolf growled.

“Maybe we need a break.”

“No, we fucking don’t,” Wolf snapped. “Not by a long shot.”

“You left. You went to the meeting by yourself.”

The meeting had been texted to Wolf’s phone only and Caleb had been hot that he had been excluded.

“I was only gone for two hours, baby,” Wolf pointed out.

“And you told them you’d take that job in Central America, didn’t you?” Caleb spat with his lips pressed flat. The dimples Wolf loved to kiss were nowhere to be seen at the moment.

“I didn’t.” Wolf shook his head and tucked his hands into the pockets of his blue jeans.

“What?” Caleb’s lips parted with surprise.

“I didn’t take that job. I came back from the meeting to tell you that I wouldn’t go, but you had packed a bag and left.”

Caleb’s pupils had blown wide. “You’re lying.”

Wolf shook his head. “No, I’m not. I’ve never lied to you and you know in your heart that I’m telling you the truth.”

“I...”

“You what?” Wolf gave a sad smirk. “Gave up on us too quickly? Did you always plan to run when the going got rough?”

“Going to Central America on an op that you could potentially not come back from wasn’t something I considered in the ‘going got rough’ category.” Sarcasm dripped from Caleb’s voice.

The elevator phone started to buzz, but Wolf ignored it. They weren’t finished by a long shot and no way in fucking hell were they taking a break .

“I can’t just turn off who and what I am.”

“I’m not asking you to. Working for Phoenix is what both of us do. I’m only asking that you take me with you.”

Wolf hadn’t wanted Caleb anywhere near the shit fest that was going on in Central America. Over the past several years, he’d tried to protect Caleb as much as he possibly could, but maybe therein lay their problem. Was he being too overprotective?

Wolf gazed at his husband with his dark hair, bright blue eyes, and sleek yet ripped, muscled frame. A black overcoat hid that compact body.

Suddenly, Caleb knocked the overcoat out of his way and Wolf caught a glimpse of a Taran Tactical Innovations TR-1 Ultralight rifle hidden inside.

Was Caleb on a mission?

Wolf frowned at the Taran. The weapon had a thirteen-inch forearm with a Bravo Company mod, (BCM), pistol grip, and was equipped with a sound suppressor.

Let’s just say the weapon paled in comparison to the man carrying it. Tucked inside Caleb’s shoulder holster was a Glock twenty-six, the combat master package, with a similar suppressor.

Wolf preferred the longer version of the Glock thirty-four, but the twenty-six was lighter and better in several situations. Strapped to Caleb's leg was a Microtech Cypher OTF knife—lethal in close combat—which Caleb had been accomplished with for years now.

Yeah, Caleb was a badass motherfucker and somehow, Wolf had forgotten that. Still, he had to know one thing.

“What would taking you to Central America have accomplished? Other than putting us both in danger?”

A muscle ticked in Caleb's unshaven jaw. “You just don't get it.”

Wolf stepped closer. “Then explain it to me.”

“Why do I need to explain a fucking thing!” Caleb growled and pushed him.

Wolf hadn't been expecting the shove—although in hindsight, he should have because Caleb was a firecracker. Even with their nineteen-year age difference, the younger man had never taken his shit and never would.

Stumbling back, Wolf fell with a crack into the elevator doors; he felt the metal pop behind him.

His fist closed around Caleb's jacket and he yanked him closer, muttering, “Stubborn.” Their lips crashed together in a heated kiss and once again, Wolf found his back against the damaged door, but for a different reason. He was all in and returned the crushing kiss, his arms sweeping around to hold Caleb tight.

“No,” Caleb rasped, jerking away and taking several steps away from him. “Damn it!”

“Why not?” Wolf licked at his bottom lip.

“We haven’t settled a damn thing.”

“Then explain it to me,” Wolf said again.

Caleb gave a heavy sigh. “I want you to take safe jobs when I’m not with you. That would at least give us a fighting chance.”

“There is no such thing as a safe job.” Wolf was confused. They worked for Phoenix—one of the most lethal and dangerous covert teams in the world. Everything they did day in and day out was perilous.

“Then safer!” Caleb snarled.

“How can my taking safer jobs give us a fighting chance?”

“You’d be alive, damn it,” Caleb said.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Wolf replied softly.

“I need to be there when you do dangerous jobs,” Caleb said flatly.

“Why?”

“Because.” The man crossed his arms and looked away.

“Why, Caleb?”

Caleb’s gaze snapped back to him with anger, impatience, and fear reflected in their blue depths.

“If you go, then I go. If you die, then I won’t want to be here.”

The words rang loudly in the small elevator and Wolf’s heart pounded and every bit of saliva dried up in his mouth. The buzzing of the elevator phone stopped only to start up again a few moments later.

Fuck.

The reason Caleb needed to go was the exact reason Wolf had not wanted him to. Caleb was scared that he would die and Wolf was terrified of losing Caleb.

It had taken him years to find Caleb and it had since taken every ounce of his willpower not to chain the younger man to their home.

Wolf reached over and slapped the button on the elevator to get it moving again. The blinking red light and insistent buzzing indicated that the hotel had probably called maintenance by now.

“We have some talking to do,” he growled and placed a hand on the wall when the elevator lurched with a grind and dropped downward.

“Fat chance!”

Wolf gave Caleb a wolfish grin and the younger man rolled his eyes.

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Caleb jerked his coat closed and gripped the elevator railing when the car lurched. He grappled with what Wolf had told him. His husband hadn't taken the job? Why was that?

"We need to work on our communication skills."

Wolf scowled at him. "I wasn't the one who left."

"I wasn't going to be gone more than three days," Caleb said.

"Three days? Why?" His husband glared, oh, he hadn't liked that answer.

"Three days was the amount of time you were going to be gone," Caleb said.

"Three?" Wolf squinted, mulling that over. It didn't surprise him that Caleb had found out how long the Central America job was supposed to be. His husband was tricky and also had close friends in Phoenix, like Seth and Jordan, who were both techie geniuses. "That doesn't include travel time," Wolf murmured, earning a glare from Caleb.

When the elevator stopped, it did so with a slight bang on the second floor. The doors popped open to reveal several women waiting. They all got on and squished Caleb and Wolf into the back corner.

When Wolf stepped closer, the familiar rush of being near his husband swept over Caleb. A few of the women gave them knowing glances and he noticed the name badges some of them wore were of a writers' convention.

Bang!

Everyone jumped, including him, when the elevator's door slammed shut.

Oops. The doors had been fine before he'd shoved Wolf into them.

"Oh, my gawd. That scared me," one woman said and others laughed.

"Sounds just like the landing of my plane earlier," another one chimed in—causing more laughter.

Caleb snickered and Wolf snorted.

"Are you two enjoying the convention?" one woman turned toward him and Wolf.

Caleb caught the scowl on Wolf's face and elbowed him. "Yes, very much. You?"

"Oh yes, it's going to be so much fun." She smiled and then her eyes swept to the matching rings on their hands. "Married long?"

"Six months," Caleb admitted.

The elevator saved him from responding further when they reached the first floor—rather than stop efficiently, it landed with a slight slam. Some of the women made sounds and others just stood with calculating gazes.

"It's possessed," a person said.

"A ghost at midnight!" another one claimed.

No, Caleb wanted to respond, it was just me and my husband making out against it.

But he only smiled and imagined how broken the doors would be if he'd done what he'd wanted, like rip off Wolf's clothes and have sex against that door so he could watch in the mirror.

Bad, bad thoughts, Caleb , he silently admonished. Jumping his husband's bones right then wasn't an option. They had stuff to figure out, but he was sure he had made his point.

He just had one more thing to do to get it into Wolf's head that coddling him and leaving him out was no longer going to be an option.

Caleb was tired of it and it needed to end. When Wolf leaned further against him, Caleb sent a scowl up into his husband's face.

The doors opened and the women spilled out on the bottom floor.

Wolf didn't move from crushing against him.

"Move," he hissed.

"Let's go back upstairs." The thickness of desire in Wolf's voice almost made him cave, but this was too important to put off.

Of course, Wolf would know he had gotten a room here. It had been an unexpected cancellation. Phoenix normally didn't handle jobs in this neck of the woods—on the East Coast, but the suspect they were after had run clear across the country.

"No, we are not going to my room. Now, move," Caleb whispered and shoved at Wolf's chest.

"Coming?" One of the women held the elevator door open with one hand and Wolf

had no choice but to move.

Caleb hid a smile and strode quickly down the wide hallway toward the front desk. Wolf prowled at his side.

They drew more than one pair of eyes. It was Wolf, though, that they looked at. His husband was a walking fantasy with unique blue eyes so light they looked silver. With wide shoulders, a muscled build, and dark, windblown hair, Wolf turned heads. The stubble on the ex-Special Forces soldier's strong jaw gave him an untamed vibe. That combined with a deep voice and tattoos made Wolf hands down one sexy fucker. His husband was dressed similarly to him wearing Phoenix tactical gear—which made him look like a ninja. The coat Wolf wore matched his, but Caleb had only felt the familiar Glock thirty-four tucked inside.

“Where are you going?”

He smiled at the irritation in Wolf's voice and tossed him a glance after they turned the corner away from the reception desk and toward the doors that would lead them either outside or to the parking garage.

“I'm on a mission.”

“What mission?” Wolf scowled.

“I took a mission that Rossi needs completed.”

“He didn't tell me about no stinkin' mission,” Wolf snapped when they stepped outside into the cold October air. Thankfully, there wasn't any snow on the ground, but Caleb didn't think it normally snowed there this time of year. He really wouldn't know since he lived in a city just outside of San Francisco, California.

Caleb waited until they walked past the smokers and went to the end of the parking garage where cars came in and out before he swung on Wolf.

“Don’t act like Rossi doesn’t tell you about all the jobs he gives to me.”

“I ... um...” Wolf rubbed a hand at the back of his neck and glanced away.

“You’ve been vetting my jobs since day one.” He scoffed when Wolf snapped to give him a surprised look. “You don’t think I didn’t know that?”

“You knew?”

“Mhmm. And I didn’t mind because we were on those jobs together and when there were more difficult jobs, we took them together as a unit.” He hoped to god he was making his point. “But when you took this job and left me out—”

“I didn’t take the job! I just went to the meeting,” Wolf growled, but Caleb was going to finish his say.

“Fine,” he corrected. “But you still left me out. How do you think that made me feel?”

Wolf had no response.

“So, I’m going to finish this job that Rossi assigned and I will see you at home.”

Wolf looked like he had swallowed a lemon and Caleb wanted to laugh so badly, but he held it in.

This was too important.

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Had Caleb just told him to sit this one out? Wolf gaped at his young husband.

“You don’t take jobs without me,” he reminded Caleb, and the irony wasn’t lost on him.

Well. Fuck. Shit. Damn it. Wolf scowled at the bright challenging light in Caleb’s blue eyes. When the man remained mute and continued to stare at him, Wolf got it.

He’d been a possessive, overprotective ass and the next words out of his mouth needed to be very carefully chosen.

“I’m sorry.” He started there, because he truly was. “I didn’t mean...”

“I know. You love me and want to protect me from all the wrong in the world, but I didn’t train and become part of Phoenix to be coddled.”

Wolf nodded, swallowing around the sudden knot in his throat.

He had to let Caleb go.

Oh, not let Caleb out of their marriage, but Wolf had to loosen his hold.

“I’ll compromise. I’m not going home, but I’ll wait here at the hotel,” Wolf croaked over the frog in his throat.

Caleb’s head tipped and those fucking dimples finally popped and an overwhelming sense of relief washed over Wolf.

“They’ll look at the elevator camera and hold us responsible,” Caleb pointed out about the damaged doors.

“Was there a camera?” he frowned.

“I don’t know.” Caleb turned and walked away from him.

“Wait!”

“Yes?” Caleb spun around and the dark coat swirled around his black combat boots as the wind tossed his hair. He was so goddamned sexy, Wolf couldn’t think for a moment.

“Don’t I get a kiss?” Wolf blurted, licking at his lips and Caleb’s eyes darkened.

He was proud of himself, everything inside of him wanted to forbid Caleb from going. Another part was urging him to tail Caleb for safety reasons, but Wolf knew that was his own insecurity and fear.

Caleb walked slowly back to him and when the man was within reach, Wolf fisted his coat and pulled him close. Their lips met and just like before—that one touch from those delectable lips—he was a goner. A brush here, a nip there, and his cock went from soft to hard in a nanosecond.

Jerking back with a rush of breath, Caleb stared wide-eyed at him.

“What?” Wolf rasped, licking at the taste where Caleb lingered on his lips.

“Are you busy right now?”

For sex? He was never too busy for Caleb and a romp in the sack, but something in

his husband's gaze kept those particular words unspoken.

"No, I'm not busy," he said carefully.

Caleb jerked his head toward the parking garage. "Care to come along?"

"Are you serious?" Hope bloomed in Wolf's chest. Had he just been invited on Caleb's mission? Thank god he hadn't blurted out the sex part.

"I could use a partner."

He couldn't wipe the smile from his lips to save his life and when Caleb linked their fingers, Wolf tightened his grip. Sex could wait until after they kicked ass.

They entered the parking garage together. They'd do this job together, and they'd spend the rest of their lives together.

It may not always be easy, and Wolf knew he had a lot of work ahead, but Caleb was worth it.

What they had together was worth it.

Roscoe stood at the head of a small room in the same hotel waiting for the rest of the team to find their way to the meeting.

Wolf wondered how the fuck he'd missed that half of Phoenix was present in this same hotel and had been since yesterday. Of course, he hadn't been in on this particular plan—because he'd been handling other things—but he was starting to question his Spidey-senses.

He should never have gone to see Rossi without Caleb present and that was

something he would never do again. Even the look of surprise on Rossi's face when he had walked into the man's study should have clued him in.

"Where's Caleb?" Rossi had craned in neck to see around him as if Caleb was hiding behind him.

"Not for this one," Wolf had said and took a seat.

Stefano had made a sound under his breath.

"What?" Wolf frowned at Stefano. Rossi and Stefano were never apart and Wolf had heard rumors that they would be retiring soon. He wondered where that would leave Phoenix.

"It's your funeral," Stefano had scoffed and sipped at the cup of coffee in his hand.

Stefano had been right. He'd fucked up. But his and Caleb's relationship was strong enough to weather it.

A chair scraping brought Wolf's attention to the small conference room and he gave an up-nod to both Wild and Storm, who sat next to one another. Wolf briefly wondered who was watching their kids. Although little Megan and Chase weren't so little any longer, ages ten and eleven still took supervision.

He wanted that for him and Caleb. To adopt a child. But that would need to be after he retired. Which was still way down the pipeline. He would be forty-three this year and had no intention of retiring until he was pushing fifty at least.

Caleb's shoulder bumped him and he smiled, discretely linking their fingers together.

In the back of the room sat Fear and Lash, and Wolf wondered briefly if they knew

about his screw-up. By the look on Caleb's brother's face, they did know. Lash gave him an icy squinted stare.

Noah walked in with Asher and Seth and all three men took a seat.

"So now that all the players are here, that makes ten of us," Roscoe said, pulling up a PowerPoint on the wide wall screen.

Rossi wasn't fazed by him being here at all and that made Wolf suspicious.

"I have a sneaky idea I've been played," Wolf murmured against his shoulder.

Caleb snickered and glanced over.

Wolf was correct.

This hadn't been a job to do by himself, but rather a lot of the team were here.

So what if he'd lied? His white lie had woken Wolf up.

"Would I do that?" Caleb asked with an innocent bat of his eyelashes.

"Mhmm. You had planned on me being here," Wolf said.

"Give the man a brownie point."

"We could have just talked," Wolf whispered the complaint.

"No, we needed to be apart for you to see what you were doing."

Wolf gazed into his eyes with that eerie silvery gaze before giving a slow nod.

“You’re right. I would have been too close,” Wolf admitted. “And as much as it made me angry that you disappeared, it worked.”

Rossi broke into their covert conversation to continue. “Seth, Asher, Wild, and I will take the perimeter. Wolf, Caleb, Fear, Lash, and Storm will breach the inside.”

Rossi brought up the inside plans of an apartment building located not far from the hotel. “As soon as one floor is cleared, I’ll send in Asher to start retrieving victims. Carl Grant is our ultimate goal. The informant said that the man’s office is located at the end of the hall on the top floor.” Rossi gave Noah a nod.

Noah stood and turned to them. “Carl Grant is a sex trafficker who has been preying on runaways in the streets of the city. We had almost caught him in California, but he evaded us and hightailed it to Virginia. So here we are.” Noah pointed to the wall screen. “We will meet at dark tomorrow night and apprehend this bastard.”

They all knew what that meant.

Dead or alive, Grant’s reign of terror was coming to an end.

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The wall hit Wolf's back when Caleb crushed into him and slammed his mouth to his.

Wolf stepped away from the hotel room door so that it could swing shut with a click. He gripped Caleb by the hips and yanked at the bottom of the younger man's shirt.

Caleb pulled the material up and over his head, shaking out his dark curly hair and Wolf fisted the back of Caleb's head, bringing the younger man's mouth to his.

Tongues tangled and tasted and Wolf drank from Caleb until their breaths were hot and ragged.

Impatient hands yanked at his shirt and Wolf shrugged out of the material and pulled the sweaty t-shirt over his head. Both of them had just come from the hotel workout room where they'd tried to blow off steam, but the sweatier Caleb became, the more Wolf wanted to fuck the man's brains out.

He and Caleb both kicked off their sneakers and then Caleb's mouth was on him, biting at his pecs and shoulders. The man forced his head back with his mouth, and Wolf groaned under the onslaught, leaning his head back against the wall as Caleb's lips roamed over his jugular.

They worked their way down the hallway, shedding clothes along the way until they reached the bathroom fully naked.

Wolf flipped on the shower and dragged Caleb beneath the spray before it was fully hot. The water in the hotel heated up pretty fast so the brisk spray only lasted a

moment.

The water felt cool against Caleb's heated skin and he fought to get closer when Wolf's soapy hand closed around his throbbing dick.

"Easy, baby."

Fuck, Wolf's voice almost had him coming in the palm of his man's hand, but he sucked in several breaths to keep from blowing his load too early. Which was something he was really fucking good at. He didn't have the control that Wolf had.

The water suddenly turned from cool to warm and he sighed, leaning into Wolf. His husband's hand ran from his cock, around to his ass, slick soapy fingers running up his crack and probing at his hole until he was moaning. Caleb brushed his lips over Wolf's jaw, searching for his mouth and tangling their tongues beneath the rush of water. Blinking open his eyes, he stared into Wolf's heated gaze.

Caleb pulled back from the kiss and draped his arms over Wolf's shoulders, fisting his fingers into the man's hair.

"I want it hard and fast," Caleb ordered.

"We will see," the man growled.

"You don't want it like that?" he whispered huskily and bit at Wolf's lips.

"Caleb." The agonizing tone of his husband's voice brought a smile to his lips.

"What are you waiting for?" he teased.

"You want to be able to walk tomorrow."

Ah...Caleb suddenly got it. In the beginning, sex between them had been gentle, but then Caleb convinced Wolf he liked it hard.

“I like it hard,” Caleb said between nibbles on his jaw. “Walking won’t be a problem.”

He caressed the nape of Wolf’s neck, right where he knew the man loved it. Pressing closer, he undulated his cock against Wolf’s thick length.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” Wolf gave a rakish grin.

“I’ve been warned,” Caleb said and then squeaked when Wolf took control.

Their kiss turned hungry and wild, melting his bones. Caleb couldn’t stop the moan from welling out of his throat. Wolf spun him around face-first into the tile and Caleb found his front pressed to the cool surface as Wolf crowded in closer, pressing against his back. He felt Wolf’s cock sliding between the crack of his ass and moaned again, widening his legs.

He wanted Wolf, right the fuck now.

Hard and fast.

Caleb would worry about all the shit they needed to sort out later. Right then was all that mattered at the moment.

“Hurry,” Caleb gasped against the wall. Wolf ran kisses along his back, licking up the water, and probing his ass with a soapy dick. They’d used soap as lube more times than he could count, but Caleb also had a small bottle of lube in the shower he’d placed there last night.

Wolf must have suddenly seen the bottle because he pulled back, rinsed his cock, and lubed it up before he was back pressing the thick hard length between his ass cheeks.

“Oh, fuck yeah,” Caleb breathed and gasped when the head of Wolf’s cock popped through his tight entrance. He went up on his toes at first with the burn, but Wolf kicked his legs apart and Caleb’s feet planted, sending Wolf’s cock deep.

“Nnnnh,” he panted against the tile, widening his stance.

Wolf reached around to grip his cock with a soapy hand and Caleb bucked into the tight fist. Fuck yeah. Wolf always knew the quickest way to get him to come.

“I don’t want to come yet,” he whined, undulating.

“Just to knock the edge off,” Wolf murmured. Biting at his shoulder, the man shoved his cock deeper, impaling him, and yanked at his cock until he was jerking and coming against the tile with a sharp shout.

Wolf bit him where his neck met his shoulder and Caleb shuddered through his release. With his cock released, he hung still semi-hard between his legs.

Strong hands gripped his hips and Wolf was suddenly pounding into his ass. Every thrust hit the bundle of nerves deep inside of him and his cock began to rise. It was frequent that he came twice during sex. Wolf said it was an age thing.

Caleb knew it was a Wolf thing.

His big, ripped husband drove into him until Caleb was gasping when Wolf reached around him to yank at his cock again, Caleb painted the tile once more.

Wolf’s thrusts became sporadic amidst grunts and one long hiss and then Wolf

emptied his load into his ass.

Caleb stood shuddering, totally spent, only held up by Wolf's strong grip. When he was turned around and washed from head to toe, it was all Caleb could do to stay upright. Wolf hurriedly soaped and rinsed before snapping open the shower door.

His husband dried them both and lifted him into his arms.

"I'm too heavy to carry," he murmured.

"Hush," Wolf said and lowered him to the bed.

Caleb pulled back the puffy white comforter and sheets and slid into the bed. Wolf joined him and caught him close; the man's lips touched his in a soft kiss.

Turning around, Caleb snuggled his ass back into Wolf's crotch and the man closed those meaty arms around him.

It was well into the afternoon by the time Caleb surfaced from sleep.

Wolf lay curled around him.

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“Y ou two get your shit worked out?” Lash asked.

Caleb glanced up from tucking extra ammo into his coat to answer his brother. “We’re working on it.” Thoughts of last night with Wolf made him smile.

Lash lifted an extra clip from the bag in the back of the SUV and smirked. The slight smile pulled at the scar that ran from beneath his brother’s chin and down his neck before disappearing into the collar of his shirt.

Fear, his brother’s fiancé of several years, appeared next to them and Lash’s brown eyes softened—the pair were never apart. Caleb wondered when the pair would tie the knot. Fear swept a hand down Lash’s back before he reached between them and snagged a few ammo clips. Of course, Lash and Fear were code names, and even though Caleb was considered the little brother, he couldn’t bring himself to call them by Micah and Alex—their birth names.

The Phoenix operatives had gathered at a pre-arranged location to gear up and make a plan for taking down Carl Grant.

“You two good?” Fear asked, shooting a glance to where Wolf stood talking to Quick.

Quick had shown up early that morning. Right now, the guy was in charge of covert ops in Arizona or Nevada, Caleb wasn’t sure which one it was. Not that any of them were privy to orders that came from the top.

“Say the word and we’ll kick his ass.” Lash pointed an ammo clip at Wolf across the

way.

Caleb snorted. “He would hand you yours and you know it.”

“Maybe,” Lash huffed.

Caleb knew his brother had been in agony when he’d gone missing for two years, and it had taken a long time for Lash to stop blaming himself. While his brother had felt in debt to Wolf for finding him, Lash had exploded at the thought of Wolf and Caleb being together. All in all, it had worked out once Caleb had put his foot down.

Caleb was good at that. He wasn’t a pushover, and they all knew it. He’d learned through the school of hard knocks, if you will.

Fear and Lash seemed mollified that he and Wolf were on the mend and moved on to get coffee that someone had thoughtfully supplied.

Caleb closed his eyes when he felt Wolf behind him. The man was scary quiet. He drew in the slight woodsy scent and leaned back against the man’s muscled chest when Wolf’s arms closed around him.

Phoenix hit the ground running.

By Caleb’s calculations, it took the unit forty-three minutes to breach the upper floor of the building due to the number of suspects guarding the outside and stairwell.

Wolf tapped Caleb on the shoulder and his husband moved, leading the way up the stairs. The gun leaped in Caleb’s hand when a perp came down around the corner firing on them.

The fucker went down, but two suspects were on them before he knew it.

Wolf lunged to the side and Caleb dropped low.

A bullet whizzed past Caleb's head, punching a hole in the wall and Wolf fired, dropping the sucker dead.

Caleb was too close to the other suspect for Wolf to risk a shot, but he didn't need to. In typical Caleb style, his husband slashed his knife, opened the man's upper throat, and then jammed the blade into the man's clavicle. The suspect fell and when Caleb pulled his knife free, the man rolled down the stairs.

Caleb was on the move and Wolf stayed hot on his husband's ass.

Upward, the odor grew stronger as if those who inhabited the building forgot what a shower was. That stench was also mixed with mold. Wolf grimaced.

Reaching the top floor, they stepped into the hallway and took out the perps waiting for them before they started to clear the floor.

The door at the end of the hallway was closed, like a sinister portal waiting for them to breach.

They moved as one.

Toward that door. Toward Carl Grant.

Toward evil.

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P hoenix converged stealthily behind them, Noah aka Ghost, Fear, Lash, and Storm brought up the rear.

Their fearless leader, Roscoe was somewhere outside, securing the perimeter along with Seth, Asher, and Wild.

There were victims somewhere inside and they took turns simultaneously kicking in doors as they went down the upper-level hallway.

Coming to the door at the end, Wolf took the lead, but there was no way in hell Caleb was sitting this one out. He stood on the other side of the closed door and met his husband's silvery gaze.

With a wink and smirk, Caleb nodded and Storm kicked the door in with his reinforced steel-toed work boots. It caved like a toothpick, the sound loud.

Gunfire within the room echoed and bullets flew at the opening.

Storm was already on the move, dodging back and out of the way, but a touch too slow, and the big man grunted under the impact of a bullet. Ghost lunged after Storm and grabbed the giant beneath his arms and pulled him back out of the way completely.

Caleb went low and dodged out taking a look inside the room.

Sure enough, their main suspect held a slender girl in front of him. The fucker should have chosen a bigger shield.

Firing, Caleb's bullet hit the man in his gun arm. The suspect yelled and the girl screamed. Wolf's bullet caught the man in the throat and arterial spray showered the kingpin and the girl.

At a run, Caleb entered the room, sliding across the floor on his knees. Wolf was right behind him. Caleb snatched the girl up and kept going until he took shelter behind a large over-stuffed recliner.

Two gunshots came from someone near the far end of the room. One bullet hit the wall and the other the floor as a second perp opened fire.

"Fuck!" Wolf shouted and everyone flew for cover.

Caleb pushed the girl to the ground. "Stay still," he said and was gone, moving. He flanked the perp until he could get a bead on the perp and put a bullet in the asshole.

Ghost had secured Storm and was coming in from the doorway.

"Careful!" Ghost ordered.

Everyone kind of hesitated at the order and it became clear why when they saw a young boy shakily holding a nine-millimeter handgun with the business end pointed at them.

The kid couldn't be more than fifteen, at that. Curly dark hair, wide eyes, wearing only a pair of white briefs.

"It's okay," Caleb said because he was the closest.

The boy swung the gun his way, holding it with both hands. Wolf crept up behind the boy, waiting for Caleb's signal.

“We’re here to help,” Caleb continued softly, taking slow steps closer, holding his hands out at his sides. “He’s dead.”

“Where’s Shannon?” the boy said.

It was probably the little girl behind the chair.

“She’s safe,” Caleb said just as the girl flew up from where she was hiding and ran across the room.

The two children clutched each other, faces ravaged from abuse. Their innocence shattered by a madman, both children cried and Caleb clamped down on the knot of grief welling up in his throat.

Wolf took that moment to take the gun from the boy and secure the scene.

“All clear,” Wolf called it into Roscoe.

“Roger that. We’ve secured several victims on the lower floors. Get your perps cuffed and bring them downstairs,” Roscoe said.

Caleb made his way to the door, only to find Storm on his feet in the hallway holding a fully automatic rifle.

“You good?” Caleb asked Storm along with Lash and Fear.

“Yeah, caught the vest,” the big man rumbled, rubbing at his chest with his free hand.

“Good damned thing too,” Lash said. “Otherwise, Wild would fucking kill us all.”

“And then flay us alive,” Fear agreed.

Perps were secured and brought down with them and Caleb guided the boy whose name was Ryan and the little girl down the stairs.

Rescuing victims gave him a rush of satisfaction that was hard to describe.

Caleb walked slowly behind Ryan and Shannon as they tentatively walked down the stairs. Relief and tears at the thought of finally being free covered both the kids' faces.

This right here was what Phoenix did.

Some might think they should branch out and do other things, but in all honesty, bringing down sex traffickers was their main priority.

And Phoenix was fucking good at it.

Taking down sex offenders had always been the primary function of their specialty team. Once in a while, Phoenix took down drug lords, but those were just afterthoughts. And usually where there were drugs, there was underage sex.

It was one of the reasons the team had been created by Rossi so many years ago.

And Caleb was proud to be a part of it.

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Before they left the hotel, they arranged one last dinner in the hotel restaurant. It was noisy and the unit had the hotel staff hopping. From the hostess to the waitstaff personnel, the laughter ran rampant.

Everyone had some type of beverage in front of them, some alcoholic and some not. Wolf had chosen to forgo drinking because he was over waking up feeling like shit the next day. He'd ordered a steak and was enjoying the taste. He also enjoyed the hell out of being with Caleb. His young husband was the love of his life and his favorite person in the world. Wolf knew that he would have traveled the world to find Caleb when the man disappeared and he also knew he wouldn't have rested until they were together again.

"Whatcha thinkin?"

"About how I found you here clear across the country," he murmured.

"So, Wolf found Smoke," Caleb used his own code name with a smile. Wolf could tell by the brightness in Caleb's eyes that his husband was very tipsy. But Caleb didn't drink much as a rule, so the man must have felt safe enough here in the company of his protectors. These men weren't only Caleb's protectors, they all watched each other's backs.

"Or maybe, just maybe, Smoke saved the wolf," Wolf murmured.

Caleb's heart squeezed with joy. He fisted Wolf's coat and yanked him close.

"We're a team," he hissed fiercely against Wolf's ear.

“I’ll never forget that again.”

It was a vow Caleb would hold Wolf to. A commitment that would keep them close at home and during missions.

It was a promise they’d always be together.

A promise—of a lifetime.

THE END

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:04 am

Greek God of Erebus—“The personification of darkness and shadow”

The job was supposed to be simple.

But it turned out to be a fuckin’ nightmare.

Hawk sat in the dark with his back against the concrete wall and studied the line of homeless tents that stretched as far as the eye could see. His focus was on a row that sat deep within the homeless community of San Diego. It was almost rhythmic watching the people mill about, sorting through findings or huddled around burning canisters. The fire sent smoke up into the air in slow curling tendrils, and the smell of charred paper and melted plastic mixed with singed clothing drifted on the slight southern breeze.

Normally, Hawk would have done the hit at night, but it had proven fuckin’ impossible, because his mark had sat so far tucked inside the homeless community that he couldn’t get a bead on the guy, so here he was back in the daytime.

This one last job had turned into a month-long recon.

The coined phrase, “I’m too old for this shit,” came to mind and he snorted under his breath and situated his ass against the hard concrete of the retaining wall. Thankful for the heavy jeans protecting his ass and the worn boots and a black hoodie all designed so he fit in.

Fitting in around there wasn’t a problem for him even with his height and size. In fact, he’d seen several other men with the same bulk. And his mark also fit into the

filth and stench, Hawk should have been able to get close. Only, he hadn't been able to, and finding the guy became a game of cat and mouse in the stench-filled area.

Not that he had a problem with the homeless. Each person had to find their own way and he of all people knew that sometimes life handed you a pile of shit and the only way out was starting from the bottom up. Some people actually preferred to live on the margins of society.

Not him, though, and he thought of the shabby, rundown apartment he lived in with its bare walls and faded carpet.

One last job and he was out of there with enough money to last a lifetime living in the sun on a remote beach some-fuckin'-where.

They'd tried to decorate for the season with smatterings of garland and rummaged decorations that seemed to fit more for Christmas than the upcoming turkey day. The tattered arrangements looked worse for the wear, but it did give the area a bit of a cheery glow. What a fucked up way to spend any holiday. Oh, not for him, but for the people below. The ones who wouldn't sit down at a table filled with food and gaze across at loved ones.

He grimaced and rubbed at the ache in his shoulder. He hadn't had a holiday like that since he'd been a boy. With Halloween just last week, people would be preparing for Thanksgiving, then Christmas, all followed up with a happy fucking New Year.

"There he is."

The old man sitting nearby hissed, yanking him from his thoughts, and pointed a gnarled finger in the direction of the cluster of bigger tents. A twenty-dollar bill and what was left of a fifth of whiskey had bought the old man's help sorting through the mass of people.

Hawk zeroed in on his mark and gave the grizzled old guy a slow nod before he shoved to his feet.

“Bring me back some!” the man hissed, thinking Hawk was after drugs.

He’d never indulged in the shit himself. Not after his younger brother had overdosed and died at the age of twelve. If Rick had lived, he’d be forty by now.

Shaking off thoughts of his past—because fuck if that was productive—he picked his way through the trash and people and moved closer to the figure in the distance.

His mark was tall, but on the thinner side like a good wind would blow him over. He was stooped over a canister tossing trash into the flickering flames.

The guy was oblivious to his surroundings and had no idea Hawk was walking toward him.

The slender man had no idea that death had come calling.

Hawk was so focused on the guy that his foot kicked a can, bringing the man’s head up and around to him.

Hawk froze.

Eyes the color of a summer sky caught and held his and blond hair fell out from beneath the gray beanie cap, curling softly.

Like a fuckin’ halo.