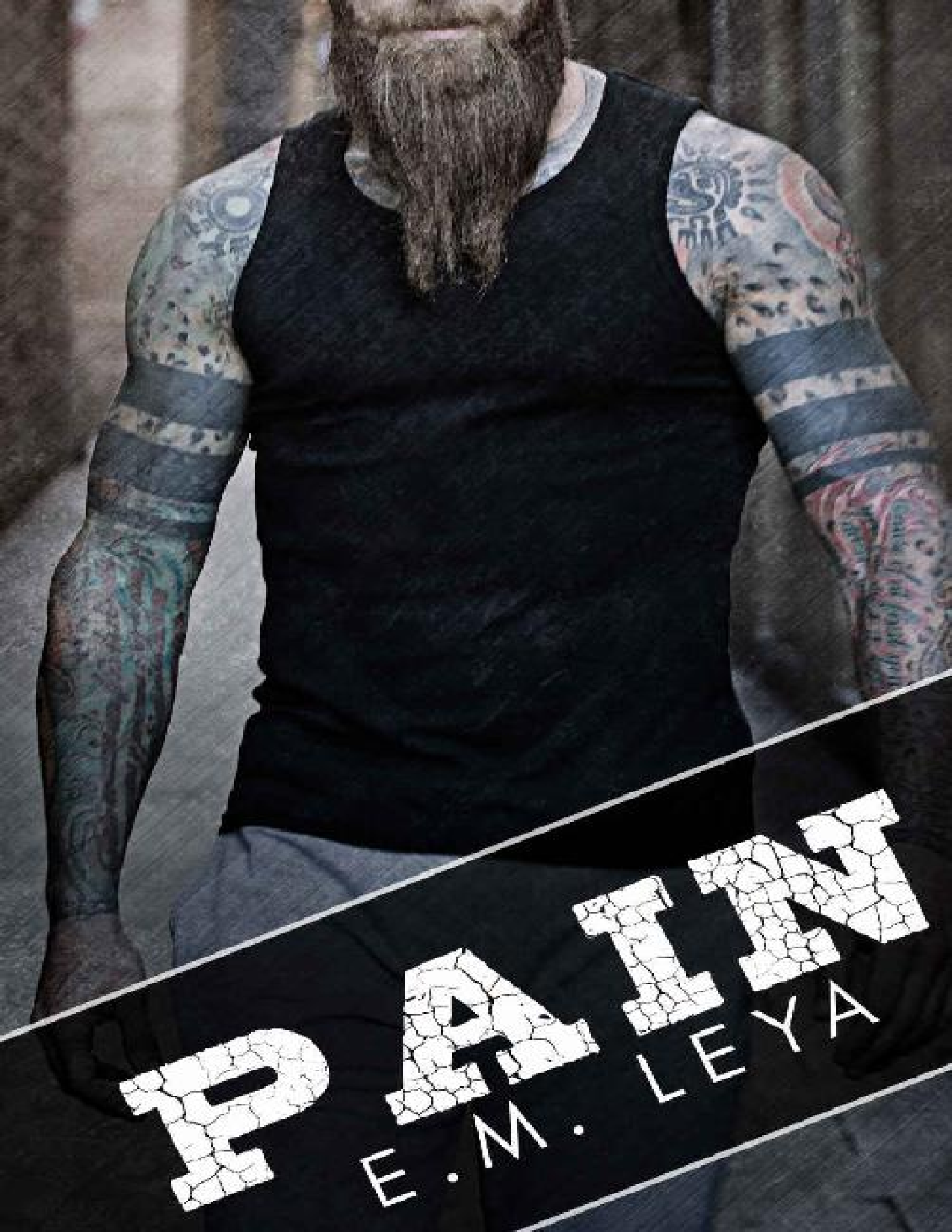
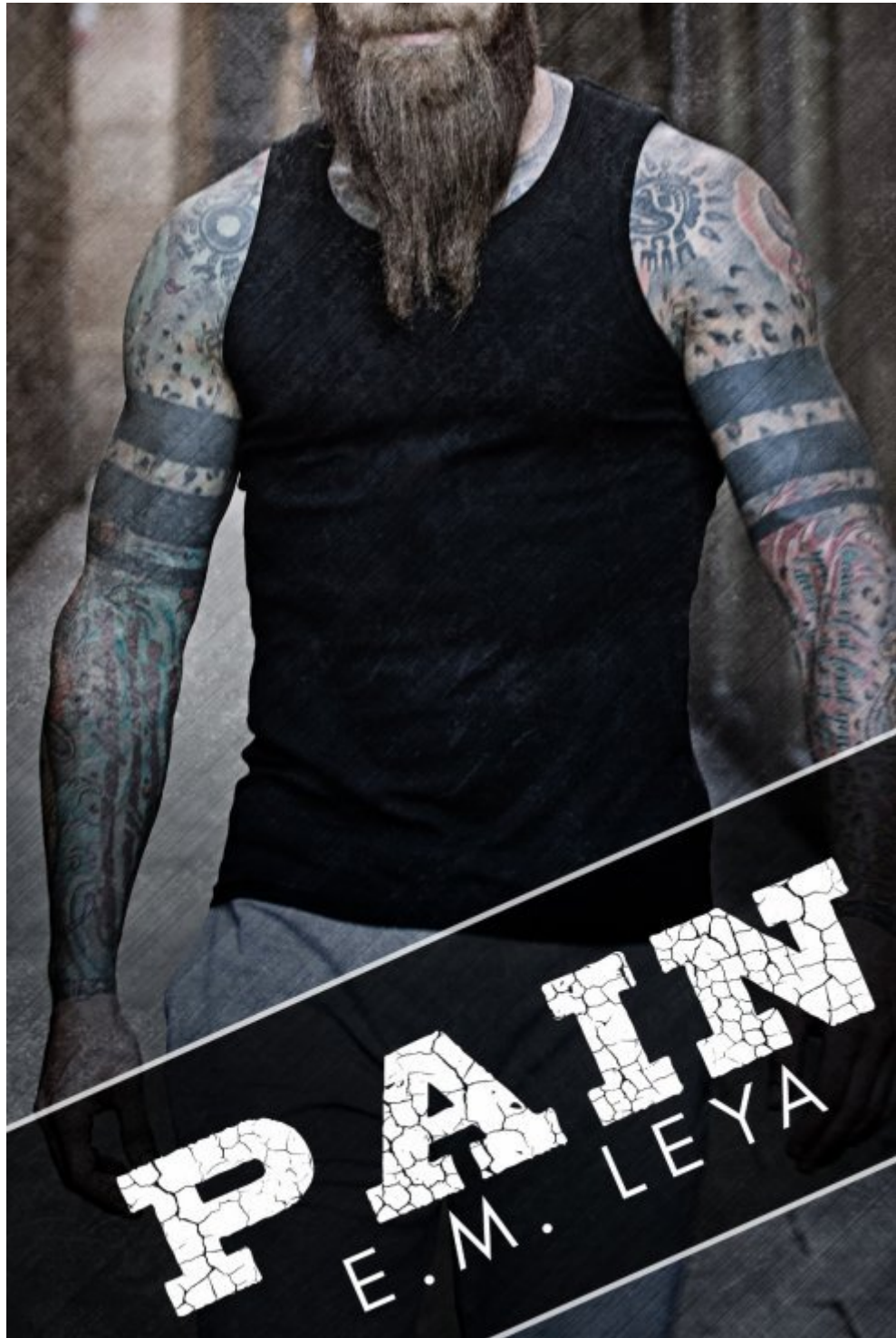




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Save The Kids Book 1

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Edited by: Dillion B.

Cover Art by: Kellie Dennis Book Cover by Design

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>TABLE OF CONTENTS</u>
<u>ATTENTION!</u>
<u>DEDICATION</u>
<u>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</u>
<u>CHAPTER ONE</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWO</u>
<u>CHAPTER THREE</u>
<u>CHAPTER FOUR</u>
<u>CHAPTER FIVE</u>
<u>CHAPTER SIX</u>
<u>CHAPTER SEVEN</u>
<u>CHAPTER EIGHT</u>
<u>CHAPTER NINE</u>
<u>CHAPTER TEN</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWELVE</u>
<u>CHAPTER THIRTEEN</u>
<u>CHAPTER FOURTEEN</u>
<u>CHAPTER FIFTEEN</u>
<u>CHAPTER SIXTEEN</u>
<u>CHAPTER SEVENTEEN</u>
<u>CHAPTER EIGHTEEN</u>
<u>CHAPTER NINETEEN</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN</u>
<u>CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT</u>

[CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

[ALSO AVAILABLE FROM E.M. LEYA](#)

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ATTENTION!

This book, while a romance, does deal with pedophilia and child abuse. While it is not shown, it is discussed. It also has violence that may make some uncomfortable. If you are sensitive to these issues, please don't read.

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the real-life pedophile hunters and groups around the world who devote their lives to taking down the pedophiles and protecting our children. Unlike my characters, you find the ability and control to do this within the law, working with the police and courts to make sure the men and women who hurt our children are taken off the streets and serve time for what they have done. You are heroes, and while you never ask for anything in return, we thank you, honor you, and support you! You may never know the number of children you save, the number of parents you educate, or the full effect your dedication has, but you make a difference. I thank you for your perseverance at making the world a better place.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As always, it takes a team to make a book come together. First to Hannah Walker and Kris Michaels, thank you for the long days spent sprinting with me. It's your support and constant friendships that keep me focused and make writing fun. I love you both.

To my beta readers and editor, you make my book come together, smoothing out the wrinkles and helping me make a mess into something amazing. I couldn't do the work without you. Sara, Dillion, Sandra, Tammie, Jesus, Carolyn, Diana, Alyson, Stephanie, Sabella, Cindy, and Adriana thank you for the time and effort you put into helping me.

A special thanks to Dr. J. Rosado for his help in making sure the medical procedures were realistically portrayed. Your knowledge and assistance were a blessing. Any mistakes or liberties are my own.

Again, thank you to the decoys, hunters, and groups that fight this legally every day, keeping our world safer.

I'd also like to acknowledge the brave victims of sexual crimes who show bravery and strength each and every day.

CHAPTER ONE

Xander glanced down at the file one last time, confirming the location and information. It wasn't as if he didn't already know for sure he was at the right place. He'd been staking the house out for weeks while his team finished gathering information.

Bile rose in his throat as he again read the list of atrocities the man who lived inside the house had committed. Xander could stomach a lot, but this stuff was more than any person should ever have to read about, or worse yet, experience.

He skipped over the photographs. He'd seen them already. They were the same ones the jury had seen when they'd found the man guilty. Pictures so horrible that several of the jury members had cried when they'd been presented.

A quick glance at the house down the block confirmed the man was home. His black truck sitting alone in the driveway like it did every night. The man lived alone, making this job easier than others. Xander wouldn't have to worry about anyone walking in and interrupting his work. He could take his time, play with the perpetrator's mind, hopefully making him suffer the same way others had suffered at the man's hands.

Xander lit a cigarette, taking a long drag off it before blowing the smoke out. He watched it flow out the cracked driver's window as he relaxed his head back, mentally preparing himself for what he was about to do. There was no fear. He'd done this too many times before, and each time, he'd become better at what he did. He'd lost count of how many there had been. No matter how many he took out, another showed up. It was an endless cesspool of the worst monsters who ever lived. Xander enjoyed seeing them suffer for what they'd done.

He set the file on the passenger seat, patiently waiting for the phone call that would put everything into motion. As far as he was concerned, the information he had was enough, but he worked with a team, and he wouldn't put the rest of the group in danger because he rushed things. He would do things by the book, and wait for the final verification to come in before he stepped out of his car.

Taking another drag off his cigarette, he took in the neighborhood. It was a clean, middle to high-income area, filled with families. There were over fifty kids in a three-block radius. That fact motivated Xander to remove the danger from the community. While surveilling the house, he'd watched the perpetrator sit on his front porch and wave at the young kids who rode by on their bikes.

The scum bag was nice to the girls, but it was the little boys that he tried to draw up the driveway to talk to him. When they wouldn't come to him, he'd grab a football and come down into the yard with them. He did everything he could to earn their trust, and Xander wouldn't be surprised if there were more than one victim in the area they didn't know about.

Right now, he was more concerned with the victims they were aware of.

Xander crushed out his cigarette before grabbing his phone. His team should have had verification by now. They'd worked too many hours confirming everything. The evidence was solid, not only did this creep have a file several inches thick that should have kept him locked up for life, Xander and his team were positive he was still actively victimizing others.

The moon was high above him, but the partial cloud cover kept it from lighting up the windows of the car. He stayed in the shadows, aware that many houses on the block had security cameras, and it wouldn't take long for the police to collect them as evidence once he finished.

He didn't worry. The car would come back as belonging to the very police force who would investigate, besides, he'd done this so many times that he covered his tracks well. The only image they would get of him would be a man dressed in solid black, and that was if they could see through the tinted windows at all.

At the sudden beep of his phone, Xander smiled. This was it. He quickly read the text message, relief flowing through him at the words on the screen.

Confirmation. Proceed. STK

"STK," Xander said out loud even though no one was with him. Those three letters were the code confirming the text was from his team. Without the letters, he'd abort the job. Save The Kids. It was the motto of his group.

It was why they did what they did. Where the court system failed, his team succeeded.

Pulling the drawstring tight around the neck of the solid black hoodie he wore, Xander made sure his long beard was tucked below the neckline and that as little of his face as possible was visible. He tightened the strap around his gloves, making sure that the sleeves of the hoodie were underneath them. He couldn't risk any of his tattoos showing, and he had many.

Once he was sure that he was fully covered, he rolled up the windows on the car. He was only a few houses from the perpetrators. Some jobs, he parked right out front, but the street light sat just beside this man's driveway, and Xander wanted to avoid that. Making sure he had his tools in the front pouch of his hoodie, he grabbed the file from the passenger seat and stepped out of the car.

The cool night air would have felt good against his skin if he wasn't so bundled to cover his identity. Maybe once this was over he'd go for a run. Work off some of the emotional stress of what he was about to do.

He casually walked down the sidewalk, calmly crossing the street. There were no nerves. He'd done this too many times to be nervous about it. He went into each job cautious, but fully ready to do what needed to be done. He was making the world a better place, and no matter what people might say about him, he had no plans to stop doing what he did.

As he walked up the driveway, he slowly slid the ski mask down from under his hoodie to cover his entire face. He'd spent weeks learning the layout of the house and watching the man's habits. There wasn't anything about this man he didn't know. It was his job to make sure everything happened without a snag. Mistakes wouldn't be forgiven, and one wrong move could easily cost him his life.

He quietly opened the back gate, so he could make his way to the back door. The perp liked to sneak outside every twenty minutes, so he could smoke. It was the one door that was never locked when the man was home. It was also the closest door to where the disgusting pervert sat, staring at his computer screen all night, spreading his disease among the dark web.

Once in the backyard, Xander pulled his gun from his pocket as he slid through the shadows. After he made his way inside, he would have seconds to take the man to the ground before the perp reached for the illegal gun he kept in the second drawer of his desk. The man was a drunken mess, so he

wasn't worried. He could probably be in the house and directly behind the fool before he noticed he wasn't alone.

Xander carefully slid the sliding glass door open, glad that for once the perp he was after didn't have a dog. That always made things harder. He wouldn't hurt an innocent animal, but there had been times he had to tranquilize a dog before he was able to take down the target.

The sound of the TV gave him cover from the slight slide of the door. He opened it only enough to squeeze through, leaving it open as he stepped through the small dining area to the living room next to it.

The man had his back to Xander, typing away on his computer. On the screen, Xander saw images he wished he'd never have to see again — young boys being abused by other men who bought them off the black market. Xander's grip on his gun tightened just slightly.

Like every other time he did this, he thought about how easy it would be to put a bullet in the back of the man's head, but that wasn't what his team was about. They wanted the men and women responsible for the abuse to live. To wake up every day in pain, paying for their sins. Death was too easy. These pedophiles deserved much worse.

Not willing to wait any longer, Xander made his move. In three strides, he stood behind the man, the barrel of the gun pressed to the back of his head. "Don't move, asshole."

The man jerked, but Xander was ready. He quickly jabbed the needle into the man's neck before he could pull away.

"Just relax. It's time for you to pay for your sins, Jensen. We know what you've been up to. We're not going to let the courts handle you this time. We've seen how well that worked in the past." Xander smiled as the man started to slump in his chair, but was still alert enough to understand what was going on.

Xander tossed the thick file onto the desk, right beside the screen with all the images of children. He would leave the feed open, giving the police more evidence when they came. It was always a bonus when they caught these fools with their accounts open, giving them a trusting link to others they knew on the dark web.

"Who?" The man's words were slurred.

"Who am I? I'm your worst nightmare come true." Xander didn't move the gun from the man's head yet. He needed the drugs to take better effect before he could trust that the man wouldn't fight. "You've hurt a lot of

people, Jensen. I'm here to make you feel pain just like you put them through and to make sure you don't hurt another child again."

The man whimpered, but his arms and legs were like weights now. He was at Xander's mercy, and Xander had none. Moving the gun from the man's head, Xander leaned against the desk, staring at the vile scum sitting in front of him. "You and I are going to spend a little time together, Jensen. You have no idea how much I've looked forward to meeting you tonight." Xander leaned in, grasping the sides of Jensen's shirt, and pulling hard. Buttons popped and scattered as Jensen's chest was revealed.

So drugged that he could hardly raise his gaze to look at Xander, Jensen could do nothing to stop what was about to happen to him.

"Let's get you naked, shall we?" Xander used his foot to push against the wheeled office chair and send it flying over the floor until it tipped, dumping Jensen onto the floor.

Jensen grunted, but couldn't move.

"Now you know how helpless those children feel, don't you?" Xander kneeled beside him, reaching out, making sure Jensen saw the sharp scissors in his hand. "Why don't we just cut these off, so I can see what you have to work with." Sadly, Xander already knew. There were videos of Jensen abusing children all over the dark web. Xander had made sure they were downloaded and included with all the other information in the file. It took a one terabyte flash drive to contain all the videos and pictures his team had found of the man.

Drool dripped down Jensen's chin as his eyes drooped. He wouldn't get the pleasure of falling asleep though. His team worked hard to make sure the dosage of drugs used was just enough to debilitate the perp, but allow him to still be aware of everything that was happening. It didn't matter anyway. The real pain would come long after the drugs had worn off.

Sliding the scissors into the waistband of Jensen's pants, he cut, the blade so sharp that he hardly had to move it. The thin material of his slacks parted, revealing a simple pair of white briefs.

Xander swallowed, remembering his own father wearing the exact same kind. He forced the memory away, refusing to let emotions get in the way of his job.

"Mmmph." Jensen's body trembled, proof of his fear.

Xander always found it interesting how the drugs affected people differently, this man slightly shook, but other couldn't move at all. It didn't

matter, as long as they couldn't attack him. He enjoyed seeing them tremble and show how scared they were. "Oh, don't worry. I won't hurt you any worse than you did those children."

That was probably a lie, but he didn't need to tell Jensen that.

Once he'd pulled off the rest of Jensen's clothes, and finally had him naked, Xander stepped back. He enjoyed this part. The moments right before he attacked, the quiet minutes where the perp had to wonder exactly what was going to happen to him. Even in his worst nightmares, he wouldn't guess what was about to come.

Taking the zip ties he had in his pocket, smiling down at Jensen, he raised his brow. "You liked to tie the boys up the first few times, didn't you? You didn't like it when they'd fight you." He bent down, rolling Jensen to his stomach before pulling one arm, then the other behind Jensen's back and sliding the tie around his wrists. He pulled the tie tight, probably too tight, but it didn't matter. This man didn't deserve to be comfortable once he was able to feel his body again.

As he stood, Xander placed his boot against the man's ass, pressing hard. "Men like you make me sick. I'm going to bring you all down. Each and every one of you." He lifted his boot off him, then used the toe of it to kick Jensen over so he was forced to his back, his hands painfully held behind him by the tie.

"Now we can have some fun." Xander pulled the rest of the items he had from his pocket.

Tears fell down Jensen's face, but that, and the trembling body, were the only signs of his fear. It was a shame Xander couldn't do this with them fully alert and able to show their full distress, but it was safer for the team to drug them.

"Okay, now let me explain what I'm going to do. I'm guessing you aren't a religious man. The Bible, and several other historical documents talk of eunuchs. They mostly served kings and other notable persons." Xander smiled as the trembling got stronger. "See, you were given several chances. Three times the courts had you, three times you served time for child abuse and sex trafficking. Each time you got out of prison, you went right back to what you were doing. This time, we're going to make sure you can't hurt another child."

He kneeled between Jensen's legs. "Now don't worry. I know what I'm doing. I'm not a doctor, but I've done this enough times to do it right. I'm

not going to let you die." Xander lifted the curved knife, setting it on Jensen's chest for a moment. "Let's spread those legs so I can see what I'm doing." He forced his legs wide, enjoying the sweat that was now showing on Jensen's forehead. "Nervous? Don't be. Did you know even in ancient times when this was done, only about seven of every thousand men died?" He tied a string around Jensen's cock and another around his balls. "Now this would be easier if you weren't lying down, but I'll make do."

Xander tugged on the strings, smiling when it lifted Jensen's cock and balls from his body. "Perfect." He made sure he had a small blow torch beside him and the tubing that he would need. "It's kind of amazing how simple this is. See, all I need to do is slice the penis and balls off, then insert this tube into your urethra. Once that is done, I'll cauterize the wound. As long as you don't get an infection, everything should be normal." Xander winked at Jensen. "Well, almost normal. You won't be raping young kids any longer, will you?"

He'd done this so many times before that he didn't even feel pity or shame for what he was about to do. The man deserved it. Every man he'd done it to before this had deserved it. "Okay, how are those drugs holding up? Can you feel anything?"

Snot, drool, and tears shined on Jensen's face.

"You'll let me know if this hurts, right?" Xander tugged on the strings, lifting the cock and balls out from his body and with one quick slice, he severed them from Jensen.

Jensen's silent scream was nothing more than a rush of air.

"Sure bleeds a lot, but no worries. You'll be fine." He quickly inserted the tube into the urethra, keeping it from becoming blocked. They might be seeking to stop the man from hurting children, but they wouldn't take away his ability to pee. Once that was done, he heated the knife with the blow torch before cauterizing the area. The smell of burning flesh was the worst part of the whole thing, but it also added to the torture and torment for the perp. He didn't bother to try and make it pretty. The hospital would take care of that once they got hold of him.

The whole process took less than an hour. Xander pulled a bag out of his pocket, dropping the used tools into it, making sure he wasn't going to leave anything behind. Jensen was in shock, his face pale, body shaking, and Xander guessed the drugs were starting to wear off. "Good, you seem to have some feeling back. We've got one more thing to do before I leave." He

pulled out two more zip ties before grabbing hold of Jensen's feet and dragging him to the desk. It wasn't heavy, but it would do the job of keeping Jensen stationary in his weakened state. "Now, I'm just tying your feet to the legs of the desk. You aren't going to want to be moving around for a bit. It will take some time for the drugs to wear off, and you did lose quite a bit of blood. Give yourself some time to recover."

Jensen let out an audible grunt.

"See, you're feeling better already." Xander made sure the file he had on Jensen was visible on top of the desk. "Now, I'm going to leave. Help will be here soon. You don't have to worry. We are nicer than you. Those poor kids didn't get any medical treatment after you made them bleed, did they? See, once I'm gone, I'll call for help. All you have to do is lay there and wait for them to show up." Xander glanced around the room, again making sure he had everything. "Oh, I guess you might want to keep these too, don't you?" He picked up Jensen's bloody cock and balls and set them on his chest, right between his nipples.

Jensen gagged as he stared at them.

"Yeah, I'm sure the kids you rape feel the same way about it." Xander held no sorrow for the man. "Tell your friends I'll be coming for them." After another glance around the room to make sure he didn't miss anything, Xander slipped out the back door. He lifted the ski mask from his face once he hit the driveway, tucking it on top of his head, hidden by the hoodie. The street was quiet as he made it back to his car, the neighbors unaware of what had happened.

Xander got to his car and slid into the driver's seat before he let out a long breath. He quickly reached for his phone, texting his team.

Task complete. STK

Once he'd sent the message, he grabbed a second phone from his glove box and dialed 911. Once the operator answered, he lowered his voice as he told her, "a man needs help at 4123 Sycamore." He didn't wait to answer questions before he disconnected the call and dropped the phone onto the seat beside him.

He took a moment to light a cigarette before casually pulling away from the curb and driving out of the neighborhood. It had been another successful night. One more pedophile was dealt with, and that meant a lot

of kids were saved. Sadly, Jensen was only one of many, but Xander wasn't going to quit. He'd fight for the kids, no matter what it took. He never wanted anyone to go through what he did as a child.

As he drove past the lake, he stopped beside it. He stepped out of his car long enough to toss the bag of tools and the burner phone into the water. He glanced up at the moon again, taking a deep breath as he peeled off his gloves and tossed them into the water as well.

Thinking about the run he still wanted to take, he slipped back into the car and headed home. Once he got his run, he'd enjoy a hot shower, followed by a cold beer. Tomorrow, he'd do it all over again.

CHAPTER TWO

Matt reached for the bottle of water beside his computer, taking several large gulps. He needed to eat, but he just wasn't hungry. Everyone was telling him he was losing too much weight, but they just didn't understand. How could he eat when his daughter was missing?

Food wasn't high on his priority list. Finding Faith was.

He rolled his shoulders and started scrolling through the information on his computer. He'd spent the last three weeks trolling the dark web, looking for any clue of where Faith could be. Hell, he wasn't even sure she was still alive, but he liked to think that if she was dead he would know it. After weeks of search parties and too many police interviews, he finally decided that he had to start searching himself. Let the cops look through the fields and lakes, Faith wasn't going to be there. She wasn't the type of kid to run off. Whoever took her had grabbed her as she walked home from school.

Less than half a block. That was how far his house was from the doors of the school. He could see them from his front porch. He'd probably been wrong to allow Faith to walk home alone after school, but at ten years old, she'd seemed mature enough to handle walking half a block. He thought she'd be safe with all the other kids and parents around. How wrong he had been.

The images on the computer screen broke his heart, and the thought that Faith might be abused that way made him sick. He couldn't think about it too long because the fear and anger would grow into something he couldn't handle. More than once he had to rush to the bathroom and get sick after seeing some of the images that people shared.

How had he been blind to this going on? Thirty-four years old and he'd never realized how big the sexual trafficking rings were. He'd heard about them, but he assumed it was mostly older women, not children. Not that one was easier to deal with than the other, but having his daughter out there, possibly in the middle of all this, made him literally vomit.

After weeks of trusting the police to do their thing, without any leads or answers, he decided he had to start searching his own way. First, it had been simply checking hospitals, morgues, and other places within a few hundred

miles. It wasn't until he'd joined a chat group supporting parents of missing children that he'd heard about the pedophile rings. At first, he was in denial, telling himself that would never happen to his child, but the more he talked to others, the more real the possibility became.

With no other leads, he dug deeper, learning about the dark web and the sex trafficking rings that, until then, had been nothing more than rumors in his mind. Each bit of information pulled him deeper into the underground world. Learning everything he could, he found many of the children that were sold on the dark web were his daughter's age, and they were taken just as Faith had been, close to home and within areas that most parents deemed safe for their child.

He was a fool all these years. He never thought about it before, but he had somehow gotten it in his mind that there were safe places and dangerous places. He let his guard down when they were in what he thought was a safe place, giving the child abductors the perfect chance to take the most important person in his life.

He stared at the picture of Faith that he kept beside the computer. She was his world. His life changed the day she was born. He finally understood the meaning of the words unconditional love. Even the love he had for Faith's mother paled in comparison to what he had for his daughter. She was everything. When his wife died from cancer five years before, Matt had done everything he could to continue to make sure their lives went on, and Faith had everything she could need. He didn't spoil her with materialistic things, but he did keep her busy, filling her days with things they could do together. He never wanted her to feel unloved. Now, he had failed her in the worst way. He let her down, unable to protect her or keep her safe.

Forcing his attention back to the computer, he scanned the ads for young girls. It was disgusting how many there were. There wasn't a picture of all of them, but each had a description. He avoided the blondes and redheads, focusing on the dark brown-haired girls, hoping, but at the same time, not hoping that Faith was one of them. If he could find her, save her, bring her home where she would be safe, then find a way to make everything all better again, maybe then, he could feel some redemption.

That was the thing, even if he did get her back home, would she ever be okay again? Night after night he thought about the things she might be going through. Just when he didn't think his mind could go anywhere

worse, something popped up online, showing him differently. The world was full of sick fucks, and his daughter could be out there with them.

The sound of his front door opening startled him, and he rushed to see who was just walking into his home without ringing the doorbell. When he saw his sister, carrying two grocery bags of stuff, he sighed. "Trish, what are you doing here?"

Trish pushed past him, heading into his kitchen. "I brought you dinner." She set the bags on the counter and started to pull a bucket of fried chicken out along with other side dishes, all packaged in Styrofoam containers. "I tried to call, but you didn't answer." She glanced over at him.

Matt leaned against the refrigerator, wishing he'd remembered to lock the door. Not that it would do a lot of good, she was the only other person with a key, but it might have made her think twice about coming in. "I've been busy." He really wasn't in the mood to deal with Trish. She'd been amazing the last few weeks helping him with everything, but now that she was starting to 'mother' him, he wished she would just let him be.

"I know, that's why I brought food. You've been too busy to eat, too busy to answer your phone, too busy to let anyone know you're even alive." She turned to stare at him, her green eyes filled with compassion. "I know this has been hard for you, Matt, but you have got to keep your strength up. Faith is going to need you strong when she comes home."

"What do you think I've been trying to do? I'm trying to get her home." He ran his fingers through his hair as he pushed away from the fridge. "I'll eat when I'm hungry." He ignored her worried expression and left the room.

"You spend every day locked up in this house. Get out there and look with me. Let's hit every park, every playground, every mall. Someone had to have seen her. We've handed out fliers to everyone."

"And I appreciate all the help from everyone, but the fliers aren't working. She's not home yet. I have to do something." He sat back down in his computer chair.

"What the fuck is that?" Trish's hand covered her mouth as she stared at the disgusting images on his screen.

Matt sighed, wishing he had changed the page before she saw it. "It's how I'm searching for Faith. You don't want to see it." He clicked the mouse, opening up another page so she wouldn't have to stare at the naked images of children.

"Matt, what the hell are you getting yourself into?" She came up beside him, swatted his hand away and reopened the page he'd been on. "Holy shit. What is this?" Her voice was filled with disgust.

"It's a sex trafficking site. It's the dark web, where perverts sell young children and women to men who want to..." He shook his head. There was no need for details.

"Oh my God." Trish sobbed. "You don't think that Faith is...?" She stepped back, shaking her head.

"I don't know, but I have to make sure. I can't take the chance she's being held for shit like this." His chest tightened as he saw the tears in his sister's eyes. "I don't know where she is, but I have to look. I have to make sure. We've searched every possible place around here, and we'll continue to search, but if she was kidnapped, what are the chances they kept her close? They wouldn't. It's been weeks. She could be anywhere by now." Matt hated the reality of it all.

"She can't..." Trish gestured to the computer. "No, she just can't. I won't even think about it." She turned and walked back into the kitchen.

When he heard Trish crying, he sighed. How was he supposed to help her when he was falling apart himself? Going into the kitchen, he found her bent over the counter, crying. He stood beside her, his hand on her back. "I know it's horrid, and I didn't want you to have to think about it, but it's a reality I have to face. I'm not stopping until I have my daughter back. Without her, I have nothing."

Trish shook her head. "You have me."

It wasn't the same and she knew it. "I need Faith."

Trish reached for a paper towel off the dispenser and blew her nose, then grabbed another to wipe her eyes. "I don't even want to know what I was looking at on that computer."

"I wish I didn't know either."

She turned, tossing the paper towels in the trash before washing her hands. "You're going to drive yourself mad." She pulled two plates out of the cupboard and started to put chicken, mashed potatoes, and corn on them.

"I know, but what choice do I have? The cops aren't looking. The longer she is missing, the less they look. I can't give up. I won't."

Trish shoved a plate at him. "No one says you have to give up, but that stuff..." She shook her head. "You can't look at that and not have it have

some effect on you."

"If it brings Faith home, it will be worth it." He stared at the plate in his hands, his stomach turning at the thought of food.

"Eat, Matt. You're not going to do Faith any good if you get sick." She went to the table and sat down. "Have you called Mom?"

He closed his eyes. He couldn't talk to his mother. It was hard enough without having her remind him how he should have kept a better eye on Faith. He knew the fight they'd had right after Faith went missing was nothing more than emotions being out of control, but some of the things she'd said cut deep. He needed time before he could deal with her again. "You know I haven't."

"She's worried about you."

"Tell her not to. Save the worry for Faith. She's the one who we need to worry about."

"You're her son."

"And Faith is her grandchild. I'm here, safe. Faith isn't."

Trish picked at her chicken. "Tell me about that stuff online."

He shook his head. "You don't want—"

"I need to know. You shouldn't have to carry this alone. What is it about?" She stared across the table at him.

Trish had always been a strong woman, but talking about stuff like this didn't feel right. Still, he was sure if he didn't tell her, she would find a way to learn about it on her own, and he didn't want that. Women weren't welcome on the sites he was on, at least not women like Trish. "It's a place people go to buy and sell other people. I mean there is a ton of shit on there. It's a drug market, a gun exchange, you name it, but the pages I look at are where they have women and children for sale. Think of it as a slave market. It's disgusting and horrifying what is on there."

"There are girls Faith's age?"

Matt lowered his gaze to the food on his plate. "Yes, and younger. Much younger." He bit his lip, remembering the first time he'd seen a three-year-old for sale.

"Jesus."

"I've slowly worked my way into the community acting like I'm looking to buy a young girl. It's taken time, and I'm still not fully trusted," Matt told her.

"How do you become trusted in a place like that?" Trish stared across the table at him.

"It's not easy." He wasn't about to tell her the things he had to say and do to earn the little trust he had. He'd shared photos that would probably get him a good prison sentence if he was caught, and talked about doing things that made him physically sick when asked why he was looking for a child. Even after all that, he still wasn't in deep enough. He had to get farther into the system, get them to invite him into the smaller inner circles, where the real information was shared.

"How did you find out about all this?"

"One of the other parents in a support group. His son was taken and sold. They found evidence of it, but have never found his son. He gave me the information to get in. He's deep inside the rings too, trying to find his son. It was only because he'd been working for two years to earn their trust that he was able to pull me in as a friend and have the groups have a little more trust in me than they would have if I'd started on my own." He stirred his spoon in his potatoes, still not having bothered to take a bite.

"And if you find her there?" Trish wiped tears from her cheeks.

"I don't know. I'd like to say get the police to follow up, but the truth is, most of these men are so well hidden that the cops would never find them. The only thing I could do is try and buy her. I honestly don't know."

"Fuck, are you listening to what you are saying? Buy your own daughter?"

"In a perfect world, this wouldn't be happening. Faith would be sitting here with us, stealing all the drumsticks. It's not a perfect world and Faith isn't here. I have to do whatever I have to do to find my daughter and bring her home."

"So, this is why you haven't answered your phone? You've disappeared."

Matt nodded.

"Hell, this isn't good. It's going to kill you."

"If I don't get Faith back, I might as well be dead anyway. I would never forgive myself if she was taken by these monsters and I didn't look for her there. There are so many kids, Trish. So many women who have been forced into this. It's disgusting."

"Why haven't the police shut all this down?"

"I don't know. I've seen talk of raids, but honestly, it's too big. These people move constantly. I'm sure it's impossible to keep up with them. And they don't trust anyone. I've had to create a whole new identity and hack into my system to change my information, so they can't track my location and find out who I really am. I've broken the law doing this, but like I said, it doesn't matter if I don't get Faith back." Matt leaned back in his chair.

"This is insane."

"A nightmare," Matt agreed.

Trish sighed. "You still have to take care of yourself. Please eat just a little. I can't have you get sick too. It's too much. Please, for me?"

Matt stared at the food, his stomach turning, but Trish was right. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten anything. He'd lived off coffee and water for the last few weeks, only eating when he started to feel dizzy because he hadn't. Even then, it was only a cup of soup or crackers. He forced himself to take a bite of the potatoes, hardly tasting them. The smile of relief on Trish's face was worth it. Maybe, just maybe, she would lay off now and leave him alone to do the things he needed to do.

As he forced himself to eat and listened to Trish talk about her week, his mind drifted back to the dark web. If Faith was out there, he would find her, and he would stop at nothing to bring her home.

CHAPTER THREE

Xander glanced over at Becca, watching as she set a stack of files down on the desk. As much as he appreciated the work she did with the team, he longed for a day where she would drop by without any files in her hands. Files meant work, and in his business, work meant kids were being hurt. "That's a large stack."

"Two cases. I'll brief you when the others arrive." She swept her long, blonde hair back from her face, tying it in a ponytail before falling down onto the couch across the room. "What a long day."

"Judge Harrison again?" Xander asked.

"Yeah, I don't know what I did to end up in his courtroom this week, but I'm done with it. He needs to retire. He spends more time snapping at the court clerks than dealing with his caseload." She pulled her vape out of her pocket and took a long drag off it.

"Is he running for reelection?" Xander asked.

"He hasn't decided. He has to submit the paperwork next week if he is." She stretched her legs out on the couch.

"At least with him being so lost in his own head, it gives you time to dig through the cases for us." He admired Becca. She risked everything alerting them to every child abuse case that came through the local courts. It was one way they were made aware of pedophiles who had been charged multiple times or given light sentences for horrible crimes.

His team only dealt with the worst of the worst, but once someone was on their radar, his team made a file on them to keep watch. Sadly, most would offend again, often taking things to another level.

Becca was only one of eight on the team besides Xander. Carter was their computer expert. Xander hadn't found a system Carter couldn't hack into. He was a genius when it came to programming, and they were lucky he was on their side and not the other. Beau was their physician. He trained them in how to handle the surgical side of what their team did and made sure they had the drugs they needed to keep the perps compliant. He was the one who trained Xander on how to cut off a man's balls and penis. It had

taken practice, but after doing it so many times, Xander was nearly as good as Beau would be if he went out and did it himself.

Kasey and Dyson also worked with them. Like Xander, they were the ones who made contact and dealt justice to the men and women they hunted. They were called the muscle of the team because they did the dirty work, the physical part of the job that many others couldn't stomach.

Trenton and Bryon spent most of their time online, researching and building their cases, and saving information. Trenton was in charge of making sure the files and information were accurate, possibly the most important member of the team. Bryon had the hardest job of all of them. He was deep into the dark web, a well-trusted member of some of the worst circles that existed. He put himself into the sex trafficking community, personally taking the time to appear an active and interested member. It was because of him that the team got the information they were able to. They did everything that they could to keep him safe and make sure that when they did take down a person or group of traffickers that Bryon stayed protected. They couldn't risk him being exposed. They would lose too much information if he was uncovered as a spy.

Together, they worked hard to take down pedophiles and the underground rings that exploited children. They focused mostly on protecting children under twelve, finding the men and women who desired them to be the most dangerous and vile people alive.

There were other teams who hunted the others, but most of them stayed within the boundaries of the law. They gathered information and handed it over to the police. Xander's team was glad the other teams were out there, hopefully stopping and scaring most pedophiles before they got to the level that STK needed to get involved.

STK only took on the worst of the worst. Those who kidnapped, groomed, and sold children to others. It was a disgusting community of men and women who would spend months training young children on how to submit. Xander had no regrets being part of the team, and he was proud of what he did to the men and women who destroyed these children's lives.

"Hey, boys and girls." Beau walked in carrying a box. He set it beside the files Becca had brought in.

"Hey, Beau." Becca waved.

Xander nodded his direction. "What's up?"

"Glad to finally get a couple of days off. I swear it's been crazy this week at the hospital." Beau grabbed a beer from the small fridge that sat to one side of the room. "Anyone else?" He held the bottle up.

"No thanks." Xander needed to keep a clear head. He wasn't sure if he had a job to do tonight or if Dyson was going to take it.

"I'll take one." Becca sat up on the couch.

Beau took her the beer and sat down beside her. "Everyone else late?"

"I said six o'clock. I've got three minutes." Carter walked out of the other room, where they had all their computers set up.

Trenton, Bryon, and Carter spent most of their time locked away in that room, digging for information and tracking the men they were watching. It was a job Xander couldn't handle. Not only did he like to be active and keep moving, but he didn't have the stomach to look at the photographs and videos all day. He wasn't sure how those who had to deal with it day in and day out handled it. He would lose his mind.

Maybe it was too close to home.

"Like these meetings ever get started on time." Bryon stepped out of the other room, followed by Trenton. "Where's Kasey and Dyson?"

"Dyson won't be here, but Kase should be here." Beau told them.

"So, if Dyson's busy, who's doing tonight's job?" Xander asked. He didn't mind doing two jobs in a row, it would hardly be the first time, but the team agreed to split them up, so it never became too much for any one person.

"Kase is doing it. I talked to him this morning." Carter twisted open his beer. "I've got a bit more information to add to the file." He glanced at Trenton.

"Just get it to me. I'll add it in. I've got everything ready to go. Three convictions, one of child rape. Served five years, released and on parole, but he's been looking into joining a party." Trenton's words were filled with hate.

Xander swallowed his disgust. A party was where several men would get together and take turns using a young boy or girl. Some believed it was an important part of training a child, but to Xander, it was one quick way to get your name added to their list. As far as he was concerned, anyone who took part in a party deserved what his team would bring.

The front door opened, and Kasey walked in, his arms filled with pizza boxes. "Howdy." He set the boxes on the coffee table. "I needed to eat, and

figured I'd feed you fools too." He flipped his long, dark hair back from his face before opening one of the boxes and pulling out two slices. He took a seat on the floor, leaning back against Xander's chair. "So, what are we doing?"

Bryon leaned over and grabbed a piece of pizza. "I've got a lot of information. Get comfy, we may be here a while."

Xander stood, grabbing the bottle of beer he'd dismissed earlier along with two slices of pizza before sitting back down.

"I've got two new cases to give you also. One male, one female, both with priors. I don't think they are ready for us to move on, but this female needs watching." Becca nodded to the files she brought. "Forty-year-old woman found guilty of sexually abusing her grandsons. Served three years. Finished two years of parole, but has just picked up another charge of grooming young boys online. The judge found her guilty, but gave her probation on the charges. The male has been charged with attempted kidnapping, served ten years, and was caught stalking a local elementary school. He got six months, with credit for time served. He'll be out in two weeks."

"I'll make sure we have them in our system and check out their internet activity," Carter promised.

"Kase, you've got tonight's case. Sixty-two-year-old, Benji Ferguson. He's got a child held in the home, so be careful. You know the routine, get in, take care of Benji, mark the house so the cops know the kid is there, leave the file, and get out. Let the cops do all the work."

Xander blew out a long breath, glad that Kasey was taking this one. He hated working stings when there was a child in the home. When it happened, it took everything he had to not rescue the kid. The only thing that kept him going was that the cops would be there within ten minutes most of the time, and if they were lucky, the child would be returned to their parents.

"I read the file earlier. I'm good." Kasey nodded to the team. "I'll call Carter once it's done."

"Everything go well with your sting last night, Xan?" Bryon asked.

"Yep, not a glitch. The guy was active when I entered, took him down, took care of him, and called the cops." Xander pulled a piece of pepperoni off his pizza and popped it into his mouth.

"A small article in the paper today about it, but like always, they kept most the details out of the media as best they could." Trenton smiled.

That was normal. By now, STK had done enough jobs that the police were more than aware of them. Maybe not STK, but that there was a group out there taking care of business. It seldom made the news. Carter said he figured it was because the police knew that if what they did made headlines, the public would stand behind them and more groups might try to take a vigilante approach when dealing with pedophiles.

Xander figured the cops were privately supportive of what they did, though they couldn't state that publicly. There was no doubt that if STK was ever caught, they would face hard time for what they'd done. It was a risk Xander was more than willing to take. The lives he'd saved were more important than his fear of sitting in a prison cell the rest of his life. He guessed the cops weren't digging too hard to stop them. The people STK took down deserved what they got.

"I have a case I need some advice on." Bryon sighed. "I started tracking a new profile. The guy has hidden his true identity well, but I had Carter do some of his fancy work, and found out that this guy is the father of the ten-year-old girl who went missing in Cedar Oaks a couple months ago. He's worked his way into the circles quite quickly. He's not deep enough yet to gain access to any information, but he's close. Even with the backgrounds these groups run, I think he's smart enough to infiltrate the circles."

Carter nodded. "I was impressed. This guy is almost as good as I am at hacking, hiding his identity, and creating another. He's good. One of the best I've seen in a long time."

"The issue with this is, we all know that a grieving father isn't stable enough to handle what he is going to find once he gets a little deeper. He's a loose cannon at this point, and we all know what will happen if by some miracle he finds his daughter on one of those sites." Bryon reached for another slice of pizza. "So far, he's doing everything right, but it's only a matter of time before everything he is seeing gets to him. We've all had those emotional breaks. We've learned how to support each other and get through them, but he's on his own. When he loses it, it's not going to be pretty."

"Not to mention the number of cases he could disrupt should they catch on that he's a fake," Beau said. "They'll all shut down and relocate. We'll lose every lead we have."

Xander nodded. They'd seen it happen before. One hint of someone infiltrating their rings and everything went black in seconds. It was like the power grid had been shut down. Everything was gone. "So, what are you thinking we should do?"

"I don't know. Normally, I would suggest we shut this guy down, but with this one, he is so deep already that I'm almost thinking he should stay." Bryon shrugged.

"He can't," Becca spoke up. "Not if he's a risk."

"This guy is good. Almost as great as me. Good enough that he could work with us." Carter held up his hands as everybody in the room turned to stare at him. "I know, I know. We haven't brought anyone inside for years. I get that. But the truth is, since Jeff left, I could use the help. This guy is really good. I know his head is in the wrong place right now, but if we bring him in, even just enough to guide him, make sure he doesn't go off the deep end, I think he'll gain their trust. Think about it. Not only can this guy hack, but he's gaining trust with the perps. He'd be a combination of Bryon and me. I'm not saying we have to bring him all the way in. We don't have to let him know exactly what we do, but I think someone should talk to him. If nothing else, we need to keep an eye on him."

Kasey set his empty water bottle on the table. "And if he reports us?"

"So what? We don't give him any information. We give him fake names. Just feel him out at first, see where his head is," Carter suggested.

"I can guess where his head is if he just had his daughter kidnapped." Becca stood, walking across the room. "This doesn't sound safe."

"Any information on his daughter?" Xander asked.

"No, she was taken less than half a block from home on her way from school. No one saw anything. No cameras other than the ones that show her leaving the school. I haven't seen any sign of her online, but that doesn't mean anything. We all know they can hold a child for years grooming them before they offer them to the public." Bryon shrugged. "She might not even be out there. There are so many possibilities that it's impossible to go through them all. They have no leads. The family has been cleared. The girl's mother is deceased. No reason or signs of her being a runaway. It's just one big dead end at this point."

"Which is why this father is delving into the dark web hoping for just anything to hold onto, no matter how sinister it might be." Kasey sighed.

"Right, but with our help, with us watching him, keeping him from going off the deep end, he might be able to help us with a lot of other cases," Bryon replied.

"The whole time with him thinking we are searching for his daughter?" Xander wasn't comfortable lying to anyone, especially an already hurting father.

"No, we'll be honest with him. We'll help him search for his daughter, take any information he gains on any of the pedophile rings. With him working with us, we can keep an eye on what he's doing and stop him from going off the edge. If things get too bad, we'll have Katie talk to him," Bryon suggested.

There was a loud groan around the room. Everyone hated talking to Katie. It wasn't that she was a horrible person, but talking to Katie meant someone in STK thought you needed to let off some tension. Katie was the group's therapist. Wife of one of the older members who had died, she was well aware what the group did, and offered her services to any of them when things got too bad or one of the other members felt you were ready to snap.

Xander hated the mandatory visit every three months that Bryon insisted they all have. He understood how trying this job could be, but he hated talking to anyone. With his past, he'd sat through enough therapy sessions in his life. He didn't want to do it as an adult.

"As much as you guys might hate seeing Katie, think of how she might help this guy. I'm guessing up until now, he's been leaning on family, maybe a pastor, or some friend. He might need something a bit more professional," Bryon said.

"What do we know about the guy?" Becca asked from where she leaned against the wall.

"Matthew Springton is thirty-four-years-old. Married at the age of twenty-two. Had his daughter Faith at twenty-four. Mother, Jill, died of pancreatic cancer five years ago. Matt has raised his daughter alone since then. He's an IT specialist for a local software company. From what I can tell, he is way underpaid for the skills he has, but makes a comfortable enough living from his job to raise Faith. His sister, Trish, is a big part of their lives, filling in on the motherly role when Faith needs it. His mother lives close, and is also active in their lives. No signs of any major family issues. Faith does well at school, has a lot of friends. No issues were found

on her side either." Carter stood and disappeared into the other room for a moment. When he came back, he passed a printed photo of Matt and Faith around the group.

Bryon reached for another beer. "Since she's been missing, Matt's withdrawn. He spends every free moment he can delving into the dark web. He got the information from Darren Richter. The father of Danny Richter."

Everyone in the room nodded. They all remembered the young boy who had been kidnapped and sold online several years back. It was a case no one could forget. The father found the proof his son had been sold, but by the time he did, there was no trace of the young boy.

"So, would we include Richter in this too?" Kasey asked.

"No, even though I'm sure that Darren is more than willing to help us, the fewer people who know about us the better. The only reason I'm even suggesting Matt is because of his hacking ability, and the fact that he already has an online persona that is gaining trust. It's got to be a group choice. We all know how one wrong move could take us all down. I, for one, am not ready to skip out of the country. I have too many kids still to save." Bryon looked around the circle at the rest of the group. "Think about it tonight. We'll talk tomorrow and vote on it." He stood. "Kase, will you be okay tonight?"

"Yep, in and out without a problem. He's so paranoid about what is going on with the internet, he doesn't pay any attention to his surroundings. I'll have the boy he's holding in police protection by midnight." Kasey stood.

Xander almost asked to join him, but he hated people tagging along on his jobs, he was sure that Kasey was the same way. "Yell if you need anything. I'm just relaxing tonight. I can be there in ten."

Kasey nodded. "Thanks, but don't wait up for a call. This one looks like an in and out."

The best kind. Xander tipped his head in agreement and slapped Kasey on the back for good luck. With nothing more to do, he pulled his keys from his pocket before looking back at Bryon. "You want this guy in, don't you?"

Bryon shrugged. "It's not about what I want. It's about what the team feels is right. We'll figure it out tomorrow and go from there."

"Fair enough." Xander gave the group a wave and headed outside, focusing on the neighborhood around him.

Just like most of the perpetrators they took down, STK's home base sat in the middle of a well-off neighborhood. Kids played up and down the streets, and everyone knew everyone. To the neighbors, Bryon was just a single man with friends who like to hang out all the time. They never caused problems, and to anyone looking, everything was on the up and up. Little did they know that inside the nice two-story home was the headquarters of one of the most dangerous teams in the United States.

He smiled at the neighbor as he got into his car, wondering what people would say if they knew. Glad they didn't, Xander casually pulled out of the driveway and headed home. A good night's sleep and he'd head back to work tomorrow, ready to take another pedophile down.

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CHAPTER FOUR

The sound of knocking on the door stirred Matt awake. He groaned as he sat up on the small couch where he'd finally fallen asleep. It was rare he slept, but when he did, he usually passed out without even realizing it. It was the only way. He'd learned soon after Faith was kidnapped that trying to go to sleep only meant long hours of thinking as he stared at the ceiling in the darkness.

As the pounding continued on his front door, he forced himself to stand, rubbing the back of his hand over his eyes as he stumbled to the front of the house. He peeked through the hole to see who was interrupting the first good sleep he had in over a week, sighing when he saw his best friend, Jason, looking back at him impatiently.

Matt worked the lock, then pulled the door open, turning away to head toward the kitchen without even saying hello.

"Well, aren't we cheerful today?" Jason shut the door and followed Matt.

"Fuck off. What do you want?" Matt reached for the already dirty coffee cup he'd left by the sink and poured a cup of cold coffee out of the pot. He stuck the cup in the microwave to warm before turning and looking at Jason.

"I just thought I'd check on you." Jason raised a brow. "You look like shit."

"Thanks, didn't know I needed to dress up for you." Matt rolled his eyes. "Trish called you, didn't she?"

"She's worried about you." Jason leaned against the counter. "And I am too."

"I'm fine. I mean, how do you guys expect me to be? My daughter is missing. I have no clue who has her or what is happening to her. Should I be happy and laughing?" He pulled the coffee out of the microwave, slamming the door shut harder than he meant to.

"No, but she said you aren't eating, and you've stopped answering your phone. Have you even checked your voicemail?" Jason opened the

cupboard beside him and pulled out a coffee cup, pouring his own coffee without even bothering to ask.

The two of them had been friends for nearly twenty years. They'd met in junior high, in wood shop. The friendship was instant. They'd been by each other's sides through hell and back. He loved Jason like a brother, but since Faith went missing, he just couldn't bring himself to be around anyone. They all tried to comfort him. He didn't need comfort. He needed his daughter back.

Matt blew over his coffee. "I'm alive. I answer the phone when I want to talk to someone. I haven't starved to death yet. Trish is just being her usual overprotective self."

"I don't know. Looking at you, I'm kind of worried myself." Jason started the microwave to warm his own coffee.

"How should I be? Fuck, you guys think I should just pick up and move on with my life, forget she's out there somewhere?"

"No, I'm not saying that, but you can't let yourself go like this. You have to take care of yourself, so you can help Faith. Seriously, you've lost like twenty pounds and you look like you were hit by a truck."

"I am surviving the best I can." Matt walked over to the kitchen table and sat down.

"You know, I could move in for a bit if you want. Help out with stuff."

"No, I'm good." The last thing he needed was someone hanging over his shoulder all the time.

"Matt—"

"Listen, I'm okay. I appreciate you being worried, but I'm just trying to get through each day. I'm not going to kill myself off. I promise. I just need time." Matt stared at Jason as he sat down across from him.

"What's going on with work?" Jason asked.

"I'm supposed to go back Monday. I've used all my vacation and sick leave. They've offered to work with me if I need time off, but they really want me back."

"Are you going to go?"

Matt shrugged.

"You can't just quit."

"I've got money saved, but that doesn't mean I'm not going back. I just haven't officially decided for sure." He dreaded the thought of being around so many people. The last thing he wanted was all his co-workers staring at

him in pity and whispering about him behind his back. "I'll probably go back, but cut down my hours for now."

"Can I do anything for you?" Jason lifted his cup to his lips, his worried gaze traveling over Matt.

"No, just trust me that I'm not killing myself off. I eat when I need to. You woke me up, so I'm getting sleep. It's just hard. I know she's out there, but I don't know where or with who. I keep thinking about what could be happening to her." Tears filled Matt's eyes and he quickly blinked them away. He was done crying. He cried the first two weeks. Now was the time for action, not tears.

"And this website that Trish tells me you've been on? She sounded really upset about it." Jason stared at him.

Matt blew out a long breath. "It's the dark web. I didn't mean for her to see it. It's sex trafficking, pedophiles, anything illegal really. It's where they sell identities when your ID is stolen, or teams work together to hack stores and large companies. It's the worst of the worst."

"And you're on there?"

"I'm watching it, looking for Faith." Matt didn't need to tell him how deep he was involved in it.

"Looking through that shit on there can't be healthy."

"I agree, but someone has to. The police seem to have given up. She'll end up a cold case until they find her body in a few years after some pervert tires of her. I can't let that happen. If there is a chance I can find her, any chance at all, I will do whatever it takes to make sure it happens. What I'm dealing with is nothing compared to what she must be going through." Matt swallowed the last of his coffee.

"Can I help you look? I don't know the first thing about the dark web. I wouldn't even know how to find it."

"Thanks, but it's not easy to get on. It's taken weeks just for me to earn what little trust I have on there. It's not like you can just sign on and browse through it like you do other sites. Besides, you're right, it fucks with your head, and you don't need that."

"And you do?"

"No, but the damage is already done. I can't unsee what I've seen."

"Fuck, Matt, you can't do this to yourself."

"Then tell me what the hell I'm supposed to do? Go to work each day and forget Faith is missing? Go about my life as if she isn't in the hands of

some stranger who could be hurting her? I can't do that. You know I can't." Matt stood, going for more coffee. "Tell Trish you talked to me and think I'm okay. Tell her to stop worrying about me. I know what I'm doing. I promise I won't starve myself. I'm not that far gone yet."

"Yet." Jason huffed. "I'm worried about you."

"And I'm worried about Faith."

"We all are." Jason sighed. "I wish there was more I could do."

"I know, but there isn't. Just keep pushing the flyers, and you've done great keeping the Facebook page active. The more people who see her face the better the chance of finding her." Matt sat down again with his fresh cup of coffee. "I know I might seem ungrateful for everything everyone is doing, but I'm not. I just need to do what I'm doing right now. Weeks of searching out there..." He waved his hand toward the window. "Has turned up nothing. I've got to try whatever else I can."

"No one is saying you're ungrateful. We're just worried."

"Don't be, okay? As long as there is hope that she is alive, I'm going to push on. I can't give up."

"That's all I need to hear. I just don't want to walk in one day and find you dead because you let yourself go. I'm not as worried as your sister is, but I'm concerned. Maybe answer your phone once in a while and let us know you're okay?"

"Yeah, I guess I could do that." He hated the distraction of his phone. He needed every bit of focus to deal with the people he was trying to work with on the dark web. One slip up and everything he'd worked for would be lost. "I'll try to do better."

"Have you talked to Jill's parents?" Jason asked.

He closed his eyes, remembering the conversation with his wife's parents. "Yeah, they called a few nights ago. Helen offered to come stay for a few weeks if I needed help, but honestly, she'd just be in the way. I promised them I'd be in touch if there was any news. They are putting up flyers in Florida and doing all they can, but being so far away, there isn't much more they can do."

"Has to be hard for them." Jason picked up his coffee cup and went into the kitchen, rinsing it out.

"It is, Faith is all they have left of Jill." Matt shook his head. "Anyway, anything else my sister sent you over to find out?"

Jason grinned. "No, she was just worried. I'll call her and let her know I talked to you and think you're holding up the best you can. Just try not to bring up that dark web stuff with her. I think it really freaked her out."

"It would freak any sane person out." Matt sighed. "Okay, get out of here so I can shower and decide what I'm going to do about work on Monday."

"You should go in."

"I probably will for a bit." He needed to keep some money coming in. Even if he had some saved, he couldn't get careless. "I'll be okay, I promise." Matt got up, going to where Jason still stood in the kitchen.

"Thanks for not letting me push you away, even though I try."

Jason gripped Matt's shoulder. "We've been through too much for me to walk away now. I'm always here if you need me."

"Thanks." Matt swallowed back emotions he didn't want to deal with. He really did have great friends and family. He was just so lost in his anger over Faith being taken that he took them all for granted. "I can never repay you for all you've done."

"You don't have to. You know I'd do anything for you and Faith. Now go grab a shower, eat something besides some instant noodle thing, and try not to let yourself be dragged down into the darkness of that website you're on. I'm here if it gets to be too much."

Matt nodded. "I'll try."

"That's all I ask." Jason gave his shoulder another gentle squeeze. "I'll call soon."

"And I might answer." Matt gave a half smile.

"You do that." Jason saluted as he walked out.

A few seconds later, Matt heard the front door open and shut. Alone again, he let out a long sigh. As much as he wanted to get back online and start searching for Faith again, he did need a shower. He'd keep his promise to Jason and try to do better, but until Faith was home, he couldn't be sure he could keep his promises to anyone. The only promise that mattered right now was the one he made to bring his daughter home.

CHAPTER FIVE

"I'm going to scare the poor guy." Xander stared out the passenger window as Carter drove them toward Matthew Springton's house. How the hell he was chosen to go with Carter to make contact was beyond him. With his thick, muscular body, covered in tattoos, he was hardly the face anyone would want to see when they opened their front door.

Carter, on the other hand, looked the part, dressed in nice slacks, his blond hair freshly cut, and his friendly personality could put anyone at ease. STK would have been better to send someone like Becca with Carter. The chances of him talking to them at all were slim. From what they'd been able to learn, Matthew had pretty much cut off everyone from his life. Once he saw two strangers at his door, he wouldn't bother opening it.

"You'll do fine. Bryon wouldn't have asked you to come if he didn't have a reason for it. It's not the first time he plans something out without us knowing why, only to have it all come together later and make perfect sense." Carter glanced over at him. "Put on your friendly face for a change."

Xander gave an over-exaggerated toothy smile. "This work?" He ran his hand over his long beard, gripping it tightly just under his chin. "Are you sure telling him about us is the right thing to do?"

"No, but I'm betting he's desperate enough to welcome anyone willing to help him, especially with the way he's been working the dark web. We aren't going to tell him who we are yet. We're just getting a feel for him and seeing if he might consider working with us on his daughter's case. You just sit back and look pretty. I'll do the talking."

Xander figured he was there more for muscle than for conversation. He wasn't the friendly kind of guy. Ask him to take down a person and force him to talk, he was the man, but make small talk and pleasantries and he would fuck everything up.

They'd met at STK headquarters, and after a bit more discussion, voted on whether to bring Matthew in and offer him a chance to work with the team. It wasn't an easy choice. They all had a lot to lose. They couldn't afford to place their trust in someone and have it backfire on them. It was only Carter and Bryon's confidence that the team needed this man that

Xander was able to put aside his hesitation and vote to give the guy a chance. The vote had ended up unanimous. At least if things went south, they were all to blame, not just a few of them.

After the vote, Bryon had told him that he would be going with Carter to talk to the guy. He'd hoped that he would have a job to do, but there wasn't anything active at the moment, at least with enough information to demand his skills, so Xander had no choice but to follow orders and join Carter for the short car ride across town.

It wasn't like Bryon was in charge. They all had a say in all decisions, but with Bryon being the oldest member, and the one who had the most knowledge about the dark world they were dealing with, everyone respected him, and seldom questioned his requests.

That still didn't mean Xander understood them. He tapped an unlit cigarette against the dashboard. "We could have at least taken my car, so I could smoke."

"I didn't want to smell that shit." Carter frowned. "You can smoke when we're done. It won't kill you to wait a few minutes."

"Says the non-smoker." Xander stuck the cigarette into his mouth, chewing on the filter.

"It's a nasty habit."

"There are worse."

"Not that smell as bad."

"I'll remind you of that the next time Dyson decides to make us his famous chili." Xander grinned.

"Ah, fuck. How can something that tastes so good cause someone to smell so bad?" Carter shook his head.

They all loved it when Dyson would cook for them, but whatever ingredients he used always gave the team gas. An hour after they ate, the small house smelled worse than the local landfill. Xander learned quickly to eat, then as fast as he could, make a quick exit and head back to his own home where the only gas he had to deal with was his own.

He smiled, thinking about the small group of friends that were more like family than his own. He sure trusted them more than he did his own family. STK was everything to him. Even before he'd become an official member, they'd been there for him. Going with him to his father's trial, supporting him on the days he didn't think he'd make it, and reminding him that the past wasn't who he was.

Even after being in the Army and thinking he'd put the past behind him, he had found himself falling apart at his father's trial. It was only Dyson's strong shoulder and firm words that had kept him going. They'd formed a bond over the weeks of the trial, one that to this day meant more to him than any friendship he'd ever had.

"What are you smiling about?"

"Was just thinking about the team." Xander glanced over at Carter. "Odd how a bunch of fuckups can come together and form a family like we have."

Carter laughed. "Don't let Bryon hear you call us family, or he'll have to stop having all his impure thoughts about Becca."

"Think he'll ever tell her?" Xander loved Becca like a sister, but he wasn't sure big, brooding Bryon was the right fit for her. Bryon saw things in black and white. The world was full of right and wrong with little in between. Becca, on the other hand, was as colorful as they came, enjoying life to the fullest and never letting the darkness of their job get her down. The two were as different as they could be, but everyone except Becca saw how Bryon looked at her.

"I don't know. I wish he would. He could stand to get laid every once in a while." Carter laughed.

"Speaking of..." Xander raised a brow. "Did I see some guy with painted on jeans dropping you off yesterday?"

"Paul, he runs the dairy farm outside of town. We met at the bar a few weeks ago. It's nothing serious, but he's hot as hell in bed." Carter grinned before glancing at Xander. "What about you? Anyone warming your bed?"

Xander laughed. "Right, like I ever bring them home." It was true. He never brought his partners home. He might go to their place, but his house was his escape. Very few people even knew where he lived. His bed was his, and he had no plans on sharing it with others. Sex was a need, plain and simple. He got what he needed, then said farewell. If it was good, he might hook up with the guy again, but he didn't do serious, and he sure as hell didn't do breakfast together the morning after.

"You know, someday someone's going to manage to break through that cold heart of yours." Carter smiled.

"They'd have to find my heart first." Xander chewed harder on the cigarette filter, wishing like hell that he could light it.

"It's the house with the blue truck." Carter slowed, stopping a house down from the one they were going to.

"Cameras?"

"This isn't a hit."

Xander sighed. It wasn't like he could turn off his mind. It was ingrained in him to have a full background on someone before going in. The fact that Carter had all the information this time, and he had none, didn't sit well with him. "Anything I need to know?"

"Nope, just that the guy is fucked up about his daughter. Can't get any worse than that, right?" Carter got out of the car.

"It can, but we won't tell him that." Right now, Faith was just missing. There was hope. Finding a body or seeing her sold on the black market would be much worse for Matthew.

"No, we let him hold on to hope for as long as we can. If he decides to work with us, Bryon, Trenton, and I will watch him closely. We won't let him get too deep just in case. We need to protect him while this plays out." Carter brushed something off his pant leg. "Ready?"

Xander gave a single nod, and let Carter lead the way to the front door. This Matthew guy was less likely to think he was going to be attacked if he saw Carter's pretty face before he had to face his. He still couldn't figure out why the hell Bryon thought it was a good idea to send him. He did the dirty work, not the make people comfortable, come work with us kind of shit.

Carter paused at the door, glancing at Xander. "We'll be lucky if he answers. From what Bryon said, he doesn't even answer for his sister often."

"If it's meant to be, he'll answer." Xander reached out and hit the doorbell.

"Impatient?" Carter laughed.

"If he's not going to answer, then I can get that smoke." Xander shrugged. "No point in wasting time."

"You really need to quit." Carter sighed.

"And you really need to mind your own—" He cut off what he was about to say as the latch inside clicked, then the door slowly opened.

"Can I help you?"

Xander took in the dark-haired man, with deep circles under his eyes, and pale skin as if he hadn't seen sunlight in months. His hair was curling

over his collar, looking as if he'd been running his fingers through it for hours.

"Hi, my name is Carter, and this is Xander. We were hoping to talk to you about a few things if you have a minute." Carter smiled.

"Listen, I'm not interested in buying anything, God isn't my closest friend right now, and I donate to my own charities, so I'm sorry I can't help you." The man went to shut the door.

"Wait, are you Matthew?" Carter pressed his hand to the door, keeping it from shutting.

"Yeah."

"We aren't selling anything. In fact, we're here to see if we can help you." Carter glanced at Xander.

"Help me how?" Matthew asked.

"We're aware of what happened to your daughter and we think we can help," Carter told him.

Matthew sighed. "The cops warned me there would be people showing up trying to scam me by making promises. Thanks, but no thanks." He again tried to shut the door.

Carter wedged his foot in the doorway.

Xander didn't have the patience to pussyfoot around. "We know about the dark web. We can help."

Matthew's face paled and he stepped back.

"Don't worry, we aren't here to hurt you. We know how well you've covered your tracks," Xander continued. "Believe me when we say we are on your side. We want to help find Faith."

Matthew shook his head. "How did you find me?"

Carter grinned. "You're one of the best hackers I've ever seen, but I'm better."

Xander sighed. "Can we please take this conversation inside? This isn't something I want Pauley Peeper to hear about." He gestured with his head to the little old lady peeking out her living room window at them.

Matthew shook his head. "No way. You're not coming in here." The fear in his eyes was intense, but the rest of him was standing strong and in control as if he'd fight if they tried to enter.

"Listen, Matthew. We are on your side. We want to help you learn how to deal with the dark web. You're deep enough now that one wrong move could get you killed. Let us help you. We've been doing this for years. My

team and I have been taking down these creeps for a long time. We can help you, even add to your cover if you let us." Carter held up his hands. "If you'd rather talk here, we can, but we have to be careful. What we have to tell you isn't stuff we want public either."

"Why should I trust you?" Matthew glanced at Xander.

"You shouldn't. It's a damn good thing you aren't just opening your door up to us. I wouldn't either. I mean, hell, would you look at him?" He gestured to Carter. "Would you trust a face like that?"

Carter groaned, but Matthew smiled.

"Seriously, Matthew, you shouldn't trust us, yet, but you should hear us out. If we wanted you dead, we wouldn't have shown up at your front door. Once you hear what our team can do, I think you'll consider working with us. We can't make any promises that you'll get your daughter back. I wish we could, but working together, we might find her, or we might help someone else get their child back." Xander shrugged. "The choice is yours. Tell us to fuck off and we're gone."

Matthew stared at the two of them for a long moment before finally opening the door. "If you're here to kill me, then let's get it over with. If not, then talk fast." He turned and walked away from the door, not even waiting for them.

Xander smiled at Carter as he stepped inside. "See, you've just got to be honest with them."

Carter mumbled something Xander couldn't catch as he followed him inside and shut the door.

They found Matthew in his living room, sitting in his computer chair, but the computer screen turned off.

"Have a seat if you want one." Matthew gestured to the couch and chair against the other wall.

"Thanks." Carter took a seat on the couch.

Xander sat down in the recliner, relaxing back with a sigh. "This is comfy. I need to get one like this." He reached down, pulling the lever on the side of the chair, causing the footstool to pop up.

Matthew watched him with an amused look. "If you're comfortable enough, why don't you tell me who the hell you are and what you want?"

Carter cleared his throat. "For now, we are going to keep who we are to ourselves, but I will tell you what we do. We have a team that works on taking down pedophiles. We take down the worst of the worst. We aren't

looking for the nineteen-year-old who is caught with his fifteen-year-old girlfriend. While we do frown on that, it's a case for the cops, not us." He gestured to the computer. "We have people, who like you, are deep into the dark web with fake identities, trying to take down the trafficking and sex rings we find. We focus mostly on children under the age of twelve, but we do get involved in the adult cases if we have enough information. We go in and do what the cops can't or have failed to do. We look for the creeps who have been given a chance already, served time, and been released. Once they have proven they aren't going to stop hurting kids, we jump in and either take them down before they can physically hurt a child, or we go in and rescue the child after taking the perpetrator down."

Matthew narrowed his eyes. "Take them down how?"

Xander smiled, wondering how Carter would answer this one.

"Well, we don't kill them, but we do go in and make sure they will never be able to rape another child again. We then leave them secured with files about all of their cases, both new and old, and let the cops deal with them once we've eliminated the possibility of them raping again." Carter ran his fingers through his hair.

Xander laughed. "Carter never was comfortable talking about that part."

Matthew paled. "If they can't rape anyone again, you...?"

Xander made a slicing gesture that had Matthew paling even more. "We take away their need, their weapon. We make sure they never find pleasure again."

Matthew stood, running down the hallway.

Xander jumped up, following quickly, making sure Matthew wasn't calling the cops, but he found him in the bathroom, the door wide open, with Matthew on his knees heaving into the toilet.

"Told you not to be so graphic. Most of us can't handle that shit," Carter said from a few feet away.

Xander flipped Carter off before stepping into the bathroom, finding a washcloth, and wetting it. He waited for Matthew to stop throwing up before handing him the cloth. "It's always a shock to hear about, but you'll get used to the idea."

"Thanks." Matthew flushed the toilet as he sat back on his feet. "You're serious, aren't you?" He glanced up at Xander as he wiped his face.

"Yep, sure am. I can't stand what these assholes do to kids." He stared right at Matthew, letting him see how serious he really was. "If they can cause the kids pain, I can cause them pain."

"Why not kill them?"

"Death is too good for them. They need to suffer a little. One day I'll tell you the side effects of eunuchism." He wiggled his eyebrows.

Matthew shook his head. "You're a sick fuck."

Not the least bit offended, he shrugged. "When you've seen what I have, you learn what sick really is. What I do is far from sick. It's deserved."

Matthew slowly stood, brushing past Xander to get to the sink. He stared at Xander in the mirror for a second, then turned on the water, cupping his hands and washing his face.

Xander had a towel ready for him when he straightened. He handed it to him, meeting his gaze. "I'm not going to lie to you about anything. If you are going to work with us, you need to know what we do. You need to be prepared for the things you'll see and hear. If you don't have the stomach for this—"

"I can't cut off someone's—"

"You won't have to," Carter interrupted from the doorway. "We are interested in your hacking skills. We leave the dicing and slicing to the others who can handle it."

"We'll give you a minute to collect yourself. When you're ready, come back out and we'll talk about everything." Xander gently brushed his fingers over Matthew's back as he turned and followed Carter down the hallway.

As they sat back down, Carter glanced over at him. "Did you have to be so blunt?"

"He needs to know what he's getting into. You can't sugarcoat the shit we do." Xander looked around the room. He wanted to go over and explore the computer, find out what exactly Matthew was up to, but the last thing they needed right now was to snoop and ruin what little trust they had earned, which wasn't much.

"Still, leave the bloody shit out of it. Let me talk." Carter glared at Xander.

"Right, because he was listening to you so well." He shrugged as he leaned back in the recliner again. "Fine, do it your way. Wake me when

you're done." He closed his eyes, relaxing as if he was sitting home, ready for a nap.

Carter snorted. "You're so fucked up!"

Opening one eye, Xander smiled. "Don't forget it."

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CHAPTER SIX

Matt braced his hands on the bathroom counter, trying to understand everything he'd been told. In less than fifteen minutes, his world had shifted, and he wasn't sure how to digest the information he was learning. He took a deep breath, before stepping out of the bathroom, but he paused in the hallway, trying to think what he would say to the two strange men in his living room.

When they'd first shown up and mentioned the dark web, he'd thought he was fucked. He was sure that they'd somehow tracked him and knew who he was. His life flashed before his eyes for a moment until they must have seen his fear and then tried to ease his mind.

He still didn't fully trust them. How could he? He was good at what he did, and his identity was well hidden. There shouldn't have been any way for anyone to figure out who he was or where he lived. If these two could do it, who else could?

The thought sent a chill down his back. He only wanted to get Faith home, not bring danger to the house where he wanted her to return to. No matter what, he needed more information from the two men. He couldn't even recall their names. He'd been too stunned finding them at his doorstep.

He was going to have to deal with whatever this was. There was no avoiding it now that they were in his house. At the very least, he needed to find out how they managed to find him, so he could protect himself better.

With a deep breath, he tried to calm his nerves as he walked back out to the living room. As he entered, the blond smiled at him, but the other guy, the one with the beard and ink, seemed to be sleeping in his chair. Matt raised a brow as he looked at him, then back at the blond.

"Matthew—"

"It's Matt." He walked over to his computer chair. "What were your names again?"

"I'm Carter, and Sleepy over there is Xander." Carter rolled his eyes at Xander.

Xander lifted a hand and waved, but never opened his eyes.

"And you hunt pedophiles?" Matt was trying to remember everything they said, with the exception of what Xander had told him, but unfortunately, that was the one thing he couldn't seem to forget, as much as he wanted to.

"We do, but only the worst ones. The ones who have already been through the courts, already served time, have gotten out and reoffended. There are a few cases where the offense has been so extreme that we've gone after first-timers, but those are the most horrendous cases you can imagine, infants and—"

Matt held up his hand. "I get it." He took another deep breath. "Okay, start at the beginning. How did you find me?"

"Like you, we have people searching through the dark web. One of us saw you, and like we do with all new faces, we did some background. We dig up what we can through normal channels, but when someone comes up blank like you did, with just a basic bit of information, but not much else, that's when it's handed over to me, and I dig a little deeper. As I said before, you're an amazing hacker, but I'm just a bit better." There was confidence and pride in Carter's voice. "I have to admit, you impressed me. I haven't seen someone as good as you in a long time, and I know some of the best."

The compliment shouldn't have made him smile, but it did. He was proud of his skills even if he'd never really used them for much until now. "Thanks."

"How'd you learn?"

"A friend and I used to play around, the more I learned, the more I wanted to learn. Most of it is self-taught, but there was a guy in college that helped me some. You'll forgive me if I don't give his name." Matt leaned back in the chair, trying to appear more comfortable around these two than he really was.

"No, I get it, I really do." Carter grinned. "Anyway, we started to see you posting, weaving your way into the community. You'd post just enough to earn their trust, but not enough to make us think you were a serious player. I dug as deep as I could go, finally finding your true identity and that led to the news reports about your daughter. It didn't take much to link it all together."

"But if you found me..." Matt shook his head. "I should have known this would backfire."

"Actually, it hasn't. I can help you hide even better. Fill those small holes that leave you vulnerable." Carter offered.

"And in return?"

"Nothing. I'll help you either way. No matter what you decide to do with the information and offer we are about to make you." Carter glanced over at Xander, rolled his eyes, then looked back at Matt. "Your hacking abilities are amazing. We'd like you to join our team. You're already getting deeper into the dark web, and we'd like to have you keep that identity and have us help take you deeper. You'd work with our team to find the men and women who have no intention of changing. The ones that have proven time and time again they are going to re-offend. We do our homework. When we go after someone, there is no doubt that they are guilty. We go in, do what needs to be done, then leave them for the police. We've done this for over ten years now."

"I don't know. I just want to find my daughter." Matt ran his fingers through his hair. "I never wanted to get into all this. I just want my baby home."

"We know that, and finding her is always your first priority. We understand that. We'll help look. We are praying she isn't on the dark web. I know other scenarios aren't much better, but we pray she isn't..." Carter shook his head. "We have resources to help, not just with the dark web, but other places. We've already reached out to see if there is any chatter about Faith through those connections, be it the local police, FBI, or just others like you and I who use our computer skills to better the world. But while you're sitting in front of that computer, searching through all the horror, help us maybe save a few others as well."

"You'd trust me?" Matt couldn't imagine they'd let a stranger into their circle so easily.

"Not fully, yet. We have only eight members right now. We haven't brought someone new in for several years. We don't trust easily, and we are very careful about who we let join us. You're the first we've come across in quite a while who has the skills and reason to help us. As of right now, we can walk out that door and you'd have no clue who we are or how to find us. If you decided to do this, to join with us, then we'd slowly integrate you with the team." Carter shrugged. "We can use your skills, but the choice is yours. Either way, we are already trying to help you find Faith and that won't change."

"And if I join and decide it's not for me?"

"Then you can leave. We'd ask you to keep everything you've learned a secret. Something you would take to the grave with you. There are too many children at risk for us to have to deal with someone leaking our information or even going public with it. As of now, the police are aware of what our team does, but they have no clue who we are. It's not without danger. As much as we like to think the police and justice system might secretly support what we do, there are laws, and we are accountable to them just like anyone else. Hacking is illegal, what Xander and some of the others do is mutilation and torture. All of us could go down at any time, but we are willing to take that risk to save the kids. It's all that matters to us," Carter explained. "You don't have to answer now. Take some time and think about it. One of us will be in contact."

"You're serious about this?"

"Very."

"Is this something I do on the side, or is it like a job?"

"It can work either way. Several of the team hold full-time jobs along with helping us, but there is a wage that goes along with it. I promise it's much more than you make at your current job." Carter smiled at him.

"How much more?" Matt wasn't going to quit work for something he didn't fully know the details on.

"Let's just say you'll make more in a year with us than you will in five with your current employer." Xander suddenly sat up, giving his two cents.

"Thought you were sleeping," Carter teased.

"I was trying but you wouldn't stop talking." Xander stretched his arms over his head. "Damn comfortable recliner you have. I need to get one like it for my place."

Matt shook his head, confused by how casual Xander seemed to take everything. If he was the one who actually went after people, he had to have a more serious side than he'd shown so far. "That's a lot of money."

"It's a risky business." Xander smiled at him.

"And that is the reason you need to think all this over. Once you decide, then we can let you know more details, set you up somewhere safe to work from. Let your home be a safe place again."

"I can't work from home?" Matt wasn't sure he wanted to do this anywhere else.

"It's not recommended. We have a house we work from. It's secure, and you'll have me and two others working with you most days. Xander and the others come and go as needed. Staying here puts you in danger if you're compromised. Your home should be your safe place. The one place you don't have to be watching over your shoulder all the time." Carter stood.

"And if we find Faith?"

"She's our first priority. We drop everything else and we go get her," Xander promised.

"I need to think." Matt also stood, closing the distance between them before offering his hand first to Carter, then Xander. "Thank you."

"No, thank you. I'm sorry we're meeting under the conditions we are, but I'm glad we've met. If you choose to join us, your skills will really bring us a lot of help. Sadly, there's more work than most of us can handle."

Matt glanced at Xander. "Even for you?"

"Especially for me." Xander's steel blue eyes met his. "I hope you join us." He tapped Carter on the back. "Can I have that smoke now?"

"Go, I'll meet you outside." Carter rolled his eyes as he tossed the car keys at Xander. "Don't smoke in the car."

"Yes, Boss." Xander flipped him off again, but smiled to soften it as he nodded to Matt before heading out the door.

"Are the rest of the group like him?" Matt asked.

"Ha, no, Xander is one of a kind, but so are all the others. We're a very mixed group of people, but we are family and we take care of each other like family. If you join us, you won't ever want for anything. We take care of our own." Carter's expression softened. "I'm really sorry about your daughter. I can't even imagine what you must be going through. Even if you don't work with us, if you need anything, just someone to talk to or yell at, call me." He pulled a business card from his pocket. "You can also call if you make a decision before we get back with you."

"Thanks." Matt took the card, rubbing his thumb over the engraved lettering. "Thank you for everything."

"Good luck, Matt." Carter turned and started to walk out.

Matt cleared his throat. "Hey, Carter?"

The tall man turned around. "Yeah?"

"Am I still safe here? I mean, you found me." He needed to know he wasn't going to have anyone else showing up at his door.

"As far as I know you are. I wouldn't worry. Few are as good as I am, and most of them work for our side. If anything seems off or you don't feel safe, call and we'll be here right away."

"Thanks." Matt didn't take much comfort in that. If one person found him, another could.

"No problem. Talk to you soon." Carter headed out the door.

Matt didn't follow him. He heard the door click closed as he sat back down, trying to sort through everything he'd learned. There was a part of him that had wanted to agree to everything right off, but there was another part, the part that needed to get Faith home, that worried getting involved with all of this would make his search for his daughter harder.

Unsure what to do, Matt set the business card on the desk to deal with later. Right now, he had a daughter to search for and bring home.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Wake your ass up!"

The sound of Dyson's voice calling for him was the last thing Xander wanted to wake up to. He rolled out of bed, pulling his sweatpants on as he stumbled to the front door. He flipped the lock open and didn't even bother to open the door before turning back toward the kitchen. "What the fuck do you want?"

"Nothing. Figured I'd just come over, wake your ass up for the hell of it, and see how pissed I can get you," Dyson said as he let himself in.

"Only you would have the balls to piss me off." Xander fumbled with the coffee maker, trying to get his morning caffeine fix.

"Here." Dyson set a cup of coffee on the counter. "I got you food too." He tossed the bag at Xander's chest.

"Fuck, I love you." Xander dropped the bag on the counter and reached for the coffee, pausing just long enough to light a cigarette from the pack on the counter.

"Yeah, you keep saying that, but I haven't seen a ring yet." Dyson jumped up, sitting on the kitchen counter as he took a sip of his own coffee.

"I won't buy the cow without testing the milk first, and you won't give it up." Xander hissed as he took a drink of coffee, burning his tongue in the process.

"Do you think I'm crazy? I know what you do for a living. I'm not letting you near my cock or balls," Dyson teased.

"Whatever." Xander rolled his eyes as he dug into the bag and pulled out two sausage biscuits. "You're just afraid you'd love it." He glanced up at his best friend and grinned. "Why are you here anyway? It's my day off."

"It was, but I need your help with a job tonight." Dyson met Xander's surprised stare.

It was rare that they had to team up to take down a perp. The only time it happened was when there was more than one perpetrator on site or a risk of someone else showing up. "What ya got?"

"It's the Sanders case," Dyson told him.

"Ah..." Xander nodded, recognizing the name. The Sanders were a married couple. The husband and wife team had recently kidnapped three young boys, holding them captive in their home as they groomed them, so they could sell them to others. All three boys were between twelve and fourteen and had been taken from the same mall on the same day. Security cameras had shown each boy walking with the woman to a black van at separate times. They hadn't been in distress, so she had to have lured them there one way or another. Once at the van, it had only taken seconds for her husband to grab them and pull them in before anyone noticed.

That had been over two weeks ago. STK had been searching hard, trying to find any information, but it wasn't until one of the boys showed up in a video, that Carter and Bryon had been able to figure out who had them and where they lived. Once they had the information, Bryon had given the go to rescue the kids as soon as possible.

"I'm going to need a second set of hands. I can't risk the kids getting hurt if one of them should get away from me and get to them first." Dyson set his cup on the counter beside him. "I know you hate dealing with team jobs, but Kasey is doing a job uptown tonight already."

"I'm in. You know I've got your back." Xander wouldn't let Dyson go into a situation like this alone. Not only did it put the kids at risk, it put Dyson in danger too. It wasn't like he had plans, and even if he did, saving the kids came first. "You've got the information?" He was sure that Dyson had stalked the house, finding out the couple's habits and the layout of the home before planning to move in.

"I've got the file in my car. It shouldn't be hard. The kids are kept in a locked room in the basement. The couple spends most of their time in a shared office on the main floor. If we do it right, we should be in the office before they realize we're there." Xander bit into his biscuit, thankful Dyson knew him well enough to know his favorite foods.

"I'll grab the file in a few. I just wanted to make sure you didn't have plans."

"Like my social calendar is so full," Xander spoke with his mouth full. "What time?"

"Figured any time after eleven would be safe. The house sits back from others. No close neighbors. There are two cameras outside, but Carter is going to have them looped before we get there. No one will see us coming." Dyson shook his head. "I'm looking forward to this one. The stuff Bryon's

found on them is worse than usual. Taking them out is going to be a pleasure."

Xander took another gulp of coffee before taking the last bite of his breakfast. "Grab the file and we'll go over everything. I need to get a shower first." He tossed the bag in the trash. "Thanks for breakfast."

"I know better than to show up here before noon without coming with food." Dyson grinned. "Go shower, I'll make myself at home."

Xander grunted as he made his way back to his bedroom. Dyson was probably the only person who he'd leave unattended in his home. It wasn't that he had anything to hide, but he just didn't like people in his shit. He enjoyed his privacy, and his house was the one place he could find that.

As he stepped into the shower, he thought about the job they had to do tonight. It would be good to see this couple taken down. There was evidence of them having done this several times. How they never hit Bryon's radar was surprising. Hopefully, they could find evidence of where, or who, the other missing boys were, so they could maybe bring them home in time too.

He'd planned on spending the day working on the fire pit he was building in his backyard, but a day with Dyson sounded good, even if it was for work. He missed hanging out with him. It wasn't like they never saw each other, but their days of going out every night, hitting the clubs, and having fun had died off over the last year.

There really wasn't a reason. Nothing had changed. Maybe it was because they were getting older. Neither enjoyed the clubs anymore. Work also took a lot out of them. There were some jobs that were worse than others, and those could take a couple of days to get over. As good as he was at dealing with his emotions, you could only see so much before it got to you.

Dyson was a good friend. They'd met in the Army, both looking for a way to escape their abusive pasts. They'd been instant friends. When Xander left the service, Dyson followed about a year later, coming to stay with Xander for a while until he could get on his feet. It was then that Xander had managed to find his father.

He turned off the shower, not wanting to remember. There were some memories best left in the past, and anything to do with his father were among them. He quickly dried off before pulling on another pair of sweats

and a t-shirt. If they were just going to be hanging out around the house, he'd go for comfort.

Dyson was sitting in the living room, the remote in his hand as he skimmed through what was on TV. "You know, you really need to let me help you upgrade this system."

Xander rolled his eyes. "Because I watch so much TV."

"Maybe you would if your system was better." Dyson grinned.

"Maybe I would if there was something decent to watch." Xander sat down, reaching for the file that Dyson had set on the coffee table.

"So, what did you think of the guy Bryon wants to bring in?" Dyson asked as he set the remote down, evidently happy with whatever show he'd found.

"He's nervous, but that could be nothing more than having us show up at his door, aware of what he was up to. He was freaked out at first."

"You have that effect on people."

"Right? What the hell was Bryon thinking of sending me with Carter? Anyway, he's obviously stressed. He wasn't as shocked to hear what we did as I thought he would be, well, other than the vomiting."

"He vomited?"

"Only when I explained what I do to the perps." Xander shrugged.

"Please tell me you didn't go into graphic detail." Dyson sighed. "You know that shit freaks people out."

"He needed to know." Xander grinned. "He seems like a good enough guy. Definitely a computer geek. He'll fit in well with the tech guys. As expected, finding his daughter is his main focus, but I saw something flicker in his eyes when we mentioned helping bring other kids home. I think he'll join us. Whether he'll stick around or not is another thing. Right now, he's still fighting for his daughter, but you know as well as I do, the more time goes by, the more he'll start to lose hope."

"Maybe this will give him something to hold on to. I mean, we've found kids several years after they were taken." Dyson glanced over at Xander. "Then again, there is no guarantee his daughter was taken by one of these groups. It could have been anyone. She might be living in France now just because someone wanted a daughter."

It was true. There were so many scenarios, and it could be any one of them. If Matt joined the team, he was going to be a basket case for the first while. There was no promise this would get his daughter back. Truth was,

yes, the team wanted to help him find Faith, but even more, they wanted his skills, so they could help so many more children. "Honestly, I think he'll end up joining. If anything keeps him from it, it will be that if one of us goes down, the whole team could go down. It's not just you, Kasey, and me. We might do the dirty work, but it's all approved by the team. We might be the ones with blood on our hands so to speak, but it's the team as a whole who pays the price."

"Which is why I'm so nervous about bringing someone new on." Dyson shifted, bringing his feet up under him on the couch.

"I know, but they took the same chance bringing us in. They didn't know how we'd react when they invited us in."

"Dude, I think they had a good idea. We strung your father up and would have killed him if STK hadn't stopped us."

Xander stared at the folder on his lap, but his mind was back to that night so many years ago when Xander had learned of his father's location. After years of abuse, the bastard had skipped town, leaving Xander and the cops with no leads. Xander was only one in a long line of children his father had abused, but Xander, being his son, figured he was the one with the most right to seek vengeance on him.

He'd talked Dyson into helping, and the two of them had shown up at his father's house once they found out the information. They'd beat the man to where he was barely conscious, then had prepared to kill him by cutting off parts of his body one at a time. It was only the sudden appearance of Bryon and Kasey at the house that stopped them.

Bryon had talked Xander down, promising his father would pay for what he did, but reminding him that death was the easy way out. It was better to let his father spend the rest of his life in prison. Bryon swore Xander wouldn't want his father's death on his hands, but still, to this day, Xander was sure he wouldn't have minded.

Dyson nudged his leg. "Stop thinking about it."

Xander sighed. "I know, I just wish..."

"STK took care of things. He's spending his life in prison. He won't hurt another kid." Dyson reached for the file. "Okay, let's go over this." He flipped to the first page, pulling out photos of the couple. "Let this motivate you." He flipped the photos of the young boys that had been posted on the dark web.

Xander took one look at the photographs and all thoughts of his father faded. Tonight, he would stop these monsters. This was what was important. His past was just that, the past, but this was these kid's reality. This was the present, and tonight he would hopefully help the boys take the first step toward putting it in their past.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

"I wish all locations were this secluded." Xander stepped out of the car about five hundred feet down the small dirt road that led to the perpetrator's house.

"Me too." Dyson slipped his gloves on.

They'd just gotten confirmation that the sting was a go, and Xander was restless about getting it done. Hopefully, within an hour or so, the perps would be in police custody at the hospital, and three young boys would be reunited with their families. That was what pushed Xander to confidently follow Dyson to the house.

"You want the lock, or shall I?"

"You, of course." Xander wasn't about to try his lock picking skills when he had Dyson with him. The guy could break into any lock put in front of him. What took Xander five minutes to get open, took Dyson five seconds. On a case like this, every minute mattered.

They went to the back door that opened into the garage and made sure their masks were in place. As expected, Dyson had the door unlocked and them in the garage in seconds. They glanced at each other, giving a nod, and quietly moved on, pushing the door that led from the garage to the house open.

Xander held his breath as Dyson made sure they were in the clear before they both slipped into the house. The lights were on, allowing them to see as he followed Dyson through the rooms, toward a small office the man and woman worked in.

The door was open, and they stood there for a moment, both watching as the man and women both worked from separate computers. The man seemed to be chatting with someone, but the woman was uploading pictures of her in different sexual acts with the young boys she now held hostage.

That was all Xander needed to see. With a nod to Dyson, they both burst into the room, Xander grabbing the female as Dyson took the male. The second they had hold of them, each slid the needle of the syringe into their necks before sharing a smile with each other across the room.

"You've been a very bad boy and girl, haven't you?" Dyson pulled the syringe from the man's neck before dumping him onto the floor with a loud thud.

The man stared up at him as the drugs took hold.

The woman in Xander's arms had gone limp, but he kept hold of her anyway. "You like hurting little boys?" He hissed against her ear. "Well, I like hurting those who hurt children. It looks like karma has come back to bite you." He grinned at her as he finally let her body drop to the floor.

Dyson set the file on the desk, right beside the female's computer. "You don't mind a bit of pain, do you?" He looked between the two on the floor before glancing at Xander. "Why don't you handle her, I'll take care of him."

"I was hoping you'd let me have the female tonight." Xander nudged the woman with the toe of his boot. "I'll make you feel things you never imagined possible." He grinned.

Tears rolled down the woman's cheek, and she struggled to breathe through the snot forming in her nose.

"Scared?" Dyson knelt beside the man. "Maybe as scared as those three boys you have held downstairs?"

The man jerked, but that was all the movement he could make as the drugs took effect.

"Don't worry, it will only hurt for a minute." Xander narrowed his eyes at the woman. "Isn't that what you told the boys in that video you made?"

Her eyes twitched, but it was the only sign she understood what he was saying.

"Time to get naked." Dyson pulled a pair of scissors from his pocket, taking a moment to cut all the clothes off the man before tossing the scissors to Xander.

Purposely missing, Xander watched as the cold steel scissors fell hard against the woman's shoulder. It was nothing more than a heavy thud, but it was enough to add to the fear she was already experiencing.

As Xander took the scissors and started to cut away her clothing, he stared into her eyes. "What makes a monster like you? What is wrong in your head to make you like young children? Do you know how disgusting you are?"

The woman shivered as he pulled the clothes from her body. Once she was naked, he glanced over at Dyson. "Hey, you okay if I let her watch you work? I think she might enjoy it. After all, she likes seeing boys in pain."

Xander lifted the woman up by her hair and leaned her against the desk so she had a full view of what Dyson was doing to her husband.

"I don't mind at all." Dyson started to pull tools out of his jacket.

A small whimper escaped the man.

"Don't worry, it only hurts for a second."

"Don't lie to the man. I used to hate it when my doctor would say that to me when giving me a shot. Those things hurt for hours." Dyson tied the string around the man's cock, then around his balls. "You sure you don't want to do this? You're better than I am," Dyson lied as he glanced at Xander.

"Oh, no, you need the practice. The chance of you messing it up again is unlikely." Xander loved being able to mess with the perp's head. "I'll get my turn in a minute." He brushed the back of his gloved fingers down the woman's cheek as her eyes went back and forth as if she didn't know if she should watch what was being done to her husband or keep her eyes on him.

"At least yours isn't as messy." Dyson made the cut, causing blood to spurt.

The woman's tears fell faster as her husband trembled on the floor, sweat dripping down his face.

"See how easy that was?" Xander smiled. "You didn't even need to saw through it this time."

The woman struggled to breathe.

"What? I thought you liked seeing males tortured, or is that only when they are too young to protect themselves?" Xander pushed her, causing her to crumple in a heap on the ground. "Let's get you tied up, shall we?" He kicked her legs apart, enjoying the fear in her eyes.

"Wait, I want to make sure he can see what happens to her." With the tube already in place, Dyson held up the blow torch so the man could see it, he then heated the knife and cauterized the wounds.

"I'm not sure he's with it enough to even care." Xander watched the man looking as if he was fading in and out of consciousness.

"Some guys just don't have the balls for..." Dyson frowned at the man. "Oops, guess that saying won't work for you anymore." He finished off cauterizing before setting his tools aside. He then grabbed the man by the arms and pulled him, so he was propped up against the other desk. "There, now you'll get a good view."

The woman stared up at Xander with her eyes filled with fear.

Xander glared at her. "You ignored the fear in your victim's eyes the same way I'm ignoring it in yours." He pulled his own tool out the front hoodie pocket.

"Oh, I didn't know they made those that size." Dyson shook his head.

Xander held up the two-inch curling iron. "Twice the size of your husband, isn't it?" He asked her, then shook his head. "Well, maybe we should just say, much more than your husband considering everything now." Xander gestured to her husband's cock and balls on the floor.

"Shoot, I forgot lube." Dyson sighed. "I always forget something."

"That's okay, we'll make it fit. I'm sure the pain won't be any worse than what her victims went through." Xander placed the curling iron against the woman's vagina, and without a care for how much it would hurt, he forced it inside her.

Unable to move, the woman couldn't fight him. Only the constant stream of tears gave away her discomfort.

"Well, that looks like we've taken care of everything." Dyson started putting everything they'd brought into a bag. "What should we do with these?" He toed the bloody cock with his boot.

Xander pulled out zip ties, securing each of the woman's hands to the desk before handing two ties to Dyson. "Toss it. It won't be any good anymore. It's trash."

Dyson picked the cock and balls off the floor and tossed them into the trash can under the desk before tying the man's arms to the desk, so he couldn't move once the drugs wore off. "Got everything?" He glanced back at Xander.

"Sure do." Xander glanced around the room, making sure there was nothing left that could lead anyone to them. "Good to go." He nodded to Dyson.

They made their way to the office door when Xander stopped. "Fuck, I almost forgot." He grinned, sure she'd been thinking she got off easy. He hurried back to the woman, reaching down, he took the plug to the curling iron and held it up for Dyson to see. "I forgot to plug it in." Ignoring the tear-stained face staring up at him, he plugged the cord in so it would slowly heat.

"Tell your friends we'll be coming for them too," Dyson said as they walked out the door.

Once they had shut the couple in the room, Xander quickly pulled a can of spray paint from his pocket. He followed Dyson down the hallway, painting arrows along the wall every five feet to lead the police where they would need to go.

They continued down the stairs, going to the room that surveillance had decided held the boys. It was the hardest thing Xander ever had to do by not rescuing the kids himself, but this was for the best. The arrows he painted would hopefully lead the police to the kids before they found the couple. He spray painted a heart on the door where the kids were held, thankful that Carter somehow always managed to know where they were being kept.

With a final glance at Dyson, they quickly left the scene.

It wasn't until they were in the car and Dyson was pulling away that Xander called the police on a burner phone. "There are three kids being held hostage at 9432 Bunnion Lane." He hung up. Then pulling his own phone out of the glovebox, he quickly sent a message to the team.

Job completed. STK

Silence filled the car as Dyson drove them to the lake to dispose of everything. As much as they joked to torment the perpetrators more, what they did wasn't easy, and it wasn't fun. They all dealt with it their own way, but they all had to deal with it. It wasn't until they were away from the neighborhood that one of them spoke.

"My house and a beer?" Xander asked.

Dyson nodded as he pulled back onto the road. "Maybe two."

CHAPTER NINE

Matt unlocked his car and climbed inside, tired, and exhausted after his first few days back at work. He hated every minute of it. The work was the same, the job easy, but what he hated was that every five minutes, someone was coming in and telling him how sorry they were about Faith.

Each time he wanted to scream at them to leave him alone, but they were just trying to console him and be kind. He couldn't take his anger and frustration out on them. Still, it got to be so bad that he could hardly do the job he was paid to do. He was more of a distraction at work than a help.

He started the car, cranking the air conditioner, hoping to cool it down after it had sat in the sun all day. He stared up at the large office building he'd worked in for more years than he could remember. It had been a good job. It supported his family when he'd first gotten married, then again when he had Faith, but now, without a reason to go in, without a reason to need that paycheck, he found he just was not motivated to do it anymore.

Life was different now. All he could think about, care about, was getting Faith back. It wasn't fair that he wasted his boss's time coming into work every day just to get nothing accomplished. He sighed as he pulled the business card Carter had given him from his pocket. He'd stared at it more times than he wanted to admit, going over everything that they'd said to him. Some of the things they'd discussed were hard to swallow, and he was fully aware that what this team did wasn't legal, but the more he thought about it, the more he understood why they did what they did.

One thing he'd learned being on the dark web was that most of the people who abused children had a record. They were on the sex offenders list already, and they were still active. They served their time either on probation, in jail, or a longer term in prison, but all of them went right back to doing what they wanted. There were some offenders who didn't care what the police or a judge said, they weren't going to stop. If what Carter and Xander did helped to stop them, then he could get behind them, maybe even join them.

He ran his finger over Carter's name, wondering what the rest of the team was like. Carter and Xander couldn't be more opposite. While he was

comfortable with Carter's appearance and ease, it had been Xander's blunt but honest comments that were actually having him consider joining. He liked that they were open about what they did. They didn't have to tell anyone what they did with the pedophiles they caught. It was enough to know they were dealt with, but from the way Xander talked, the team was fully aware of everything the others did. That was refreshing.

He wasn't sure how to take Xander. At first glimpse, he looked as if he belonged riding with some motorcycle gang, but then it had been Xander who took the time to get him a cloth, it was Xander who was honest and open with him while Carter had been picking and choosing his words. He liked how laid back Xander was.

He'd been intrigued by the large, tattooed man. And more than once over the last few days, it was visions of Xander relaxing in his recliner that had brought a smile to his face when nothing else could. He liked that Xander made himself comfortable, that he didn't play by the rules of what was proper or expected. He was his own person, and Matt was jealous of that in many ways. For too many years he'd been what everyone else wanted him to be, not what he wanted.

Refusing to think about it anymore, Matt grabbed his cell phone and punched in Carter's number. He was fooling himself if he thought he could handle coming back to work another day. He'd go in first thing in the morning and tell them he was sorry, but with everything else going on it was best he quit. His heart wasn't in it, and neither was his mind.

"Hello?" Carter's voice came over the phone.

"Hey, Carter, it's Matt, Matt Springton. I hope I'm not bothering you." His palms were suddenly sweaty despite the air conditioning cooling the car.

"Hey, I was hoping we'd hear from you. How are you holding up?" Carter sounded genuinely happy to hear from him.

"As good as can be expected." He took a deep breath, again looking at the building he'd worked in for so long. "Listen, I've thought about your offer, and I think I'd be interested."

"That's fantastic. I'm excited to have you with us. Finally, someone who will understand my geek talk." Carter laughed. "We actually have a team meeting tonight. We hold them every couple of days. Would you be able to join us?"

"Sure, tell me where and when and I can be there."

"Actually, we never give the address out over a non-secure phone, so would you mind if I sent Xander to pick you up? Once you've been here, you won't forget how to get here, but until we get you a secure phone, we like to take all the precautions we can."

Matt hesitated. Did he trust these guys enough to let them take him to an unknown location? He pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to think.

"I know you might not be comfortable, but I will tell you it's a home in a safe neighborhood. If you aren't comfortable when you get here, we'll take you home anytime. We just can't risk the team's safety by giving out information," Carter told him.

"You know what? If I trust you enough to say I'll work for you, I should trust you enough to drive me somewhere. I'm just leaving my other job and it will take me about a half-an-hour to get home."

"No problem. I'll have Xander pick you up at about six-thirty, so that will give you some time. Once you're here, I'll introduce you to the rest of the team and show you our computer system. I'm looking forward to working with you."

"Me too. I have to admit, I'm eager to see what I can learn from you." Matt was always excited to learn new computer skills.

Carter laughed. "I'm happy to teach you all I know, but from what I've seen, you're going to do fine on your own."

"Thanks." Matt smiled, then thought about how rare it was to smile anymore, but since meeting Carter and Xander, he found himself doing it more often, especially when he thought about Xander and his outlandish comments and attitude.

"Anyway, watch for Xander around six-thirty and plan on being gone an hour or two, then one of us will take you home. Once you know where we are, you can drop by anytime."

"I'll see you then." Matt hung up his phone, his stomach turning nervously, but he wasn't sure how much of it was fear and how much was excitement.

He set his phone down, giving his work one last glance, not as upset about quitting as he thought he would be. He loved working in IT, but the job had always been too easy for him. It was something he did for the paycheck, not something he did to challenge his mind. He hoped working with Carter's team, he would be able to push himself, actually have to think once in a while.

As he pulled out on the road, he thought about Faith. Usually, he would be headed home to see her smiling face, the older neighbor who watched her at their house after school would have dinner ready, then the three of them would sit down and eat together. Once dinner was done, and the babysitter was gone, he'd shower before helping Faith with any homework. He loved that time with her, the two of them sitting together, laughing, and talking, instead of working on the math problems she'd bring home. God, he missed her.

He tried not to wonder where she was or what might be happening to her. He refused to believe she might be dead, even though statistics said she probably was. He couldn't think that. Until there was proof, he would think of her alive, because as long as she was alive, there was a chance she'd come back home.

Traffic was light, and he pulled into his driveway earlier than he expected. Taking advantage of the extra time, he quickly jumped in the shower, glad to rid himself of the suit and change into a pair of comfortable jeans and a t-shirt.

As he headed back to the living room, he paused for a moment at Faith's bedroom, opening the door and looking inside. He hadn't touched anything in there, hoping she'd come home and find it just as she left it.

There were some nights he would go in and lay on her bed, remembering every bedtime story he'd told her, or even back to when Jill would fall asleep beside Faith and he'd go in and quietly cover the two of them up before heading to bed alone. Fuck he missed his family. He didn't think things could get harder than they were when Jill died, but losing Faith was harder than anything he could imagine. He wanted to go door to door, tearing apart every house to find her. He wanted to take out ads in every city, call every hospital. His mind never stopped thinking of things he wanted to do, but then the truth hit him, there was nothing he could do but wait.

He closed Faith's door. He didn't need to get himself in that mood before his meeting tonight. He needed a clear head, and allowing himself to get lost in memories wasn't going to help anything.

He grabbed a bottle of water out of the fridge and sat down at the kitchen table, again thinking over his conversations with Xander and Carter. From what it sounded like, they did pretty much the same thing he'd been doing online at home, searching the dark web, trying to weave their way

into circles and find out what kids were on there. It didn't give him a lot of hope of finding Faith if their team was deeper involved in the sex trafficking circles than he was, and they had yet to see any signs of her. He was driving himself insane trying to figure out new ways to search, new leads to look into, but there was nothing.

The sound of the doorbell was a relief, and he quickly made his way to the door, taking a second to look out the peephole before opening the door for Xander.

"You called for a cab?" Xander smiled.

"Actually, no, it was insisted that I take one." Matt grinned back. "Thanks for picking me up."

"No problem. You're on my way. Glad to hear you decided to join us." Xander ran his hand down his beard, fisting it for a moment before releasing it. "I think you'll fit in well."

"Just as long as I don't have to deal with anything bloody."

"Nope, other than Dyson's steaks, which he always under cooks." Xander winked. "You ready to go?"

"Yep." Matt patted his back pocket to make sure he had his wallet, grabbed his keys before setting the alarm, then walked out and locked the door. He followed Xander down the steps to a new model Mustang. "Nice car."

"Thanks. It's not the one I use for work, but I enjoy it when I can." Xander unlocked the car.

"You have a work car?" Matt raised a brow as he got in.

Once Xander was seated beside him, he nodded. "This one would draw attention. I don't want anyone noticing me when I go out. I have a little Toyota Camry I use when I go out on jobs."

"I'll be honest, I sort of expected a Harley." Matt grinned.

"I have one of those too. It's good for those weekend road trips."

"You take a lot of those?"

"Nope, too much work, but when I can I sneak away."

"How often do you have a job to do?" Matt had figured they would get maybe one person every month or so.

"A couple a week usually. It depends on how far we want to travel. We've pretty much cleaned up the local population, but every now and then a new perp pops up or moves into the area. Most of the time we have to head out of town to handle things."

"You do this nationwide?"

"Mostly we stick to the West Coast, but for the right case, we'll go anywhere. Even had a few cases up in Canada, but I leave most of those to the other guys. I hate flying," Xander admitted as he pulled out on the road.

Matt raised a brow.

"Had a bad experience when I was little. There was a lot of turbulence. Made me scared of planes." Xander didn't seem to have any issues admitting his weakness. "Hate spiders too. Fucking creepy things."

Matt laughed, the first real laugh he could recall in a long time. There was just something about this big, strong man who made a living cutting off people's balls being scared of spiders that was funny.

"You laugh, but those fuckers stalk you. I swear they follow me from room to room when one gets into my house. I'll never understand the need for spiders in the whole circle of life thing. Some creatures the world would be better off without." Xander glanced over at Matt. "So, what made you decide to join us?"

"Honestly, I just couldn't see myself going back to my other job for another day. I've been bored for years, but now, since Faith went missing, and everyone feels the need to try and cheer me up and be all sympathetic, I just couldn't handle it. This week has been hell. I walked out today and called Carter. I was just done with it all." Matt made sure he was paying attention to where they were going.

Xander lit a cigarette, lowering his window. "Does it bother you if I smoke?"

Thinking he probably should have asked before he lit it, Matt smiled. "No, my parents were both smokers."

"Were?"

"Is this where I tell you they both died of lung cancer?" Matt glanced over at him with a grin.

"Hey, something's got to kill me. I might as well enjoy it while it happens."

"Actually, my dad was killed in a car accident about ten years ago, right before Faith was born. And my mom, she's still alive, just no longer a smoker." Matt shrugged. "I actually smoked for a few years, but when I started dating my wife, she put a stop to it quick."

"Spouses tend to do that." Xander didn't sound happy about it.

"You married?"

"Hell no. Like you said, people tend to try and change us. Not something I'm looking for."

"Girlfriend at least?"

Xander laughed. "More like a few guys I hook up with from time to time."

"Ah, okay, so no girlfriends, and no serious boyfriends. Got it."

"Oddly, no one on the team is married. I'm not sure a family man could deal with the hours we put in or with what we do. I guess it would be hard wondering if your spouse was going to end up in prison for the next fifty years because we get caught somehow." Xander shrugged. "I never thought about it before."

"That's one of the things I'm kind of worried about. When Faith comes back home, I might not be able to keep working with you guys." Matt would never put Faith in danger of losing her father because he was breaking the law, at least not in the way he was going to be now. When he got her back, he wasn't leaving her side.

"We'd all understand that. It won't be an issue as long as you keep our secrets."

"And if I didn't?"

Xander glanced over at him. "You waiting for me to say I'd show up at your house and cut off your balls? Not going to happen. We'd just have to relocate. The teams had to do it in the past, but that was long before I joined them. If you leave, you are free to go on living your life. If you feel the sudden urge to try and take the team down, you will become an enemy, but we aren't the type of people to come after you."

Matt wasn't sure he believed that, but it didn't matter. As long as the team was honestly saving children, he would never do anything to hurt them. "I support what you guys do completely. I'd never tell a soul about it."

"Somehow Bryon and Carter knew that, or you wouldn't have been invited in." Xander pulled into the parking lot of a Mexican food place. "Hope you like Mexican. I have orders to get us all dinner and bring it back to the house. Bryon's paying, so get what you want." Xander grabbed a piece of paper from between the seats. "It's like a fucking grocery list of take-out." He stepped out of the car.

Matt followed, surprised by the sudden detour. He wasn't very hungry, but that wasn't uncommon. He hardly ate anymore.

"I swear Becca could have stopped here after she got off work. It's only five minutes from the courthouse." Xander held the door open for Matt.

He stepped inside, looking around the small restaurant. "Who is Becca?"

"You'll meet her tonight. She works at the courthouse, keeps us up to date on cases and makes sure we are aware of things going on there." Xander spoke in a softer voice than usual. "She's the only female on the team."

"Is there a reason there aren't more women?"

"Not really. It just turned out that way. Her father used to work with Bryon. I'm not sure what brought her to work with us, but she's a great resource. I'll explain everything to you when we get there." Xander glanced around them as they waited for the cashier to finish with a customer. "What are you going to eat?"

Matt shook his head. "I'm good."

Xander raised a brow. "First rule of working with us is don't lie, and don't put yourself or your health in danger. What have you eaten today?"

Matt thought back, realizing he hadn't had anything but coffee. He shrugged. "I haven't been hungry."

"Grab a couple tacos or enchiladas or something."

Even though it was said as a suggestion, Matt took it as a command. He didn't want to argue with Xander. Something told him he wouldn't win if he tried. He'd order something light and pick at it, but doubted his stomach could handle much. "I'll get a couple beef tacos."

Xander reached for a pen on the counter and added them to the list he had before smiling at the young girl who worked there. "I have a to-go order." He pushed the sheet of paper at her.

She glanced at it. "It will be about twenty minutes."

"Perfect." Xander started to turn away.

"Can I get a name?" she called to him.

"Want my number too?" Xander winked at her, making her blush.

"Name's Xan. We'll be back in twenty."

Matt shook his head, casting an apologetic look at the young girl who was watching Xander with wide-eyed interest. He quickly followed Xander back outside, wondering why he was so amused by Xander's attitude.

Xander unlocked the car, but glanced back at Matt. "I'm just grabbing my smokes. We can wait over there in the shade." He pointed to a couple of

picnic tables to the side of the building.

Matt didn't wait. He headed over, taking a seat at the first table he came to. He watched as Xander made his way toward him. If he didn't already know the guy, he would probably find him intimidating. Dark ink covered his arms, and with the thick beard, and steel-like eyes, he would make even the most confident person hesitate.

He liked Xander even though he hardly knew him. He was just straightforward and that was refreshing. "Are you ever serious?" Matt asked as Xander sat down across from him.

"All the time, but I find if I don't laugh at life a little, the darkness we see every day can eat at us. I have to stop taking parts of my life so seriously because other parts are so serious, if that makes any sense. I can't get caught up in the darkness. Everyone on the team has to find an outlet."

"And joking is yours?"

"One of them. Honestly, I just don't see a reason not to joke and have fun, but at the same time, I won't sugar coat things either."

"I liked that about you," Matt told him. "When you and Carter came by, Carter was trying to sell the group to me, but I didn't want a sales pitch, I wanted to know the truth. Know what you guys were offering and what I'd be getting into if I joined you. I wanted honest facts, not some guy impressed with my computer skills."

"Hmm, maybe Bryon knows what he's doing after all. I couldn't figure out why he sent me with Carter. I'm not the pretty face that most would want to see on their doorstep." Xander gripped the base of his beard and held it in his fist for a minute. "But I can see how Carter's professionalism might be a turn-off. Sometimes people just need to hear the truth, no matter how gory it might be."

"Yeah, I wasn't ready to hear some of that." Matt was embarrassed he'd gotten sick in front of them.

"Hey, everyone handles things differently. I think most men would squirm hearing what we do, but you needed to know. Carter would have sugar-coated it all and had you believing we were something we're not. Any member of this team needs all the facts. Now you know the worst of it, so the rest shouldn't be too much of a shock to hear about."

"Is there a lot more?"

"Not a lot that would shock you, but there are so many levels to what we do that even I don't know them all. I'm computer illiterate. I have no

idea what Bryon, Carter, and Trenton do all day, and while they know what I do, none of them want to do my job. We all have our talents, and we all make it work by doing what we do. You, being a computer geek, will end up in the back of the house on the computer all the time. You'll help get the information that I and the others need to do our part of the job. The team wouldn't work without all of us." Xander grinned. "We're like a big fucked up family. We all have our own talents, but put us together and it somehow works."

"Hmm, that's not how my family was." Matt thought about his sister and mother, wondering what they would think when he told them he'd quit his job and couldn't tell them anything about his new one.

"Yeah, mine wasn't either." Xander straightened. "Bryon and the team showed me what true family is. It doesn't always mean related."

"It's good to know you guys are all so close." Matt ran his hand down his pant leg. "I've got a good family, but right now, they are a bit much. They want to coddle me. They don't get that I don't need them smothering me. I'm trying to deal with things, but sometimes it's easier alone, ya know? My sister tries to mother me, while my mother tries to reassure me. I swear if one more person promises me it's going to be okay, I'll punch them. No one knows if it's going to be okay, no one can promise me it will be. I'm not stupid. I know what the chances are that I'll never hold Faith again. None of them understand. They don't know what it's like to have this happen. I hate that they act like they know, because they just don't."

Xander didn't say anything, just stared at Matt.

Oddly, the fact that Xander didn't try to make excuses for them, didn't try to explain why his friends and family were acting that way, was refreshing. Matt took a deep breath. "Sorry, sometimes it just gets to be too much."

"It's okay. Your days have to be filled with ups and downs. I won't even claim to imagine how you must feel. I've never been a parent, and never had a good relationship with my parents, so I can't know what you feel."

"Angry." Matt sighed, not sure why he was telling Xander, who was practically a stranger, all about his feelings. "I'm mad at whoever took Faith. I'm mad at everybody who was there and saw nothing. I'm mad at the media for not making her disappearance a bigger issue. I'm mad at God for letting this happen, but most of all, I'm angry at myself for letting her down,

for not protecting her like I promised I always would." Tears filled his eyes, but he blinked them away before they could fall.

He sighed as he stood and started to pace. "I know I couldn't have been there, but maybe I could have had the sitter meet her at school, had another parent walk her home. I could have taught Faith to fight, to know better how to get away, protect herself."

"The what-ifs are endless, it doesn't change the here and now." Xander watched him.

"I know. I've told myself that a million times, but I guess I can't control anything happening now, so I look back and wonder if I could have controlled anything that happened then. My mind never stops."

Xander nodded.

"Fuck, I don't know why I'm telling you all this. I don't even know you."

"Maybe that's exactly why. Maybe you need someone who will just listen and isn't emotionally as involved as you and the others are."

Matt shrugged.

"None of us are going to tell you how to feel. I'm not sure there is a right or wrong way to feel with what you are going through. If you need to talk, I'm here. If you just want someone to hang out with, who you don't have to talk to, I'm here. You want me to fuck off, I can do that too. The one thing about our team is we know where your mind goes, we know the fears you face, we know how bad this really could be. You don't have to hide from any of us. We won't push, in fact, unless we have information about Faith, we probably won't bring her up unless you do first, but know, if you do need to talk, we are there. I'm here."

"How do you do it?"

"Do what?" Xander asked.

"Deal with knowing how bad it is out there? See what happens to those kids? How do you stay sane?"

Xander took a deep breath. "I guess knowing we have a little part in trying to stop it. To know that by doing what we do, we aren't just saving one child, but many. Sadly, new perps pop up all the time, but one by one, we put a stop to them."

Matt sat back down. "I know what you said you do, but that only stops them from physically doing anything, right? They could still arrange, kidnap, hold?"

"They could, but one of the side effects of what we do is that over time, they lose their drive, their bodies change, both physically and mentally. There have been studies on it. We take more than just something physical from them. We cut deeper. Most won't go back into it. Honestly, after the information we give the police, most won't ever see the light of day again, but those that do, life will be forever different for them."

"You mentioned police before. How do you do all that?" Matt asked.

Xander nodded toward a group of teens headed their way. "We'll explain everything once we are at the house. It will all make sense, and we can answer all your questions."

Matt nodded. "Sorry, I need to remember this can't be friendly conversation."

"You'll get used to it. You'll get so you don't want to talk about it. It's a job, and like any job, when you leave work, you try and put it from your mind. Unfortunately, some cases stay with us more than others, and for you right now, I'm guessing it's never far from your mind."

Matt shook his head as he stared at the ground. "I'm obsessing over it. I don't eat, I don't sleep. All I do is search the web. I'll finally end up passing out from exhaustion and sleep ten hours, then go right back to it."

"That's not healthy."

"No, but until she's home, what else would you have me do?"

"I honestly don't know. I'd be doing the same thing as you probably."

"You know, losing my wife was hard, but I had time to get used to the knowledge it was going to happen. We had time to say everything we needed to say. With Faith, there was so much I never told her. She's so young. I thought I'd have years to tell her everything, to teach her everything. Now I wish I'd told her I love her one more time, or told her how beautiful she is, or how proud of her I am."

"You don't know you won't get the chance still."

Matt met Xander's stare. "Do you think I will?"

"I honestly don't know. I won't lie and give you false hope, but I also won't tell you to give up. Until you know, you have to fight. It's what any good father would do." Xander reached over and braced a strong hand on Matt's shoulder. "Come on, the food should be ready."

As he forced himself up, he reached out and gripped Xander's arm. "I just want to say thanks. You're the first person since this happened that

hasn't told me it's going to be okay. It's nice to not have someone trying to make it all okay when it's not."

Xander slapped Matt gently on the back as he led them to the door of the restaurant. "You're welcome." He let Matt walk inside before him. "But, one thing I will nag you about is eating and sleeping. So be prepared for that. You need the energy, and with the stuff you'll be doing to help us, you need to be focused. You can't do that if you're half asleep. That's when mistakes get made. So, while I might be the nice guy right now, I will be the first to kick your ass in shape if you don't take care of yourself." He strode off to the counter.

"Xan, right?" The young woman smiled. "I have your food right here." She set several bags on the counter. "That will be Seventy-two-oh-four."

Xander handed her a credit card.

"Here's your receipt, and my number." She stared up at Xander shyly.

"Thanks, but keep it for a guy who is worth your time. I promise I'm not what you're looking for." He pushed the slip of paper back at her.

"Who says you aren't?"

"Um, the fact that he's more my type than you are." Xander pointed at Matt before giving the girl another wink and turning away. He handed half the bags to Matt before slinging his free arm around Matt's shoulders and walking them both out the door.

"You're a horrible flirt. The poor girl didn't know what to say." Matt laughed as they got to the car, oddly comfortable with Xander being so close.

"Life is meant to be fun, and flirting is fun. It doesn't always have to lead somewhere." Xander dropped the bags in the backseat before going around to the driver's side and getting in.

Matt didn't know how to take Xander. He was unlike anyone Matt had ever met before. It was impossible not to like him.

The rest of the trip to the team's headquarters was silent, with only an old rock station playing as Xander weaved through the streets. For a moment, Matt worried he'd never find his way back, but once Xander got on a main highway, it was easy to follow.

He was surprised when Xander pulled up in front of a normal looking house in the middle of a neighborhood. It was the last thing he expected. He glanced around. "Do any of you live here?"

"Bryon does. The upstairs is his space. We crowd the main floor, and the basement, well, that's for recreation." Xander grabbed half of the bags after he stepped out. "Come on inside and meet the rest of the team. I think you'll like them."

Matt grabbed the rest of the bags before following Xander inside, hoping that he'd made the right choice because once he stepped inside, something told him there would be no turning back.

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CHAPTER TEN

Xander napped on the couch, wondering if he should wait for Matt so he could take him back home or let one of the other guys take him when they finished up whatever they were doing in the geek cave.

That was what he called the room where the guys had all the computers set up. He'd been in there a few times, but it was a bit overwhelming when wires and flashing boxes surrounded him, and who knew what else. The room looked like it was right out of some FBI data collection center. Truth was, it probably wasn't that far from doing the same shit the FBI could do.

He had to give the geeks credit, they got all the information they could possibly need, plus some. It made his job much easier, but he'd leave it all up to them. He had no business being surrounded by so much equipment. He was lucky to boot up his laptop and search for an address or a guy to come fix his furnace when it went out.

"You see the article about the three boys being found and reunited with their parents?" Dyson asked as he sat down in one of the chairs.

"No, missed it. Glad they found them. Are they okay?"

"You know how they are with giving out information on minors. Reading between the lines, it sounds like they'll be staying in the hospital for a few days before going home, so take that to mean what you may." Dyson kicked his legs up on the coffee table. "The article did say the kidnappers suffered injuries and were currently in serious condition." A smile spread over Dyson's face.

"You have to wonder what the backroom conversation is at the police station and hospital after they find the perps." Xander wished he could be a fly on the wall to hear if what they did disgusted people or if they were glad the pedophiles got what they did.

"Beau said he heard a couple doctors talking once that they hated having to help one of the guys that was brought in. Can't say I blame them. I'm glad I don't have some Hippocratic Oath to go by. I'd sit back and watch them suffer and slowly die." Dyson rolled his shoulders as if in pain.

"You okay?" Xander narrowed his eyes.

"Yeah, just took a fall during the weekly basketball game with some of the guys. Fell hard on my shoulder. It's fine, but keeps stiffening up on me. You should have come with."

"Take up football or soccer or something like that and I'm in. Basketball has never been my thing." He preferred a good set of weights or a long run. "If we don't have any cases in the next few days, I was thinking about getting some new ink." He ran his hand down his arm, touching one of the few spots that didn't already have ink covering it.

"I haven't heard if there's anything." Dyson glanced toward the geek cave door. "What do you think of the new guy?"

"I actually like him. He'll fit in well. The question is, can he put his personal issues aside to focus on other cases. He's been delving so deep into the dark web with one goal in mind, actually having to dig up information on others is going to be a challenge for him."

"Can't blame him for having tunnel vision where his daughter is concerned."

"No, you can't, but I worry what happens if he doesn't find her there. How long before he breaks?"

"It's something we'll have to watch for. He might not break. Many don't."

"And many do." Xander shrugged. "He's holding it together better than others, but he's also holding a lot in. As much as I hate Katie, she might be just what he needs." Xander thought about the psychologist that tormented him every few months. He hated her digging into his life. She always wanted to talk about his past, but he was more than happy to leave the past where it was. For Matt, his issues were current, and having someone to talk to would probably be a good thing.

The sound of the geek cave door opening had Xander looking down the hall.

When Bryon stepped into the room, he was all smiles. "I knew he'd fit in with us." He went to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of water. "The guy is going to give Carter a run for his money, and that's going to be fun to watch."

Carter prided himself on being the best, and if Matt was as good or better in some areas than he was, that would push Carter to work harder. He hated having someone know more than he did. They were lucky to have such talented hackers working for their team.

"He's a good guy. I think he'll be a good fit."

Bryon nodded. "I think he was a bit shocked by our systems, but once we showed him the layout, he jumped right in. He's just going through some last-minute things with Carter and Trenton, then he'll be out. Are you taking him home?"

"Yeah, I don't mind." Xander had to go past Matt's place to get to his anyway. "What's the week looking like? Any jobs?"

"We're working on a few things, but the perps changed their location last night. Moved the boy they have to a more secure area. Until we can get more information, it's on hold. I wouldn't expect much until next week."

"Want me to call Adam and schedule?" Dyson asked.

"Yeah, tell him I need an hour." Xander rubbed his arm.

"Ink therapy for you two?" Bryon asked.

"You should come with us. You'd love it."

"Sorry, I'm too old." Bryon shook his head.

"Bullshit." Dyson laughed. "There's no rule saying you can't get ink after forty."

"I'm pushing fifty. I've gone this long without it. You two have enough ink for all of us." Bryon nodded to Xander's arms.

"Hey, I'm not as bad as he is. I've only got a few," Dyson protested.

"You guys have fun." Bryon turned as Becca walked in the door. "Hey, beautiful."

Xander raised a brow at the endearment. It was clear Bryon had a thing for Becca, but this was the first time he'd heard him call her anything other than her name.

"Hey, guys." Becca handed a thick file to Bryon. "This one will make you sick."

Bryon opened the file and his face paled, which meant it had to be bad. The team had seen the worst of the worst. It took a lot to get to them.

"What's up?" Dyson asked.

"One-year-old girl." Bryon didn't look up from the file.

"Fuck." Xander's stomach turned as his temper flared.

"Why do we have the case?" Dyson asked.

It was rare a case like this fell in their lap from the court system. Almost always the courts would come down on a perp who hurt a baby with the maximum sentence.

Becca lifted Xander's legs and took a seat on the couch before settling his legs back over her lap. "Illegal collection of evidence. The investigators fucked up."

"Jesus, how do you fuck up on a case like this?" Bryon slapped the file closed. "How the fuck can they let a guy like this walk free?"

"They didn't have a choice. With the evidence thrown out, they didn't have a case."

Dyson stood. "Tell me I can do this tonight."

Bryon nodded. "Let me go find out what is going on. We don't even know where this guy is right now. Give me an hour to get some information. If I can get you in safe tonight, it's all yours, but I won't risk your safety. If we have to wait a couple of days to make sure we can get in and out without a problem, then you're going to have to chill for a few days."

"Fuck that." Xander sat up. "We aren't giving him a chance to skip town or even let the victim's family get hold of him. We need to move on this."

Becca touched Xander's shoulder. "The judge warned the family to stay away, but the child's father didn't look like he had plans to listen." She looked across the room at Bryon. "The sooner we move on this one the better."

"Let me see what we can do." Bryon walked down the hallway.

"You okay?" Xander turned to Becca.

"Yeah, this was a bad one. There was so much evidence. I can't believe they fucked this up. All of the evidence was thrown out other than the child's autopsy. No one wanted to let him go. I swear Judge Ferguson was ready to take matters into his own hands. They tried everything they could, even holding him on an old traffic violation while they tried to dig up more evidence." Becca looked exhausted. "He's going to run. I know he will. If we don't get him now, we'll lose him."

"Fuck this!" Xander stood.

"Xan, don't," Dyson warned.

"No, fuck this. It's worth the risk. I don't care if it's not safe. We've done plenty of stings that are dangerous. We're trained for this. This one deserves to be tortured, but I swear a bullet to the head would make me happy with this one." Xander stomped down the hall, not bothering to knock on the geek cave's door like he usually did. He just pushed it open

and walked in. "I don't care how safe this is, let us go in." He came to stand behind Bryon, looking down at the computer. The image of a large home was up on the screen, and on the screen beside it was the layout of the house from the original building plans.

"Back down, Xan, you know emotions will only cause mistakes. We have to do this just like any other case."

"The same way you did—"

Bryon stood, getting right in Xander's face. "Watch it. Don't you dare fucking go there. It will be the last thing you do." He glared at Xander with an anger he seldom saw from Bryon.

Xander fisted his hands, trying to keep his cool. He'd never brought Bryon's past up before, never mentioned his sister, but something about knowing a one-year-old died at the hands of a sick fuck, and he had the ability to handle the situation, but was being told to wait, pushed him almost past the limit of keeping quiet.

"Xan..." Matt's hand gently touched his arm. "Let us work, okay? I know how bad this is, and we'll do all we can to deal with this as fast as we can, but fighting isn't going to help." His hand moved to Xander's chest. "Let's go have a smoke and calm down for a minute, okay?"

Xander took a deep breath as he tore his glare from Bryon and looked at Matt. After another deep breath, he nodded. "Okay." His gaze flashed back to Bryon. "We need to handle this."

"I agree." Bryon never blinked as they stared at each other. "And we will, but we will do it safely."

"Come on." Matt moved from next to Xander and started for the door. "I could use a drink anyway."

Xander forced himself to turn around, his temper still pushing him to fight, but Matt was right, fighting among each other wasn't going to get them anywhere. He ignored the feeling of the others watching him as he walked out of the room. He didn't stop in the living room, but walked right out the front door, pulling a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He'd just lit one when Matt walked out to join him.

"You okay?" Matt twisted the cap on a bottle of water open and took a drink.

Xander grunted, but didn't say anything.

"You know Bryon's right. You have to do it the way you would any other sting. You can't react, no matter how bad it is."

Xander shook his head. He wanted to ask Matt how he would react if it was Faith, but he didn't. Matt didn't deserve to be the one he attacked. Neither did Bryon for that matter, but fuck he wanted to get his hands on the sick fuck who hurt this child.

He took a long drag off his cigarette as he realized how easily Matt had defused the situation. No one told him what to do, and only Dyson could get through to him most of the time when he was mad. With one simple comment, he'd stepped back and let Matt talk him into going outside. He blew a trail of smoke out as he stared at Matt. "I'm guessing you're joining?"

Matt nodded. "How could I not, especially now?"

Xander nodded, taking in the dark brown eyes that stared back at him. "Why did you get between Bry and me?"

Matt laughed. "Death wish, I guess. I honestly was just trying to get you to take a step back and think for a second. You were acting on emotion, and trust me, that's something I'm all too familiar with lately. I don't know what that shit was between you, but from Bryon's response, you were pushing him too far."

Xander ran his hand down his beard. "He'll probably never forgive me for that."

"You're the one who told me the team is like a family. If that's true, it will blow over. He's just as worked up about the new case as you are. He walked in and told us to drop everything else."

He didn't doubt that the whole team was upset about the file Becca had dropped in their lap. How could they not be? "I shouldn't have pushed him."

"Probably not, but I bet it's not the first time or the last time that you do. I'm just glad this time wasn't one that ended with the two of you wrestling each other to the ground."

Yeah, that wouldn't have been good. Bryon could hold his own, but he wasn't trained and as deadly as he was. Bryon used his mind to take people out. Xander learned in the Army to use his hands. He didn't always stop to think first, and that was the problem. "Still, thanks for defusing the situation as well as you did."

"Thanks for not punching me." Matt laughed.

"Matt, we need you," Trenton called from the doorway.

Matt glanced at Xander. "You going to be okay?"

"Yeah, go. Find something so we can take this creep down. We can talk later." Xander tried to smile.

Matt nodded. "Smoke another before you come in, okay?"

"Right." Xander laughed, but it was half-hearted. He would smoke a pack of cigarettes waiting for permission to do the sting tonight if he had to.

He watched Matt walk back into the house, wondering again how he'd calmed right the fuck down when Matt had touched him. It was like all the tension eased, and while he was still pissed and wanted the case, he didn't feel the need to tear Bryon apart to get it.

The more time he spent around Matt, the more intrigued he was, which made no sense because he hardly knew him. Still, he enjoyed being around him what little he had. Tonight, he didn't have to hang out and wait to take him home. Any one of the other teammates would have done it, but he found that he wanted to wait. He wanted to talk more and learn more about Matt.

It didn't make sense. It wasn't like he was interested in the guy. Matt had been married for years, lost his wife to cancer, and now was hoping he hadn't lost his daughter too. He clearly wasn't gay, so it couldn't be a physical attraction. He also wasn't the kind of guy Xander usually hung out with. His friends were more hardcore like Dyson.

"Shit." He gripped his beard in his fist and tugged down, wishing he had something to do to occupy his mind. He didn't need to be thinking about Matt. He didn't need to be thinking about anyone other than the fucking pedophile who he wanted to cut into pieces.

"Xan, we're going to have a meeting," Bryon called from the doorway.

His pulse increased as he snuffed out his cigarette against the brick outside the house and dropped the butt into a can that Bryon had set outside for him. As he walked into the living room, he saw everyone already gathered.

"We're going to go tonight. It appears he's alone and we can make easy entry." Bryon looked at Xander. "Dyson and Kasey will go."

"What? Fuck that." Xander's temper rushed right back. "I asked for this."

"We all want a part of this. Hell, I'm sure even Becca wishes she could do the slicing tonight, but I had to make a call. You're too worked up over this one Xan. Let Dy and Kase handle it."

Xander glared across the room. "I'm more than capable of—"

"I know you are, but not only are you not thinking with a clear head, you know we always work on a rotating shift. You've done two of the last stings. Yeah, one was a joint job with Dyson, but it's Kasey's turn. I've called him and he's on his way in."

"Let me go with them. We've done three of us before."

"You don't need three for this one. He's alone in the house," Carter said from where he was leaning against the wall near the hallway.

Xander shook his head. "Fuck all of you." He turned and stormed back outside before realizing he'd left his keys sitting on the coffee table. He turned, punching the brick wall beside the doorway. "Fuck!"

"Hey." Matt stepped out beside him. "Don't fuck up your hand or you won't be going out until it heals." He reached for Xander's still-clenched fist and looked at it.

Xander glanced down at it too, feeling the pain as he saw the abrasions along his knuckles. He slowly relaxed his hand as Matt continued to hold it around the wrist.

"They've made their decision. There's no point in arguing. How about we head back to my place and have a few beers and have Dyson call when it's done?" Matt rubbed his thumb over the pulse point on Xander's wrist. "It's been one hell of a day and I think we could both use a beer."

Xander gently pulled his arm back, his hand throbbing. "I hate not being part of this one."

"I know." Matt stared at him. "You know as well as I do, he's not changing his mind on this."

"You know him that well already?" Xander laughed.

"Am I wrong?"

"No, but you know the only reason he is doing this is because of what happened in the geek cave."

"Geek cave?" Matt raised a brow with an amused grin.

"It's what I call the computer room because that is where all you computer geeks hang out." Xander shrugged. "It makes sense."

"I guess it does." Matt laughed. "Not the most complimentary name you could pick, but I guess it's fitting."

"Sorry."

"Don't be. You're not the first one to call me a geek. It's a badge I wear proudly." Matt reached out and gently touched Xander's arm like he had before to calm him. "How about those beers?"

Xander blew out a long breath before nodding. "Yeah, it sounds good." If he couldn't go on the sting, at least he could sit with Matt and wait for the verification to come that the job had been completed. "You sure you won't mind the company?"

"I probably need it more than you do. Maybe you can find a way to keep me from staring at my computer all night. Bryon wants me to stop using it for this kind of stuff at home." Matt didn't look happy about that.

"It's for the best. It's safer here. I'm sure he told you there were spare rooms here if you decide to spend more time searching and need to crash here for a few hours."

"Yeah, he did, but it's still not the same as being able to wake up and work while drinking my morning coffee."

Xander grinned. "Well, the way I see it, morning coffee is like morning wood. It's meant to be enjoyed without any distractions."

Matt snorted back a laugh. "I've never looked at it that way."

"Try it. You'll see how much better your days start out." Xander shook his fist as his knuckles really started to ache.

"It's not broken, is it?"

"Nah, just sore. It will swell up tonight and be fine by morning." Xander looked at the bloody scrapes across his fingers. "My own fault."

"That it was." Matt rolled his eyes. "Never understood hitting things."

"Yeah, it's a bad habit of mine. Figure things are better than people."

"You do have a point." Matt nodded to Xander's car in the driveway. "You ready to leave?"

"Yeah, but I want to talk to Dy before we go, and I left my keys inside."

"And I need to thank the team for allowing me to join them." Matt headed in first, going down the hall without another word.

Xander followed, thankful that he wouldn't have to sit home alone tonight thinking about what Kasey and Dyson were doing. He still wasn't happy, but spending the rest of the evening with Matt would keep him from trying to talk Dyson into letting him join them. The last thing he needed was the team pissed off at him, but fuck, he still wanted to be part of this sting.

Dyson was the only one in the living room when he stepped back in. Xander reached for his keys, then turned to his best friend. "Be safe tonight. Make the fucker pay, okay? Cut a little deeper than normal or something."

"You know we will. No hard feelings, right?"

"Not with you." Xander still wasn't happy with Bryon, but that wasn't something he'd deal with tonight. "Call me when you're headed home, okay? Let me know it's done."

"I will. Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah, I'm going to have a few beers with Matt while I wait for your call."

Dyson glanced at Xander's hand, but didn't say anything about it. "Be careful with him, Xan, he's not in a good place right now."

Xander narrowed his eyes at him. "What do you think I'm going to do? Fuck, Dy, give me some credit. Besides, it's not like that."

Dyson raised a brow.

"He was married, remember? To a woman." Xander shook his head.

"He's not even my type, besides, I'd never take advantage of anyone going through what he is. You should know that about me." He couldn't believe his best friend would have to issue a warning like that to him.

"I know, Xan, but just be careful, okay? He's different."

Xander rolled his eyes, letting the comment go before he lost his temper again. "Be safe tonight, okay? I don't want to have to go alone to get that tattoo."

"I'm making our appointment first thing in the morning." Dyson held Xander's hard stare. "I'll be safe. I promise."

Xander gave a final nod. "Tell Matt I'm at the car." Going through with a sting without a few days of planning wasn't what they liked to do, but he was glad the whole team agreed they couldn't wait on this one. It meant more danger, and he hated not being there to back Dyson and Kasey up, but he trusted them to know what they were doing. With a look that said silently everything they needed to, Xander turned and headed out the door.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Matt handed a beer to Xander and nodded to the backyard. "You can smoke if we sit outside."

"Thanks. Most of my friends would sit inside just so I couldn't."

Matt laughed as he pushed open the sliding glass door and stepped out into the backyard. "I'm not going to tell you what you can or can't do. You know the risks. I figure with what you do for a living, if smoking is the worst habit you have, then you're doing pretty good." He gestured to a few chairs. "Sorry it's not more comfortable." He pulled an old flower pot over that was filled with dirt and a dead something or other he'd probably forgotten to water. "You can use this as an ashtray."

"It's a nice yard. Bigger than it looks from inside."

Matt sat down, swallowing back the emotion as he stared at the large swing set that Faith used to swing on. "I always planned to do something nice back here, but I worked a lot, and Faith and her friends were the only ones to really come out here."

"I bet she's an amazing girl."

Matt bit his lip for a second, then took a hard breath. "She is. I wish you could meet her."

"I hope I get to." Xander smiled.

"I like that you don't talk like the others. They would have said she *was* an amazing girl, you said *is*. It helps, even if people don't think so."

"Until we hear differently, she is alive, and she is coming home." Xander pulled a cigarette out and lit it. "I know it's hard, but I've seen a lot of kids returned home doing what I do. Not all these stories have unhappy endings."

"But many do, and I know that. I try to stay positive, but it can be hard. It helps to have other positive people around." Matt watched a butterfly land on the swing set, smiling as he imagined Faith trying to catch it. "My mom and sister try, but they are more worried about me right now. I get it, I really do, but I wish they wouldn't treat me like I should get used to her being gone. I don't want to get used to her being gone. If I accept that it's a permanent thing, then I've given up on her."

"Don't ever give up. There is always hope." Xander gestured to the swing. "It's good to come out here and remember things, even plan things for when she gets back. There is absolutely nothing wrong with believing."

"Are you so different from everyone else because of what you do?"

"I don't know, maybe some of it. I've always been a tell it like it is kinda guy. I hate beating around the bush, I hate walking on eggshells. People aren't stupid. They know the truth. We don't need to treat them with kid gloves all the time. I figure if people can't stand how I am, then they can fuck off. I'm happy, and I'm not changing for anyone."

"Probably why you're single too?" Matt grinned.

"Ah, maybe, but honestly, I don't do well in relationships. They are filled with expectations and promises neither can honestly keep. If I could find someone that could let me go on just being me and not try to change me, then I might give one a try. For now, a simple one-night-stand here and there is good enough for me."

"What about you and Dyson. You seem close."

"Dy and I served in the Army together. He was disowned by his family when he came out. He joined the military to escape. When I came home, I invited him to come with me. He followed a few months later. We've been best friends ever since."

"Ah, I thought maybe it was more."

"No, it never will be. We're better friends. Honestly, we're probably too much alike to ever make anything more work. What about you? Were you seeing anyone before all this happened?"

Matt frowned. "No, I've dated a few people since Jill died, but it was always awkward for me. I felt like I was hurting Faith by making her think I was trying to replace her mom. I know that wasn't how it really is, but the thought always kept me from letting anything get serious. I hoped as she got older she might understand better and I could try again, but now, well, when she comes home, she'll be my only focus."

"As it should be for a while, but don't let yourself stop living too."

"You've seen kids after they've been kidnapped, right?"

"Actually, no. We never see the kids. When we go in and there are kids in the house, we make sure the police know where to find them, but with what we do, it's best if we don't have any contact with the children. We leave that for the police and those who are trained to handle more delicate situations. Leaving them behind to wait for the authorities is the hardest

thing we have to do, but it's for the best. I'm sure having me walk in would scare them a hell of a lot more than seeing a cop come in." Xander put his cigarette out in the flower pot, then took a long drink of his beer.

"Probably true, but do you know how the kids are after? What happens?"

"No, we read the papers and see the news, but we don't follow up. If you're asking if they are okay? I think in time most of them will be, but it takes a while. Each child will deal with it in a different way."

"I'm just trying to figure out what happens when Faith comes home. If she's been..." He couldn't say the words. "You know, if she's hurting, I don't know how to help her."

Xander nodded. "If she needs help, there are plenty of people trained to do that. I'm not sure if Bryon brought it up, but our team has a lady we all have to see every three months. She knows what we do. Bryon likes to make sure the job isn't getting to us. You'll have to see her too. I know she deals with children as well. If Faith needs help, we'll make sure she gets it."

"I wasn't sure if meeting you guys was a blessing or not, but so far, it's helped me more than I probably ever will help the team. Even my best friend, Jason, won't sit out here and talk about things like this with me. I bring up the future and he says things like I should wait and see if she comes home first. It's so hard when all I need is for him to be understanding and supportive. Even my sister, there is so much I don't feel I can say to her. Talking with you, I don't feel as if I have to hold anything back. You aren't going to judge me for holding out hope or planning what I'm going to do once she comes through the front door again."

"I guess everyone deals with things differently, but being her father, her only parent, only you can understand what you feel. It's not right or wrong. I'm glad the team and I can be there for you. Are you going to like working with the other geeks?" Xander grinned.

"Hell, I was like a kid in a candy store when I walked into that room. The systems they have set up are amazing. I thought only the government had stuff like that. Some of it I'd only heard of, never seen. It's going to be amazing learning how to use it all. I can't imagine the capabilities of it." Matt could have spent days in there exploring the programs they had on their computers. He had skills, but nothing like Carter did. A lot of it was he didn't have the programs they did, but even then, it was going to take a

while for him to learn everything and catch up his skills to where the others were. "It's amazing what your team has done."

"It really is. Somehow, it's all come together. We work well together. You haven't met Beau or Kasey yet, but you'll like them too."

"What does Beau do?"

"He's a doctor. He's the one who makes sure we have what we need when we go in to take someone down. We drug them to keep them from being able to fight, then Kasey, Dyson, and I can do what we need to. The person still feels pain, still knows what is going on, watches the whole thing, but is unable to move."

"That's horrifying."

"Maybe, but you take a case like the one they are dealing with tonight, and somehow it seems justified."

Matt nodded. "At first, I wondered why you didn't just kill them, but the more I thought about it, the more I saw that suffering for the rest of their lives would be better. The kids don't get to escape the pain, so why should they?"

"That's the way I see it. When the group started, they didn't want to be murderers, but they wanted to make a statement, to scare others, and maybe make them think twice before they did anything to a child."

"Have you ever had anyone come after you?"

"I haven't, but I know Kasey had a problem a few years before I joined. I guess he was attacked at the scene of one of the stings. I don't know all the details, but there were more people there than they thought. He killed several before he could escape. It was after that, Bryon made the rule that we didn't rush into anything. We made sure we knew what and who we were dealing with before we jumped into action."

"That's why he was so angry with you tonight."

"That, and I was about to bring up something that we don't talk about. It's not my story to go into, but I stepped over a line I shouldn't have. The whole team knows not to bring it up. I spoke without thinking, my anger and emotions getting the best of me."

"That happen often?" Matt grinned.

Xander laughed. "That obvious?"

"You're a passionate man."

"I am about some things, others say I'm heartless. I shouldn't have gotten in Bryon's face the way I did. I'll apologize to him once the dust

clears. We both needed time to calm down. I don't want you thinking we fight all the time. Honestly, it seldom happens, and usually only about what we are having for dinner when we meet."

"Another beer?" Matt stood, wanting another for himself. It was the most relaxed he'd been in a long time. He still couldn't stop thinking about Faith, but for once, he didn't feel like he was suffocating in grief or feel that he had to spend every minute on the computer searching.

"If you don't mind the company for another." Xander pulled out another cigarette.

"I'll be right back." Matt headed inside, pausing as he looked at his computer, wondering how he was going to survive if he wasn't able to search the dark web from home anymore. It was going to drive him nuts. At least Bryon had told him he could spend as much time at the team house as he wanted.

Being around others who weren't constantly consoling him about Faith was helping his mood. She was never far from his thoughts, but the heavy weight of not knowing where she was didn't feel as hard to handle.

With two more beers in hand, he headed back outside to find Xander standing by the fence. He made his way to him, standing beside him, wondering what he was doing. "Everything okay?"

"Look." Xander pointed to a small section of bushes that were against the fence.

"What am I looking for?" Matt tried to see what Xander was looking at.

"Lean down and look all the way into the back, right against the fence."

Matt did as he was told, gasping when he saw what Xander was looking at. "Kittens?"

"Yep, yours?"

"No, we don't have any animals." Matt tried to count how many. "I see three. Any sign of their mother?"

"She just jumped the fence. That's what got my attention, then I heard the kittens mewling once she was gone."

"Shit, what do I do?"

"Nothing for now. She might belong to a neighbor and decided your pet-free yard was a safe place to give birth." Xander knelt beside him. "They don't look more than a few hours old."

"Are they safe alone like this?" Matt had never owned a pet in his life.

"Yeah, their mother probably just went to get food. I'm sure she'll be back. Keep an eye on them for a few days, if it looks like they're having issues, then you can deal with them."

"I wouldn't even know how."

"Call me, I'll help. My mother was a veterinarian. I grew up with more animals around the house than we should have ever had. She adopted every animal she could."

"Wow, that must have made for an interesting childhood."

"It was the only good thing about it." Xander glanced over at him.

"Oh, sorry."

"It's in the past." Xander stood. "At least now you know if you hear weird sounds at night, it's just the kittens."

"Yeah, I would have probably freaked out. The first day after I got on the dark web, my paranoia went way up. I installed a new security system, bought new locks. I was convinced someone was going to come after me for digging around."

"It's not that paranoid. If they thought you were a risk, some might come after you. It's a business to many of them. That's why Bryon is so strict about security and making sure we keep things safe. It's a dangerous group of people out there."

Matt stood, handing one of the beers to Xander. "I'm seeing that now. I was lucky something didn't happen."

"You were, but if you stick to the team house now, you'll be okay. Just stick to Facebook and email from home." Xander twisted the cap on the beer as he sat back down in the chair.

"I probably won't even get online here anymore. I see myself spending a lot of time at the team house."

"Just don't burn yourself out. It happens faster than you think. There's always work to do, new cases to research, new perps to follow. Don't forget who you are, and that there is life outside of what we do. Don't let the darkness consume you. When Faith comes home, you still want to be able to give her a normal life."

Matt sighed. "Do you think she'll ever have a normal life after this?"

"I know she will. Not a doubt in my mind. No matter what she's been through, she can get past it. It might take time, but she'll get there. With you by her side, she'll be just fine."

Matt hoped Xander was right. Truth was, he was so scared she'd never come home, but he refused to say that out loud. He refused to give the worry power. He had to keep hope alive. "When Jill died, I had no idea what to do. I let Jill handle everything when it came to Faith. I had so much to learn. I mean, how the hell was I supposed to know how to raise a little girl? It was a struggle. Now, with this, I feel that same fear."

"Faith will let you know what she needs." Xander smiled. "And you're not alone. Your family will be there, both your real one and your new one."

"Thanks." Matt took a swallow of beer. "So, do you have family?"

"Nope, no one. Just the team. I was an only child, and I don't speak to my father, and my mother died when I was little. Like I said before, Dyson is like a brother, and the rest of the team maybe like cousins."

Matt stared at Xander, understanding how the team could end up being so close. Working together the way they did, it would be impossible not to form bonds that went deep. Already, he was feeling more comfortable with Xander than he should so quickly. There was something about him that made him so easy to talk to. Maybe it was the fact he wasn't judging him, or maybe the fact that he was just willing to listen, but Matt craved whatever it was. "I'm glad you have the team then."

"Me too. I'd probably be in prison if it wasn't for them." Xander played with the label on the beer bottle. "Bryon kept me from getting into a lot of trouble over the years."

"You don't seem the type to risk your freedom."

"For the right reasons any man would risk their freedom. I've had a lot of reasons."

The comment made Matt wonder more about Xander and his life, but he didn't know him well enough to pry and ask questions. "Well, for my sake, I'm glad you're here and not in prison."

"Me too." Xander laughed before taking the last swallow of his beer. He glanced at his phone as if looking to see if Dyson had called yet.

"You worried?" Matt asked.

"Not worried, but restless. I hate that I'm not part of this."

"How about we go inside and find a way to distract ourselves. We can put a movie on or eat ice cream or whatever works." Matt stood.

"Ice cream sounds good." Xander crushed out his cigarette before standing. "You found my weakness, next to coffee of course."

"Ah, yes, coffee is a must." Matt stepped inside, leaving Xander to close the door when he followed him in. "Hope vanilla is okay. Trish, my sister, brought it over. I usually go for something a bit more exciting."

"Vanilla is fine." Xander leaned against the counter.

Matt pulled the ice cream out and started to scoop two bowls. "So, did I hear Dyson say you two are getting new tattoos?"

"Yeah, we'll go in this week. I'll just get this space finished." Xander pointed to a spot on his arm. "You got any?"

"Nope, almost got one in college, but I chickened out. Kind of glad I did. I was going to get a name on my chest."

"Names are never a good thing." Xander grinned.

"I know that now. Glad I didn't. Not sure Jill would have been happy with another person's name on my body. I would have ended up having to get it covered up." Matt slid one of the bowls over to Xander. "Have a seat." He nodded to the kitchen table before he put the ice cream back in the freezer. He grabbed his own bowl and joined Xander. "Are you completely covered?"

"Close on top, my legs have a lot of space left, but I have plans for them too."

"Doesn't hurt?"

"Not like you would think. There are some spots more sensitive than others, but nothing you couldn't handle. Want to come with us?"

"No, now is hardly—" He paused as Xander's phone dinged with a message.

Xander picked it up and read it, a smile forming as he glanced at Matt. "It says they are on their way home. The sting took longer than usual. The guy had bags packed ready to run."

"He was going to run that fast?"

"He had to know someone would come after him. The family, someone like us, or just someone who knew about the case. Hurting a child is unforgivable. Even in prison, there are two things that are unforgivable, child and animal abuse. No one takes those lightly."

"So now they'll treat him at the hospital and he'll go home? Is that really fair?"

"He'll go home less a man than he was before." Xander grinned.

"Honestly, it wouldn't shock me if Bryon and Carter had them plant stuff for the cops to find. Stuff that will keep this fucker locked up. Even if he goes

home, I'm sure someone will still try and kill him. I can't imagine the child's father will rest until the scumbag is dead."

"You can't blame him." Matt closed his eyes, imagining what he would do if he found someone had hurt Faith that way. His stomach turned at the thought because it was a very real possibility that someone was hurting her. He pushed his ice cream back with a sigh.

"No, you can't blame a father for wanting to take out anyone who hurts his daughter, but you also don't want them to give up their life and spend the rest of it in prison. If we can do the work and maybe keep someone who hasn't already tarnished their soul from doing so, then we will."

Matt looked up. "Is your soul tarnished?"

"It was tarnished long before I joined the team. The Army, my past before that, the years right after I came back home, none of it's been a fairy tale."

Matt's heart ached hearing that. "That isn't good. You have no good memories?"

"Oh, I have plenty of good moments in my life. It's mixed with bad, but I've done a lot of things in my past. I'm not going to lie to you and play innocent. What I do with the team is only part of who I have been. It's the part I am now, and honestly, it's probably the best part of who I've been. I'm able to look at myself in a mirror now and not hate the person staring back."

"That's a good thing then." He wanted to ask why he hadn't been happy with himself before, but he doubted Xander would tell him.

"Thanks for the ice cream. It was good." Xander stood and took his bowl to the sink, rinsing it before setting it on the counter.

"Are you okay now that you got the text?"

Xander leaned against the counter. "Better, but still pissed Bryon didn't let me go. I'll get over it. I'm going to head home and go for a long run. It will help clear my head."

"At this time of night?" He looked up, seeing it was after midnight already.

"It's the best time. It's quiet out and I can think." Xander gripped his beard. "I guess I should go and let you get some sleep. Thanks for letting me come over tonight."

"It was nice to have company for a change." Matt hadn't realized how much he missed just being able to sit down and talk about simple things and not dwell on Faith all the time.

"We'll have to do it again." Xander pulled a card from his pocket. "Here's my number. If you get bored or just need to talk, call me. We can hit the gym, drink more beer in the backyard or do whatever. I'm sure I'll see you around the team house too." He slid the card onto the table in front of Matt.

"Thanks, I really appreciate that. I seriously might take you up on that. I'm not sure what I'll do with my time now that I can't do much online here."

"You'll find stuff, but I don't mind you calling." Xander rubbed his hands down his tattooed arms. "You going to be okay?"

"Yeah, just another long night wondering where my daughter is. I'm used to them."

"I wish I could help."

"You are, and the team is too. It helps give me more hope and other things to focus on. I like knowing that everyone will be digging for information on her now, not just me."

"We will, and we won't stop," Xander told him. "I'm going to head out, but promise you'll call if you need anything."

"I will." Matt stood, walking Xander to the door. "Thanks again."

"You were the one helping me tonight." Xander stepped outside. "See you soon."

Matt nodded as he watched Xander turn and run down the front steps to his car. He didn't wait to watch him go. He shut the door and locked it, setting the alarm before heading to the living room. He might as well get started deleting everything off his computer. The last thing he wanted was to put the team at risk. Tomorrow, he'd head over to the team house and start his search again from there.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"What the fuck?" Xander swatted Dyson's arm away after he'd smacked his arm, right where he'd gotten the tattoo done two days before. "You know yours is going to hurt worse than mine." He went to grab Dyson, so he could hit the back of his shoulder.

The two wrestled around the living room for a few minutes before pulling back laughing. "It doesn't even hurt now." Dyson rolled his eyes.

After five days of no work, the two of them were getting restless. It wasn't the longest stretch they'd gone without a job, but without any other way to really help the team, Xander got bored easily. There was only so much he could do around the house, and hanging out at the team house was boring after they'd gone into the basement and played hours of video games day after day.

Bryon, Carter, Trenton, and Matt had all but locked themselves in the geek cave, working on trying to find leads on Faith, and searching out more child trafficking rings for them to take down. The lull in work was killing him. It was the one time he wished he had more computer skills, so he could at least do something.

Kasey had flown to Vegas with some of his friends, so that left Xander and Dyson looking for anything to do.

"Did I tell you I showed up at the team house early the other morning and caught Becca making breakfast for Bryon?"

Xander raised a brow. "Do you think he finally told her?"

"I was wondering if we've been the blind ones and something's been going on for a while between them and they were hiding it from us." Dyson shrugged. "They looked too comfortable, and a bit too guilty at being caught together so early in the morning."

"Hmm, could be. Wouldn't surprise me. The tension between those two has been bad for a year now. It was just a matter of time before something happened." Xander reached for his pack of cigarettes on the coffee table. "If they finally hooked up, I'm happy for them. They both needed to get laid."

"There is more to life than sex, you know?"

"There is?" Xander feigned shock.

"Maybe it's you who needs to get laid," Dyson teased.

"You're not kidding. It's been months. Maybe we should hit the club tonight."

"Can I bring a date?"

Xander sighed. "You have a date?"

"Yeah, but he'll be good going to the club if you want to go find someone to play with."

"Play with? I want to fuck them, not pull out my Lego set." Xander laughed.

He sighed. Not even the thought of picking someone up at the bar appealed to him. He was in a rut, and nothing was pulling him out of it. "Go on your date, I'll be fine. I'll binge watch something or other and try not to think about how you're getting lucky and I'm not."

"Jealous? I can ask if he's got any friends."

"And they would all want relationships. You know that's not me. I want twenty minutes and a fake name."

"Then you need to get on Grindr." Dyson laughed.

"Fuck, and risk having Bryon find my profile? No thanks." Grindr was sadly one of the main apps that pedophiles used to pick up young boys. It was amazing how the online and digital world held so much less appeal now that he knew how much bad came from so many of the social media sites. If he ever had kids, he wasn't letting them near a phone or a computer until they were thirty.

"You sure you don't want to go out? It's really okay. We didn't have solid plans. He just wanted to hang out."

"Nah, I'm good. You go have fun. I'll be fine. I'll work on the fire pit out back and just be lazy."

Dyson stood. "Alright, but call if you change your mind. I hate to see you waste a Friday night."

"Won't be the first time." Xander tossed his feet up on the couch where Dyson had been sitting. "Give me a call tomorrow."

"I will." Dyson waved as he took off out the door.

Xander reached for the remote, looking for a movie or something to watch. It was only two in the afternoon, which meant he had a very long and quiet night ahead of him.

He was almost asleep when the sound of his cell phone echoed from the table across the room. Forcing himself up, he nearly tripped over the

shoes he'd left beside the couch as he tried to reach his phone before it went to a message.

"Hello?"

"Xan, it's Matt."

"Hey, what's up?" He hadn't said more than hello to him in passing since the night they'd had a beer at his house.

"I was wondering if you're busy." Matt's voice cracked, and he sounded upset.

Xander was paying full attention now. "I'm not doing anything. What's wrong?" He prayed it wasn't bad news about Faith.

"I just got a call from the detective working on Faith's case. They found a body, but it wasn't Faith, but there was a bunch of girls' clothing with it. Some of it matches the description of what Faith was wearing. They want me to come down and look at photos. I really don't want to go alone, but I don't want to make my sister go through this with me. Do you think you could go?"

"Of course, I'm on my way right now. I'll pick you up in ten minutes." There was no way he'd make Matt go through this alone.

"I can meet you there." Matt sounded nervous.

"No, you don't need to be driving right now. You're on my way. It's nothing to pick you up. I'll be there soon."

"Thanks."

"No problem." Xander was already slipping on his shoes. "Matt, don't assume anything okay? Don't let your mind get ahead of the facts."

"I'm trying not to."

"Do you want me to stay on the phone while I drive?" He would do whatever he needed to, so he could help keep Matt calm.

"No, I need to change clothes. I'll be ready by the time you get here. Thanks, Xan."

"Again, not a problem. See you in ten." He hung up the phone, making sure he had his wallet and his keys before rushing out the door. His heart pounded as he thought about what this all might mean. He wasn't sure what would happen if Matt got bad news. If there was a body along with other children's clothing, it could mean anything. Thank God, the body wasn't hers. That was a call he wouldn't wish on any parent.

He tried not to think the worst as he made his way to Matt's.

He wasn't shocked that the moment he pulled into the driveway, Matt was out the door and locking the house.

Xander didn't bother to get out, instead waiting for Matt to come to him.

"Hey, thanks for this." Matt took a deep breath as he reached for his seatbelt. "I'm not sure I could do it alone. I called Jason, but he didn't answer."

"I don't mind a bit. I'm glad you called. You shouldn't have to do this alone." Xander pulled back out of the driveway. "What did the detective say?"

Matt pressed his lips together as if he didn't want to say, but finally glanced over at Xander. "They found a boy's body. Nine years old. Buried with it was a pile of girls' clothing. He said there was at least twenty items. I didn't have pictures of what Faith was wearing, but they could sort of see it from the grainy images from the school's surveillance cameras when she walked out that day. He said there was a yellow shirt that could match hers, but they can't be sure, and four hair ribbons. Faith loved ribbons and had one in her hair that day." Matt pinched the bridge of his nose, but didn't stop a few tears from falling. "I'm not sure I can do this. What if it's her stuff? What if she's the next body they find?" His shoulders shook as he covered his face with his hands.

"You take this one step at a time. You don't worry about what you are going to do. You worry about walking in there and finding out the facts before you jump to conclusions."

Matt shook his head. "Those clothes belong to other girls. How many other parents just got the same call I did?"

"Matt, you know as well as I do how many children are out there. This isn't going to be easy for anyone."

"I'll die if she's not alive. I can't live without her."

As much as Xander was sure that it was just a father's pain speaking and Matt wouldn't really take his own life, it still was enough of a warning that if any of the stuff ended up being Faith's, they couldn't leave Matt alone. There was no telling what would happen if Faith was found dead or even if something hinted that she might be.

As hard as he tried to keep Matt positive, the truth was, the chances of finding Faith alive grew less and less every day. Girls her age were either sold into slavery outside the country or killed soon after being taken. They'd

be lucky to ever find her. He would never tell Matt that, but he was pretty sure he already knew. Xander didn't blame him for not wanting to admit it out loud.

"One step at a time. You don't know anything yet. Try and stay positive." Xander didn't think twice about reaching over and resting a hand on Matt's thigh. "You're not alone. No matter what, we are all here with you."

Matt nodded, but didn't say anything.

"I'm headed to the police station?"

"Yeah, sorry. The one just down on Carson Ave.." Matt stared out the window. "The last time I was there was the day she went missing."

Xander didn't know what to say, and that didn't happen often. He wanted to comfort Matt, but he wasn't going to fill him with lies by saying everything was going to be okay when he wasn't sure it was. What was he supposed to say to someone who might find out their child was probably dead in just a few minutes? He gave Matt's thigh a gentle squeeze, surprised when Matt's hand covered his and linked their fingers.

Xander didn't react, but he wanted to. He wanted to glance over and look at Matt, try and understand why he would hold his hand. That wasn't something a straight man did, even when he was scared and grieving. It was totally unexpected, and even more shocking to Xander, is how right it felt. It wasn't something he could think about right now. There were bigger issues.

As they pulled into the police station parking lot, Matt released his hand. "Thanks, you don't have to come in if you don't want."

"Bullshit. I'm not letting you go in alone. You need someone with you." Xander got out of the car and came around to the passenger door as Matt climbed out. "We'll do this together, okay? You don't have to face any of it alone. No matter what happens, I'm here, and the rest of the team is just a phone call away." He was sure the whole team would show up if Matt needed them.

"I'm so scared." Matt looked across the lot at the large building.

"I know, but not knowing would be worse." He put his arm around Matt, hoping it wasn't too much, and led him to the police station.

Once inside, he stepped aside and let Matt go up to the desk and talk to the woman sitting behind it.

Almost instantly, a man in a suit walked out, first smiling at Matt before turning to Xander and narrowing his eyes as he took in his tattoos and rough look.

"This is Xander. He was nice enough to come down with me. This is Detective Michaels." Matt gripped Xander's shoulder. "I didn't think I could do this alone."

Xander offered his hand. "Nice to meet you." He was used to cops looking at him as if he belonged in a jail cell. If they only knew how close to the truth that was. He turned his attention from the detective and back to the only thing that mattered, Matt.

"We have a room set up if you'll follow me." The detective led them into the back to a simple questioning room.

There were two chairs on either side, and Xander slipped onto the one next to Matt, placing his hand back on his thigh to help support him.

Matt fisted his hands on the table. "What do I need to do?"

"Just look through the pictures and tell us if anything belongs to Faith. Take your time. I know how hard this must be." The detective sat down across from them, placing a stack of photographs upside down in front of Matt.

Xander had seen this done before when a family member had to identify a body. It wasn't like they do it in the movies. There was no walking into the morgue and having a sheet pulled back. It was simply photographs placed upside down for the family to look at.

Matt stared at the pile of pictures for several moments before he glanced at Xander, then back at the detective. "What does it mean if they are hers?"

"It means the cases are connected, nothing more than that," the detective said softly.

"I don't know if I can do this." Matt sat back as if trying to distance himself from the photos.

"You have to know. The not knowing will eat at you." Xander gave Matt's thigh a squeeze. "If you walk out of here without looking, you'll spend the rest of the day and night hating yourself for not looking, for not knowing."

"What if they are hers?"

There wasn't an answer for that. Everyone in the room was aware what it would mean if any of the clothing belonged to Faith, but no one wanted to

say it.

"Do you want me to turn them over one at a time?" Xander asked. The sooner they got this done, the sooner they could move on to the next step.

Matt shook his head. "I need to do this."

"Okay." Xander was proud of how strong Matt was being. If this was his child, he wasn't sure he could hold it together.

With a shaky hand, Matt slowly reached up and gripped the corner of the first photo. He took an uneven breath before he quickly flipped the picture over.

The photo was of a blue jacket, covered with blood and dirt stains as it lay on a steel table. Xander hoped Matt didn't know that the stains were blood, but by the way his face paled and the tremor that coursed through his body, Xander was sure he did.

"Not hers." Matt quickly flipped through the next one, then the next.

He made it through half the pile before he stopped. "I feel like I'm playing Russian Roulette." He used the back of his hand to wipe sweat from his brow.

"You've already passed two of them we weren't sure of," the detective told him.

"How many more are there that could be hers?"

"Just finish looking. I can't give you any more information." Detective Michaels fidgeted with his pen.

"You're almost done." Xander caressed his hand down Matt's leg, gripping his knee this time.

The tension in the room was heavy as Matt reached out and flipped another photo. With each turn, he released a long breath, almost as if he was able to finally start breathing again after not being able to from the moment he'd first gotten the phone call.

"Two more." Xander rubbed the tips of his fingers over Matt's knee.

As if he just wanted it over, Matt flipped them both quickly, staring at them for a long moment before shaking his head. "No, none of it belongs to her." As soon as the words were out, his body trembled, and a loud sob escaped him as he started to cry.

Xander shared an understanding look with the detective before he turned and pulled Matt against his chest, giving him support as the stress and emotional overload finally took its toll on him.

Matt shook in his arms, and tears were wetting Xander's shirt, leaking through to his skin. He didn't care. He didn't even want to try to imagine what Matt was going through. It was a relief that none of the clothing was Faith's, but it also meant they still didn't have any leads in the case. Faith was still missing, and no one knew where she was.

"Can we go?" Xander glanced at Detective Michaels as he continued to hold Matt.

"Yes, I'll be in touch if there is anything else. Thank you for coming down." He offered his hand to Xander.

Xander released one hand from Matt's back, shaking the detective's. "Thank you."

Matt pulled back, wiping his eyes with his hands. "Sorry, it was just a relief." He turned to the detective. "Thanks for not giving up."

"I promised you I would do all I could. I'll keep that promise." The detective stood, gathering the photos off the table before going to the door and opening it. "Good afternoon, gentlemen."

Xander turned back to Matt. "Let's go home."

Matt nodded as he silently stood.

Xander led him out the door with a gentle hand on his back, both relieved and frustrated that this hadn't opened up any new leads. The last thing he wanted was for Matt to have to face the chance that Faith was dead or proof that she was being sexually assaulted, but then again, one small lead would give them something to work with. Even if it led them to a body, knowing she was gone would be easier than not knowing.

Once in the car, Matt turned to Xander. "Thank you for that."

"I'm glad I could be there with you. Never hesitate to call me."

Matt nodded as he clicked his seat belt in place, leaned back in the seat, and closed his eyes.

Leaving him alone to think, Xander pulled out on the road. Matt needed time to process everything, and Xander would give him that. He'd make sure he was okay before he left him alone, but honestly, he didn't know how Matt would ever be okay as long as Faith was missing. It was something that would eat a parent up inside. All he could do was be there if Matt needed him. The rest was out of his hands.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Matt stepped out of the shower, his body drained emotionally. He was a mess after everything that had happened. When he'd first gotten the phone call, hope soared that this would lead him to Faith, but then the more he thought about it, the more he grasped what he was going to the police station to look at, the more he realized that it could have been the end of everything.

If those clothes had been Faith's, it would have meant she was probably dead too. It meant that, because they were found with another body of a child, that whoever had her was willing to kill.

His mind went nuts with the what-ifs and the possibilities. By the time he'd called Xander to go with him, he'd been ready to lose his mind. He didn't know what to do.

Now, somewhere in the area, other parents were identifying their child's clothing or worse yet, their child's body. How selfish was he to be thankful that it wasn't his daughter when others weren't as lucky? He hated the joy and relief that had hit him as he turned over that last photograph.

The sound of Xander working in the kitchen echoed down the hall. As much as he wanted to be alone and wallow in his own emotions, he was glad that Xander insisted on staying. He'd sent him off to shower while he cooked dinner for the two of them.

Matt wrapped the towel around his waist before stepping out into the bedroom, his gaze immediately going to a photo on his dresser of Jill and Faith sitting on a rock. He remembered the day he'd taken the picture. Faith had been about three years old and they'd gone on a short hike up to a lake in the area. They'd just finished lunch when Jill and Faith had walked up a short path and sat on the rock to look over the valley below.

Matt followed them lazily, pulling his camera out and snapping pictures so they could always remember the day.

God, how he missed them.

Tears started to fall again as emotional pain swelled inside him. How was he supposed to live through this? He thought losing Jill was as hard as things could get, but now, losing Faith was so overwhelmingly painful that

he thought he was going to explode with the worry and fear he had to face each day she was gone.

The pain quickly turned to anger as he thought about how everything he loved had been taken from him. Wasn't losing one person he loved enough? Did he have to lose his daughter as well?

He grabbed a bottle of cologne off the dresser and threw it across the room, watching it shatter against the wall. "Fuck!" he screamed as he reached for a small porcelain statue and tossed it too, the sound of it shattering somewhat satisfying. He turned, sweeping his arm across the dresser, sending everything flying off it as he gave into his rage and let the emotions overwhelming him finally take over.

"Matt." Xander was suddenly in front of him, pushing him hard, back against the wall and crowding him with his body. "Stop. This isn't going to do any good."

Matt pushed Xander back. "Nothing does any good. No matter what I do, it does no good. She's gone. They're both gone. How the fuck am I supposed to go on like this? How can I live knowing she's out there, probably being hurt, and I can't protect her?" Matt shoved Xander again.

Xander gripped Matt's arms, holding them at the wrist as he lifted them over Matt's head, again pushing him hard against the wall. "Stop, you don't want to destroy everything. I know it hurts. I know you're angry, but this isn't the way." Xander's chest pressed against Matt's, holding him to the wall as his hands continued to trap Matt's hands over his head. "Stop and breathe."

"I don't want to fucking breathe. I want my daughter back!" Matt closed his eyes, his breath coming hard. He didn't fight Xander. It was pointless, he was too strong, and honestly, he was right. None of this was going to solve anything.

Tears still fell as he tried to calm himself down, but his emotions were so all over the place he didn't know how to control them. Just for a little while, he wanted this all to go away, for it to go back to how it had been before Faith was taken. He needed the sanity he hadn't been able to find since the call had come that she never came home from school.

"I can't do this." Matt cried as he again struggled against Xander's hard body.

"You don't have a choice." Xander's voice was calm. "You aren't going to give up. I won't let you."

"I can't do this anymore. I can't." Matt fought again to break free of Xander.

"Stop fighting me. You have to calm down. Destroying things isn't going to help."

"You're right. Nothing helps." Matt tried to push Xander away by thrusting his hips forward, but all he managed to do was cause the towel he had wrapped around his waist to come free.

Xander seemed to ignore the fact that Matt was naked against him as he continued to hold him against the wall. "I'm not going to let you hurt yourself or destroy things."

Matt glared at Xander, wanting to hate him. He wanted to fight, break things, let all of his emotions take control and go on a wild rampage, but as he locked eyes with Xander, some of the fight was forced out of him. Broken and tired, Matt finally gave in, letting his head fall against Xander's chest as he took several deep breaths.

"It's going to be okay," Xander whispered against his ear. "I'm not going to let you fall apart. We'll get through this together."

As the tension eased from Matt's body, he leaned hard against Xander, needing his support. When Xander released his hands, he didn't think twice about dropping them around Xander and hugging him tightly. "I'm so tired of trying to be strong."

"You don't need to be strong with me." Xander pulled back and gently lifted Matt's chin in his palm, forcing him to look at him. "It's okay to let go. I just won't let you hurt yourself. I won't let you destroy things."

Matt stared into Xander's eyes, seeing the concern, the compassion. It was something he hadn't seen in a long time. Everyone else looked at him with pity. Xander understood him. He didn't try and make it all okay. He accepted it for what it was and allowed Matt to do the same. Suddenly needing the closeness, the compassion, the touch of another person, Matt closed the distance between them and softly kissed Xander's mouth.

Xander tensed for a brief moment, but then seemed to give in, his arms tightening around Matt as he moved his mouth against his and gave Matt exactly what he desired.

It had been years since he'd kissed another man. In college, he'd dated a guy for several years before he graduated and went on his way. It was soon after that, Matt had met Jill, and that was all there ever had been in his life, until now.

Xander's hands caressed up and down his back, slowing just at the base of his spine, stopping before sliding down over his ass.

It was a vivid reminder to Matt that he was naked in Xander's arms, but he didn't care. He wanted this, needed it. It had been too long, and even if it meant nothing, the arousal that was growing was exactly the thing he needed to separate from the real-world problems that were starting to consume him.

He kissed Xander back hard, parting his mouth and caressing his tongue over his lips, deepening the kiss. He moved his hips forward, brushing his arousal over Xander's hardening cock, groaning against his mouth in pleasure at the feel of another man against him. Even through the clothing Xander still wore, his arousal was evident.

Xander was the one to pull back, his breath coming hard as he rested his forehead against Matt's. "We have to stop."

"Not unless you want to. I want this, need it."

Xander closed his eyes as if he was debating on whether to argue or not. When he opened them, he stared directly into Matt's. "You're sure?"

"God, yes. Please." He didn't care what repercussions there would be later. For just a little while he needed something else to focus on. He needed to feel something other than despair and fear.

That must have been enough for Xander because he dipped his head and claimed Matt's lips, this time he controlled the kiss, teasing his mouth, and pressing his tongue inside as he wrapped his arms around Matt's body and hauled him tightly against him.

Matt slid his hands under the back of Xander's shirt, running his palms over his warm skin as he rocked his hips, pressing his cock against Xander's, wishing they were both naked so he could feel the heat from him there as well.

As if thinking the same thing, Xander suddenly lifted Matt off the ground before turning and carrying him to the bed. He gently set him down on the mattress before stepping back and lifting his shirt from his body.

Matt watched as Xander worked open the button, then the zipper on his pants, his own cock pulsing with need and growing harder as he enjoyed the show that Xander was giving him.

"Touch yourself." Xander's eyes narrowed as he focused on Matt's cock even as he kicked off his boots and bent down to pull off his socks.

Matt didn't hesitate. He parted his legs as he wrapped his fist around his cock and slowly started to stroke. He was so hard it hurt, harder than he could ever remember being in his life. Precum dripped from the head as he slid his thumb through the glistening moisture with each stroke of his palm.

"You are so fucking hot." Xander rid himself of his pants.

Seeing Xander naked, his pale skin covered in dark ink, his muscular body tensing with each breath he took, it was a thing of beauty. He wanted to taste every inch of it, feel every curve of skin, and enjoy it being pressed tightly against his own. "Let me taste you." Matt scooted to the edge of the bed, reaching out, hoping Xander would come to him.

"Fuck..." Xander took two steps and stopped, standing inches from the bed and between Matt's legs as they hung over the edge.

Matt smiled, not giving Xander a chance to refuse him as he leaned forward and took him into his mouth. He loved giving head. It was the only thing he'd missed when he'd married Jill. Being bisexual, he found pleasure in both men and women, but there was something about sucking a hard cock that gave him something he could never find with a woman. He licked up his length before sliding his mouth down him, taking him as deep as he could.

"Jesus!" Xander fisted his hands in Matt's hair. "Fuck, that's good."

Matt didn't mind that Xander rocked his hips, feeding his cock into his mouth. He took it, craved it, let pleasing Xander become his only focus. Unable to go as deep as he wanted, he slid off the bed, going to his knees before Xander, never releasing his cock.

Xander moaned, and as Matt looked up, he found him with his head back, lips parted, and painted skin starting to glisten with beads of sweat.

It had been years since Matt had been with another man, years since he'd sucked on a hard cock, but he had no problem remembering how, relaxing his throat, opening himself, and taking Xander as deeply as he could.

His own cock ached, but he didn't touch it. As much as he wanted to get off, he also wanted this to last as long as it could. It was the first distraction he had in forever, and he was taking full advantage of focusing on someone else for a change instead of his own problems.

He gripped the back of Xander's legs, then slowly slid his hand up until he was cupping Xander's ass, kneading each cheek, and wondering how far they were going to take this.

The taste of Xander against his tongue was like honey, the slight flow of continuous fluid dripping from the head of his cock urged Matt to keep working so he could get the full reward.

Xander's hips moved back and forth as he continued to hold Matt's head, staring down at him with a matching hungry need that consumed Matt.

Matt slid his hand over Xander's ass, pausing at his crack for a moment before sliding a single finger down the crease and pressing against his hole. He was tight, but there was no hesitation from Xander at his touch, only a pleased groan when Matt pressed the tip of his finger over him and circled the sensitive spot.

"Fuck this." Xander finally stepped away, his cock falling from Matt's mouth with a pop. "I need you to fuck me." He turned, picking his pants off the ground before pulling a condom from his pocket.

He turned back, reached down, and pulled Matt off his knees as he brought their bodies tightly together again and kissed him hard.

Matt clung to Xander, his knees almost weak at the thought of being inside him. He hadn't expected Xander to let him fuck him, he'd been ready to be the one receiving, but hearing Xander say he wanted Matt to fuck him shot his need to almost uncontrollable levels.

Xander broke the kiss, pulling back just enough to look at Matt. "How do you want me?"

"On your knees." Matt needed the fuck more than the intimacy right now. The thought of gripping Xander's hips and watching his cock slide in and out of him nearly made him come.

Xander stepped back before going around Matt and climbing onto the bed. He went up on his hands and knees, his legs spread, his ass like a welcome sign that had Matt's cock at full attention.

"You look good enough to eat." Matt climbed on the bed behind him, and without any warning, he buried his face between the cheeks of Xander's ass and started to lick over his hole.

"Fucking hell." Xander groaned.

Matt loved the way Xander pressed back against his mouth, and it took no time at all to have him wet enough that he could slide a finger deep into Xander's ass.

"I can't wait to feel you around my cock." Matt fucked him deep with his finger, then added another.

It was a sight he'd never tire of. Xander's ass stretched around his fingers, slowly opening for him. Beneath, thick, heavy balls swung back and forth as Xander fisted his own cock tightly in his hand.

"I wanted this to last, but fuck if I can wait." Matt reached over and opened the nightstand drawer and pulled out a bottle of lube before going back to his spot behind Xander. Taking the condom, he ripped open the package and rolled it down his cock, the feeling almost foreign to him, it had been so long since he'd worn one. After spreading lube over his latex-covered length, he drizzled it over Xander's ass, enjoying the way it pooled against his hole. "Ready?" He leaned forward, kissing a spot on Xander's spine where there was no ink.

"Fuck, yes." Xander glanced over his shoulder at him.

Matt smiled as he gripped the base of his cock and positioned himself at Xander's entrance. He didn't have time to slowly ease inside, Xander took the choice from him as he pushed back, forcing his ass to part around Matt's cock, and slowly eased him inside.

"Fuck, you're tight." Matt's hands gripped Xander's hips as he settled deep.

"Don't be gentle." Xander rested his head against the mattress for a moment before again pressing up on his arms. "Let me feel you."

Matt was more than happy with that. He loved hard, wild fucking. It was the one thing he'd always missed while he was married. Jill was more than enough, but there were times he wished he could use more force, take things up a notch. Having Xander give him permission to do just that was a huge turn-on.

Slowly, he started to thrust his hips back and forth, giving them both a moment to get used to each other. He was aware of everything, the way his balls swung, the way Xander's body gripped his, the scent of their sex slowly starting to form. He focused on Xander's back, taking in the ink he'd never seen before. He wanted to lean forward and trace it all with his tongue, but he was enjoying quickening the snap of his hips too much to lean so far forward.

"That's it. Harder. All that anger, all that frustration you were feeling. Take it out on me. Fuck me hard." Xander started to push back against him, meeting his thrusts, causing their skin to slap against each other. Every move they made became stronger, needier, and it didn't take long before

Matt was struggling to hold back. He didn't want to come yet. He wanted it to last all night.

Reaching down, he hooked an arm around Xander's body, drawing him up, forcing his back to his chest. As he continued to work his hips, sliding into Xander's hot, tight body, he reached down and wrapped his hand around Xander's cock, stroking him with the rhythm of his thrusts. With the other hand, he slid it up Xander's chest until he came to his beard and wrapped his hand around the base of it, just under his chin, the way he'd seen Xander hold it himself. "You feel so good." He snapped his hips harder, enjoying the slight change in position.

"Don't stop, don't let go." Xander cried out, his own body tensing. "I'm so fucking close."

Matt smiled as he dipped his head and gently bit against Xander's shoulder, tasting the salt off his skin. Fuck this man was amazing. The smells, the flavors, the brilliant art, he stimulated every sense. "You going to come for me? Let me feel your ass clamp down around me?" Matt fucked him harder, his own control slipping.

"Yeah, fuck yeah." Xander's neck muscles tensed and a mix of a grunt and a growl escaped him as his cock pulsed and thick streams of cum shot over Matt's hand as he continued to work it over Xander's thickness.

As Xander's ass tightened, sucking Matt deeper, he gave in to his own need, his orgasm shot through him, causing him to throw back his head, letting the pleasure flow as he filled the condom with his release. He didn't let go, enjoying holding Xander close just as much as he did the sex.

When he finally could catch his breath, he lifted his head, kissing the spot just below Xander's ear. "That was amazing."

"Yeah, it was." Xander turned his head, forcing Matt to release his beard as he sought his mouth for a long, lazy kiss.

Gripping his cock to make sure the condom didn't slip off, Matt slowly pulled from inside Xander, taking a second to remove the condom and drop it in the trash beside the bed before flopping to his back beside Xander.

"You okay?" Xander wrapped an arm over Matt's stomach as he relaxed beside him.

"I can't remember the last time I was this good." Matt closed his eyes. "Thank you for that."

"I should be thanking you." Xander laughed. "How is it I didn't know you were gay?"

Matt grinned, his eyes still closed. "Bisexual. I dated more men than women in the past, but there was something about Jill. She made everyone pale in comparison, but I've always missed being with men. It's different, ya know?"

"No." Xander laughed. "I've never been with a woman."

"Yeah, well, take my word for it. Don't get me wrong, I love Jill, but sometimes I wanted rougher, wilder. I missed calloused fingers and the scent of a man. I would have never cheated on her, but that didn't mean I didn't think about it sometimes." Matt turned his head, opening his eyes as he looked at Xander. He grinned, finding him looking the most relaxed he'd ever seen him. "I never planned on anything happening between you and me. Sex was the last thing on my mind. It just sort of happened."

"I'm not complaining." Xander rolled to his side, facing him. "It's the last thing I expected, but I'm more than happy it happened. I think we both needed that, and I couldn't find a hotter partner."

Matt blushed. "You could, but thanks, that was sweet. It did help. For a little while, I was able to just forget about everything. My mind wasn't racing a hundred miles an hour. I could focus on you and only you."

"Is it horrible of me to volunteer to help you with that if you ever need it again?" Xander leaned over and stole a gentle kiss.

"Would you want to do it again?" Matt didn't want to assume anything, but he wouldn't turn down another chance to do what they just did.

"Are you kidding? Of course. I'm a man. I'm not going to turn down hot sex if you want it. Just know, I don't like to top much, so if that's an issue—"

"I don't like to bottom much, so it works." Matt laughed. "I wouldn't mind doing it again. Sometimes I just need to..." He paused, thinking how wrong his words might sound.

"Escape?" Xander asked.

"Yeah, is that horrible? I don't want you thinking I'm using you."

"I don't mind. I know this isn't some great romance. If we can find pleasure in each other, help get each other through the long nights where we think too much, and have fun at the same time, then I'm more than okay with that."

"The team won't care?"

"Ah..." Xander bit his lip.

"Not allowed?"

"Not recommended. Bryon says that it can distract us, but he's not one to speak when Dyson and I think he's fucking Becca."

"Really?" Matt was shocked. "Isn't he like thirty years older than her?"

"Close to that. I know she is twenty-five, but I'm not sure of Bry's age."

"So, we don't tell them?"

"We don't hide it, but we don't flaunt it either. It's not like we are together a lot at the team house anyway. When we are there, you've got your head wrapped up in the computers. We'll be okay."

Matt's stomach growled.

"Dinner's ready, but probably cold by now." Xander traced his fingertips over Matt's stomach.

"How about a quick shower together, then we can eat. Then maybe, if you're up for it, we can repeat what we just did?"

Xander laughed. "I'll be up for it. That won't be an issue." He rolled over, wrapping Matt in his arms. "Getting up for you will never be a problem." As if emphasizing his words, he pressed his half hard cock against Matt's thigh.

"That's good to know." Matt forced back the guilt that was starting to creep into his mind. His daughter was gone and here he was fucking around literally in bed. He refused to feel guilty. He needed the escape, the release, the tension breaker, and if he could find that with Xander, he wasn't going to refuse it. "Let's go shower." He nipped at Xander's lip before forcing himself out of bed.

The night had surprised him, but he wouldn't have changed a thing about it. Xander was a welcome distraction, and one who wouldn't be upset if his emotions weren't always on him. This was exactly what he needed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Xander pushed the back door open, slipping silently into the house. He was glad to have a job to do after several weeks of nothing. When Bryon had called him, saying there was a job, he was more than willing to drop what he was doing and get back to work.

As he stepped into the house, a chill went through him. He'd learned long ago not to ignore his body's warnings. Something was off or going to go wrong. He'd felt the chill more than once, and every single time, there was something out of place or something that went wrong during the sting.

Debating if he should abandon the job or just proceed with caution, he looked around the darkened living room. The only light was from the moonlight that came through the windows from outside.

Checking to reassure himself he had his gun on his side, he tried to get a feeling as to why his body was warning him about something going wrong. They'd done their research. The man they were after had been in jail four times. Each time, he was released to offend again. They'd finally gotten proof that he'd been hanging around a local elementary school, and Matt had hacked into the guy's laptop, finding recent images of girls at one of the local parks, playing at the playground. A repeat offender like this wasn't going to stop. It was up to the team to make sure he couldn't hurt anyone again.

Xander shifted the file in his hands, cautiously moving through the house, unsure where the perp was at the moment.

A child's cry echoed through the house and Xander's stomach turned. There was no mistaking the sound, the pain, the fear that was in the child's cry. Everything else forgotten, Xander set the file on the couch beside him and pulled his gun out.

Following the sound of crying, Xander paused outside what he knew from his research was the master bedroom. He mentally prepared himself for what he was about to see, praying he didn't scare the child more by doing what he was about to do.

Without hesitation, Xander kicked the door open, not surprised at all when the man rolled off the child and picked up a gun off the nightstand by

the door.

"Don't try it." Xander fired, his aim well placed as a bullet ripped through the man's arm. As much as he wanted to worry about the child, he couldn't until he'd secured the man. Wasting no time, he was on top of the perp, wrapping him in a headlock as he kicked the gun away from where it had fallen on the floor.

The child screamed, but he had to make sure the perp was down before he even looked to see how badly the child was hurt. Pulling the syringe from his pocket, he slammed the needle into the man's neck.

It took only minutes for the man to slump in Xander's arms. Releasing him, he let the perp fall hard to the floor, not caring at all if he was injured.

"I'm going to help you." Xander turned to the child, sure his masked face and the gunshot were freaking the child out even more than she already was.

His chest tightened when he looked down at a young girl, probably no older than eight or nine. Her big brown eyes stared up at him, tears rolling down her cheeks. Her hands were secured to the bed, and she was completely naked with blood smeared across her legs.

The girl struggled to get free, and that about killed Xander. He wanted nothing more than to release her and get her the fuck out of there. "I need to get the bad man away, but there are going to be policemen and firemen coming to help you." He glanced to make sure the blood he'd seen wasn't life threatening, then he moved a blanket over her body, covering her nakedness. "They'll get you home to your family, okay?"

She shook her head and cried harder.

"I promise they are coming. It won't be long, but I have to take care of the bad guy first." Xander grabbed the man by the hair, seeing the look of fear in the man's eyes. If it wouldn't have been so traumatic, he'd let the little girl do his job for him tonight. It was only fair she take care of the man who'd raped her. Dragging the man out of the room and down the hallway, Xander tried not to think about the scared little girl in the bedroom. He had a job to do, and they had rules for things like this happening. The child wasn't touched until the police got there. He would do what he had to do, then get out as fast as he could.

"You're one sick fucker." Xander dropped the man on the living room floor, unable to hold himself back from kicking the man in the ribs. "I've never wanted to hurt someone as bad as I do you." Xander pulled out his

knife, enjoying the look of fear growing in the man's eyes. "Don't worry, I won't kill you." He cut through the man's pants, tearing them off him as soon as he had them cut enough to grip. "But, I am going to make you wish for death." Xander quickly pulled out his tools.

He didn't bother taking his time. He honestly didn't care if he did this job right or not. Let the man bleed to death, let him die of infection if he didn't get the tube in right away.

Taking a deep breath to calm his anger, Xander went through the steps just like he always did, never looking up at the man's eyes again, even when he cut his cock. He wanted out of the house as fast as he could, so the child could get help.

Tossing the man's cock and balls as hard as he could across the room at the wall, he quickly inserted the tube into his urethra before he pulled out his handheld blow torch and cauterized everything.

He didn't bother with anything more other than securing the man to the base of the coffee table before using the small can of spray paint to point the police to the victim. He then gathered his things and rushed out the door.

It was probably the fastest job he'd ever done, and maybe the sloppiest, but he needed to get the young girl help. Rushing to his car, he pulled out the burner phone, quickly calling 911. "There is a child being raped at 6712 Boothe Street." He hung up as he pulled away from the house.

Most of the time, he liked to be far away before the cops showed, but tonight, he needed to see that someone got to the girl. Finding a house for sale several streets down, he parked in the driveway, hoping the house was as abandoned as it looked.

He took a deep breath as he pulled out his own phone and sent a text back to Bryon.

Done. Active victim found. Secured and followed procedure. Watching for response now. STK

"Fuck!" Xander smacked the steering wheel. The image of the young girl would haunt him. She wasn't the first victim he'd seen, but each one got to him. It was a reminder of why they did the job they did, but it also left him feeling sick and disgusted with himself for days after because he

personally had to walk away and leave the victim alone when she was so scared and probably injured.

Scanner traffic has units on the way. Don't take risks. Leave if you must. STK

He was probably closer than he should be to the location, but he couldn't bring himself to drive off until he at least saw the first unit pull up at the house. He'd left the back door open, and the perp in sight, so he was the first thing they would see when they entered the home. He made sure they would see the perp first, wanting to make sure they didn't move the victim out and find him after. The young girl didn't need to see what Xander had done.

It took nearly ten minutes for the first police car to arrive, but the moment it pulled in front of the house, Xander quietly pulled back out of the driveway and headed to the lake.

Once there, he climbed out, taking several deep breaths before tossing the phone and tools into the lake. If anyone ever searched it, they would find a stash of things. He and the others used the location for years, only deviating a few hundred feet every few months so things didn't pile up too much in one spot.

Needing a minute before he drove, he quickly sent another text to Bryon.

On the way home. STK

A few seconds later, Bryon responded back.

Victim secured. Check in tomorrow when you're up. STK

Xander was glad the victim had been found, but he wasn't excited to have to check in. He'd worked with Bryon long enough to know what that meant. He didn't need Bryon or anyone on the team psychoanalyzing him and making sure he was okay. This wasn't his first rodeo. He was able to handle things, even if it was hard in the immediate hours after. He didn't bother responding to Bryon, but texted Matt instead.

Can I come over?

He didn't want to be alone tonight. He didn't know what he needed or wanted, but Matt was the one he wanted to be with.

Of course. Will unlock the door. Ice Cream?

Xander grinned.

Yes, please.

He got back in the car, sure that going to Matt's wasn't the wisest idea. It wasn't like he could talk to Matt about what he'd seen tonight. It was too close to home for Matt to hear about. All he did know was that he needed to be in Matt's arms. It was the one place he could let down his walls a bit and not have to hold the emotions back like he did when he was with the others on the team.

He'd spent several nights with Matt since the first time they'd had sex. He enjoyed whatever it was they shared. The sex was great, but even more, it was when they were laying there after, talking about nothing important, but just being together. They talked about things from their past, hopes for the future, and Matt spent hours telling him all about Faith.

Even though he'd never met the young girl, he felt like he knew her. Through Matt's love for her, Xander had slowly fallen in love with her too. He loved the way Matt's face would light up when he'd talk about her and share stories.

Xander sighed. What the fuck was he doing? He was letting himself get close to someone, and other than Dyson, that was something he didn't do. Even Dyson he kept far enough away that he never really had to talk about his feelings and emotions, but now, in his current mood, all he could think about was getting to Matt and holding him in his arms.

He pulled into Matt's driveway, glad to be done with the job. He'd planned on just going home after, but he just didn't want to be alone. He made his way up to the door, surprised when Matt opened it a second before he was going to knock.

"Hi." Matt arched his head. "Long night?"

Xander nodded as he stepped inside. "Horrible."

"Everything went okay? As planned?"

Xander shook his head. "The team is safe, but there was a hiccup."

Matt pulled him into a tight hug.

"I needed that." Xander clung to him, letting Matt's scent wash over him. "I need a shower."

"Go grab one. You can steal a pair of sweats out of my dresser if you want after. I'll scoop up some ice cream and meet you in the kitchen."

"Thanks." Xander kissed him softly, then headed down the hall.

It was the first time he'd showered there without Matt showering with him. Even though he was glad they didn't shower together tonight, there was a distinct feeling that something was missing as he stood in the stall, letting the water wash over him, rinsing the night away.

Once he was out, he found a pair of sweats, and quickly pulled them on. They were tighter than his own, but would work for the night. He didn't bother with shoes or a shirt as he made his way out to the kitchen.

"Coffee?" Matt asked as he pushed a bowl of ice cream across the counter to him.

"If it's hot already, yes, but don't make some just for me." He took the spoon and dug into the ice cream. "How'd you know I needed ice cream?"

"You never come over after a sting. You send a quick text telling me you're headed home and safe. Something had to have gone wrong."

Xander raised a brow. "Perhaps I was just horny."

"If that was the case, you would have thrown me up against the wall the moment you walked in the door like you did the other day." Matt slid a hot cup of coffee to him. "You aren't subtle when you want sex."

Xander laughed. "I guess that's true."

"So, what happened tonight? Why are you here eating ice cream at one in the morning?" Matt took a bite of ice cream, but he never stopped staring at Xander as he ate.

Xander closed his eyes. He shouldn't talk about what he saw. The last thing he wanted was Matt worrying that Faith was going through the same thing. "It was just a hard sting. Things I didn't expect."

"He had a child with him, didn't he?"

Xander looked at Matt, not wanting to answer, but his silence must have answered for him.

"I was part of this case, Xan. I know what he was like, what he was looking for. I'm not as shocked as I wish I was. He's been looking for a girl

for days, and from the evidence, he had one picked out. The photos of her increased in the last day or two."

Xander nodded. "I'm not sure if it was her, but he had a girl with him. I hate leaving kids behind. I fucking hate not being able to take them with me when I go."

"She was safe?"

"Injured, but safe. I watched until the police got there. It still doesn't help how I feel. I had to tell her the police would come. I had to leave her just as I found her. I couldn't risk evidence, risk outing the team. I couldn't risk not doing things by the book. I moved him out of the room, did what I was there to do, and left." Xander stirred the ice cream absently.

"You did the right thing. If you'd been caught, think of how many other kids you wouldn't be able to save. There are rules for a reason. You know she's safe now." Matt came closer to Xander, hooking an arm around his waist. "The evidence is more important."

"I hate when they see me. I mean I'm masked and scary looking. I only added to her fear."

"She saw you take the bad guy away, right? You said you moved him out of the room?"

"Yeah, I had to shoot him when he went for his gun, then I drugged him and pulled him out of the room after making sure she was okay."

"Then she should have known you weren't going to hurt her. You went after him. Hell, you shot him. That showed her you were trying to save her. You told her the police were coming."

"She was so scared." Xander straightened. "Fuck, you don't need to hear all this. I shouldn't have come here."

"I'll be there with the team when you debrief tomorrow. I would have heard it all anyway."

"You shouldn't have to hear it all. Hell, you shouldn't even be doing what you're doing."

Matt shrugged. "I put myself in the middle of it. I was doing this before you guys came to me, remember? I know what is going on out there, and as hard as it is, I know what Faith is probably going through. I've cried myself to sleep more nights than I care to admit. It doesn't stop me from wanting to help. If I hadn't found this guy you visited tonight, that girl would still be there. She wouldn't have been saved, and there is no telling what he would have done once he needed to get rid of her. Because of what the team does,

people are being saved. I just have to hope that Faith is strong enough to wait for us or someone else to find her."

"If she is anything like her father, she's strong enough to get through anything." Xander bumped his shoulder into Matt's. "Thanks for letting me come over. I just didn't want to go home and think about it all night."

"You're always welcome here."

"Even if it's not to throw you up against the wall and have my way with you?"

"Even then, though I won't complain if you come by just for that as well." Matt leaned in and kissed Xander's shoulder.

As they finished their ice cream, Xander tried not to think about how close he was becoming to Matt. This wasn't like him. He didn't do relationships, romance, he didn't need others in his life. After tonight, he could no longer tell himself he was here all the time for Matt. He'd come for his own needs this time, and that scared the hell out of him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Matt glanced at his watch, trying hard not to think about what was ahead for the rest of the day. The last thing he wanted was to spend the afternoon with his mom and sister, but he'd put it off long enough.

He hadn't seen his mom in person since the week Faith had gone missing and she'd blamed him for what had happened. He understood it was all because of the tension and fear they all shared, but her words cut deep. Should he have had someone walk Faith home from school? Was the half a block too far for a ten-year-old to walk alone? He still didn't think so. He refused to put blame on anyone other than the fucks who kidnapped his daughter.

He'd spent the first few weeks blaming himself, but the more he talked to other parents of missing kids, the more he saw that it wasn't his fault. Yes, there were things that could have been done, but honestly, it would have taken building a wall around his daughter to make sure she was never at risk. He'd heard other parents' stories, and so many of them proved that bad things could happen anytime and anywhere.

He grabbed his keys from the table and headed out the door, pausing when he saw an older woman coming up the walkway toward the house. He stepped down from the porch, meeting her. "Hi, can I help you?"

"You're Matthew Springton," she said it as a fact, not a question.

"Yes." Matt wished he hadn't already locked the front door, so he could have a quick escape if it was another journalist looking for an interview.

"My name is Gretchen Price. I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm a psychic."

Matt held up his hands. "Thanks, but no thanks. The cops warned me people like you might show up and try and scam me."

"I'm not here to scam you, I promise. I make a good living on my own. I don't need to go out and attack people during the worst moments of their lives. I know you might not believe in what I do, but if you'll give me five minutes of your time, I'll explain." She looked up at him.

"Is it about Faith?"

"It is. I watch the news, keep track of cases like this where I might be able to help. I know there are many who claim to do what I do just to make a dollar, but I'm not asking for anything from you. I've studied the case as best I can with what little information is in the media, and I've had some visions. Now, I can't promise that they will lead to anything, but more times than not, what I see is accurate. All I want to do is give you the information and let you decide what you want to do with it. I've tried to contact the police. I just hate going directly to families, but as you might guess, the police aren't always willing to listen to someone like me. I hope that you might at least consider my information and maybe see if you can talk the police into following leads." She lifted a folder to him. "This is what I've seen. I've also left my card if you have any questions. I don't ask for anything in return. I just want to see you get your daughter back."

Matt took the folder, part of his mind telling him to tell the woman to get lost, but the other part, the part who would do anything, believe anything to get his daughter back, gripped the folder as if it was the most important file in the world. "You think she is still alive?"

Gretchen smiled. "I do. I wouldn't have come if I didn't. If I think a child has passed, I send the information to the police. I don't bother the family then. What they do with it from there, I don't know, but I've done my part as best I can. If I think the child is alive, I hope the family will push the police to follow up, since, sadly, I don't think they do on their own."

Matt wasn't sure what to say. Having someone tell him his daughter was alive was huge, but then the fact it was coming from some lady who could be crazy caused him to hesitate. "Thank you for bringing this to me."

"You're welcome. Good luck. I'll be watching the news to see her come home." Gretchen gently laid her hand on his arm for a moment before turning away. She took several steps before turning back to him. "And that man you're seeing, the one with the long beard. He needs you more than he shows. Don't let him push you away." She smiled again before turning back and heading down the sidewalk to her car.

Matt watched until she pulled away, wondering how she would know about Xander. They hadn't told anyone they were seeing each other. There would have been no way she could have known they were more than friends, even if she had been watching the house to gain information.

The whole thing left him uncomfortable, while at the same time, giving him hope that by some miracle, the woman was right, and Faith was alive.

With his mind elsewhere, Matt pulled out his phone and called his sister. "Trish, I'm not going to make it until later. Something's come up I need to do."

"Matt, Mom is looking forward to dinner."

"I'll be there for dinner, I promise, but I have some stuff to do first. Just let her know I will be there by five." That would give him three hours to look through the file and figure out what to do with it.

"Alright, is everything okay?"

"Yeah, just some personal business." Matt headed to his car, clicking the locks open. "Talk to you tonight." He didn't wait for her to say more. He ended the call and climbed into his car, starting it, and cranking the air conditioner.

He stared at the folder, almost scared to open it, finally deciding that he would wait until he got to the team house before he read anything in case it was upsetting. The last thing he needed was to be driving, thinking about whatever it was he might read.

As he pulled out onto the road, he reminded himself that many families had hired psychics, and many had come up with nothing. Just because some crazy lady claimed she knew things, didn't make it true. She could have written down anything to try and further her career. It was the fact that she didn't ask for anything in return that had him hoping that she was the real thing.

The drive to the team house took forever. He walked inside, the file tightly in his hand.

"Matt, I didn't expect to see you here." Trenton glanced up from the table. "I thought you had dinner with your family tonight."

"I do, but something came up. I'm still going, but wanted to look into something first."

"What's up?" Bryon walked out of the kitchen, drying his hands on a dishcloth.

"Um, this is going to sound crazy, and maybe I'm looking for hope where there is none, but I had a lady show up at my house. A psychic. She gave me this folder and said she hoped it would help lead me to Faith." Matt sat down at the table beside Trenton. "I haven't looked yet. I didn't want to be alone when I did." He flipped the folder open, holding his breath as he started to read.

Bryon sat down beside him. "You know that psychics usually are just looking to make a few bucks."

Matt nodded, but didn't speak, too interested in what he was reading.

The file was simple. Comments like, blue house, country setting, large trees, pond not far from house. There really wasn't a ton of information, but then again, there was. Already, Matt was thinking of ways he could search online for a location like this, maybe even drive around to areas that matched and look for a blue house.

"Matt, don't get your hopes up." Trenton reached over, turning the folder slightly his way so he could read.

"I know, but what if she is that one percent who does have a gift. I owe it to Faith to try, to at least consider what is here."

"And we will look into all of this, but like I said, most of these people are fakes."

Matt glanced up. "She knew things about me that no one knows. There is no way she could have known. Things that have happened in the last month." He wished Xander was there, so he could explain to him. Xander would understand how impressive it was that she mentioned their relationship.

Matt pointed at the file. "Look, she describes the man who has her. Can we enter the information into the database and see if anyone matches, if there are any hits?"

Trenton nodded. "She's pretty descriptive on some things. It might be worth looking into."

Bryon reached out. "Can I see?"

As much as he wanted to keep reading, getting Bryon to approve letting them follow the leads was more important. He could do it at home, but he'd promised the team he would quit digging for information from his personal computer. Besides, he had stronger programs and resources here.

Bryon quietly read through the file before looking over at Matt. "What else did she say?"

"That she only contacted families when she felt the child was still alive. That if they were dead, she sent the information to the police to follow up on, but didn't think they ever did. She sounded like the police don't believe her. I mean, I get that so many are fake, but why wouldn't they follow every lead that comes in, no matter the source?" He wondered if they had more information about Faith than they'd let him know about.

"Did she say how she finds the cases?"

"She said the news. Said she would watch the news to see if Faith came home." Matt sat back, rubbing the back of his neck. "What are the chances she's real?"

"Not good. Most of these are fakes, but if you say she wasn't looking for money or seeking anything else..." Bryon shrugged. "We'll look into all this, but I don't want you to get your hopes up."

Matt sighed. "All I have left is hope. I can't lose it. I know chances are slim, but we have to try." He went to reach for the file.

"Nope, I'm sorry, but you let Carter and me handle this one. It's too close to home for you. If any of this information pans out, I don't want you running off on your own."

"I wouldn't—"

"You sure?" Bryon narrowed his eyes. "Because I know I would. I'd go in guns blazing to get my child back. Don't make the same mistakes I did in the past, Matt. You want this done right."

Matt wanted to ask what Bryon did, but his mind was too focused on the file. "Let me help. She's my daughter."

Bryon shook his head. "Carter and I will start on this right now. You go visit your family. Take some time away from here. I know how hard this is for you, but let us handle it. It's probably nothing. Don't get your hopes up."

"I know." Matt slumped. "I just don't know how much longer I can do this."

"You keep going until you have answers. One way or another. You don't give up." Trenton gripped his shoulder. "You know we will do everything we can, but when it's this personal, you won't be able to keep a clear head. You'll see things that aren't there, and miss things that are."

Bryon nodded. "I'm the only one here who can honestly say, I know what you are going through, and I do know how hard this is, but you have got to let us handle it. I know it's killing you, but as soon as we find out anything, one way or the other, we will call you in."

Matt nodded. They were right, but it didn't make it any easier. "You swear you'll call?"

"If even just one lead pops up from this," Bryon promised.

"Want me to drive you to your family thing?" Trenton asked.

"No, I'll be okay. Just wish I was here helping." Matt stood. "Thanks for following up. I know it's probably nothing, but I have to try. I can't

ignore anything."

"We wouldn't expect you to," Trenton said.

Matt tried to smile, but was too nervous. "Okay, I'm off to face my mom, but I'll drop by here when I'm done. No stings tonight?"

"Kase is going out. We'll be here if you want to come sit with us, but you're off the computers until we look into this. It shouldn't take more than a day or two."

"I can work on other—"

"No, you don't even need to be in the room while we search. Trust me, I know what I'm doing." The tone of Bryon's voice left no room for arguing.

"Fine." Matt ran a hand through his hair. "Keep me posted." He turned and walked out of the house before he found himself throwing a tantrum like a child. He felt like kicking and screaming. Each day that Faith was missing seemed to push him closer and closer to having a breakdown.

All he could do is hold on to hope, remember that somewhere Faith was out there, and he needed to stay strong for her. Falling apart wouldn't help her. No matter what, he had to get through this. Even though his world was falling apart, he would act like he had it together, because there was no other way. If he didn't focus on finding Faith, no one else would.

By the time he arrived at his mother's house, he was ready to turn around and go back and insist that Bryon let him help in going through the information. It wasn't like he had to bring it to the team house. He could have gone through it on his own. The only reason he had brought it over was that the team had programs they could use that he didn't have. Government programs that he couldn't find anywhere else. He never asked how they got hold of the programs, but he was glad they had them to use. It gave them even more power to verify the information and find the people they needed to handle.

"Matt." Trish opened the door as he walked up the steps.

"Hey." He tried to smile, but the dread of walking into the house, not knowing what to expect was almost consuming. "What's the mood?"

"It's fine. Mom's happy that you're here." Trish stepped aside as he walked inside.

The smell of his mom's pot roast filled the house, and for a moment, he was a child again, coming home after soccer practice to family dinner. The memory was nice until he remembered the last time he had pot roast here was with Faith. They'd come over to visit and spent the night playing cards

with everyone. He took a deep breath, refusing to get lost in memories of Faith. He needed to stay positive and show his family he was holding it together.

"Matt?" His mom came out of the kitchen, her arms open to him. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too." He hugged her. They'd talked a few times on the phone since the fight, but he hadn't been ready to face her. Her words and blame still stung, and it was going to take time for him to get over what she'd said to him.

"Come in and have a seat in the kitchen while I finish with the gravy." She led him into the kitchen. "How are you?"

"As good as can be expected." He took a seat at the island opposite the stove. "How are you?"

"I'm okay. Just worried about you. I keep going to church and praying for Faith."

"Thanks, Mom." He wasn't about to tell her that he'd all but given up any belief in a kind and loving God the day that Faith was taken. Now, after all he'd seen online, he had a hard time understanding how there could be such pain in the world if God was supposed to love them.

"Trish tells me you've gone back to work?" His mom glanced up from where she was stirring something.

"Actually, it's a new job." Matt prepared himself for any reaction.

"You quit your old job?" His sister was suddenly at his side.

"Matt, do you think that was wise? Now's not the time to be making major life changes." His mother didn't look happy as she stared at him over the stove.

"Honestly, it was the perfect time. I'd hated my job for years. I needed something new." He was already wondering how he could sneak away before they sat down to eat.

"What are you doing now?" Trish pulled up a seat beside him.

"Computers, the same as before, just for a new company." He wasn't about to tell them the truth. "It's a small company, but pays better. I'm a lot happier." He reached over and snagged a grape from the bowl sitting on the counter.

"They know about Faith? They'll work with you if you need time off?" his mother asked.

"Yeah, they know everything. They're great to work with. It's nice to be with a smaller company, and I really enjoy the work. It's been a good change."

"Why didn't you tell me when we talked?" Trish looked hurt.

"I didn't even think about it. We talk about Faith, nothing else really."

"You should have told me." Trish smacked his arm. "What else is new?"

"Nothing. That's the only thing." He debated on telling them about his trip to the police station to identify clothing, but decided that wasn't something he wanted to bring up with them.

The questions kept coming, and by the time they finished dinner, he was drained. Even if their hearts were in the right place, all they did was make him worry more about his daughter than he already was. Not to mention that the memories they shared were all done in the past tense as if they honestly never expected to see her again.

Matt glanced at his watch, wondering if he'd stayed long enough to satisfy them. He really wanted to head home. He'd hoped to get a call or update from Bryon about any information, but his phone had stayed silent. "I think I'm going to head home." He glanced at his mother. "I've got to work early." The lie came easy.

"Oh, alright, but promise me you'll come by again soon. I've missed you." She stood at the same time he did, before coming over to hug him.

"I will, Mom. Thanks for dinner. It was good."

"I'm glad you ate so well. You've lost so much weight since all this has happened." She pinched his stomach. "I'll have Trish bring you over some meals, so you just have to warm them up."

"Thanks." There was no point in refusing. She'd do it even if he told her not to. Turning to his sister, he smiled. "I guess I'll see you soon then?"

"You know it." She hugged him. "Love you."

"I love you too." He hugged her back. His sister was slowly starting to understand that he didn't need to be cared for all the time, and leaving him alone was sometimes best, but she still called and showed up unexpectedly. He gave a final wave to his mom after taking the bag of leftovers she handed him. "I'll be in touch," he promised before rushing out the door to the safety and silence of his car.

Glad the night was over, he headed home, trying to sort out the millions of emotions the day had brought to life.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"You what?" Xander stared at Bryon in shock. "This is his daughter you're talking about. You have to tell him. How could you not?"

"If we give him any information it's going to get his hopes up. If this turns out to be nothing...."

"But it could be something. Think about this, Bryon, if this was your child, you'd want to know. You wouldn't want your friends keeping secrets from you. He brought the file over here. He easily could have done the search himself."

"He could have, and then he would probably head off to find his daughter and make a mess of everything. It's better this way. All we know now is we have a location that matches the description the psychic gave us. We don't have nearly enough information yet to go on. It could be nothing. This woman could have just picked a random location and gave it to Matt." Bryon poured himself a cup of coffee.

"He deserves to know, even if you don't give him the location." Xander was pissed. Matt deserved to be a part of this. He agreed he shouldn't be allowed to run off and check out the location in person, but he did have the right to know that it did exist. "How long have you known?"

"A few days. Why are you suddenly so worried about Matt?" Bryon eyed him.

"Leave Xander alone," Dyson spoke up from his spot on the couch in the living room. "You know we'd all fight for each other if we thought someone had a right to know anything."

His comment made Xander wonder if Dyson suspected something was going on with him and Matt. He hadn't told anyone, but Dyson knew him better than anyone. If someone was going to catch on, it was him. "I just think he has a right to know. He's trusting you with the file. He didn't have to do that. You know as well as I do that he could have researched most of it himself. It might have taken longer, but he didn't have to come to you guys."

"Think about it. If this was your child, what would you do? I've been in his shoes, Xan. I know what the man is thinking. I know how he'll react. I'm

protecting him."

"Bullshit. You don't know him at all. He's nothing like you." Xander fisted his hands at his sides. "If there is any information, he deserves to know. He's not a loose cannon like you were, Bry. He will wait if we tell him to. It's not like we're going to give him the location, but he deserves to know there is one that matches. I won't keep this from him." Xander turned to leave.

"Xander, don't—"

"Don't what? Treat people right? Do what's right? Fuck you, Bry. I'm right on this and you know it." Xander opened the door.

"Where are you going?" Bryon yelled.

"To see Matt and tell him what we know." Xander was out the door before anyone could say more.

Once in his car, he took a deep breath. He understood what Bryon was saying, but he didn't know Matt the way he did. Matt would be furious if they kept anything from him. It was a point of trust. Matt trusted the team with the information, and he deserved that they trust him not to run off and take matters into his own hands.

With his temper flaring, he raced down the road to Matt's house, wondering if Bryon would send Dyson or someone after him. The fact that his phone hadn't rang gave him hope that he would let them be. It wasn't like he was doing something that would blow a case or put the team at risk.

As he pulled into Matt's driveway, he saw the kitchen light on, glad that Matt was home. He probably should have called first, but he didn't feel uncomfortable just dropping in. Matt would tell him to go if he didn't want company or was busy.

He parked beside Matt's car, surprised it wasn't in the garage. It wasn't like Matt to leave it out all night. It was still early, but he assumed Matt would have put it in the garage when he got home.

The two of them hadn't talked in days, which wasn't uncommon. It wasn't until he'd gotten to the team house that he'd even heard that a psychic had approached Matt. His first reaction was to be pissed off that someone would try to scam him, but once he heard from Bryon that some of the information was panning out, he paused and really thought about it. He'd never not believed that kind of stuff was possible, it just hadn't ever been proven to him. He'd seen so many fakes that he just dismissed them all, but if the information this woman gave was proving to be true, then maybe they

should listen. The fact that she didn't ask for money went a long way in showing that she wouldn't have anything to gain by lying to Matt.

He took the steps two at a time onto the front porch and rang the doorbell.

Several minutes passed with no answer, but Xander was sure Matt was home. He never left lights on, and the only time he didn't take his own car was when he was with him. Worried that something was wrong, Xander tried the door.

When it pushed open, his pulse shot up. Why wasn't Matt answering? A million thoughts rushed into his head, everything from the dark web having tracked him down to Matt finally having a breakdown, but none of it felt right to Xander. Matt was strong, and he'd been off the dark web from this location for over a month or two now.

It was shocking to think that it had been that long since they'd met, it seemed less, but then again, longer in other ways.

Hoping he wasn't walking in and interrupting Matt, but needing to be sure he was safe, Xander headed inside, wishing he had his gun. "Matt?"

He paused to listen, hearing nothing at first, but as he made his way down the hallway toward the bedroom, a small sound caught his attention, then another. Xander blew out a relieved breath as he headed for the only room in the house he'd never been in — Faith's.

The door to the room was partially open, and after hearing another sniff, Xander gently pushed it the rest of the way open. His heart ached seeing the little girl's room with a pink bedspread, the top of the bed filled with stuffed animals. There were toys along one set of shelves, and books along another. A small desk sat beside a dresser, but what had his full attention was the man sitting in the center of the room, his arms wrapped around a zebra stuffed animal as he cried.

"Matt?" Xander slowly sank down beside him. "Come here." Without thought of what he was doing, Xander pulled Matt into his arms and onto his lap. He cocooned him in his embrace, holding him tightly against his chest. It was one of the few times he'd really seen Matt cry. He figured he had to have bad moments, hell, any father would, but until now, Xander had seen very few.

"I miss her so much," Matt whispered.

"I know you do." Xander kissed his temple. "Tell me more about her. Is the zebra hers?"

"It's her favorite. Her mom got it for her when we went to the zoo. She sleeps with the damn thing every night since, but it holds up. You'd hardly know it was that old." He held up the zebra as if showing Xander the lack of wear. "She hates sleeping without it. When we went to Disneyland a year ago, she forgot it. I had such a hard time getting her to sleep. I bought her ten other stuffed animals, but none of them would do. She only wanted the stupid zebra."

Xander smiled. "Did you have anything when you were little?"

"Not that I slept with, but I had a stupid wrestling figure that I carried with me everywhere I went."

"I had a duck. I don't know where I got it. Probably something my grandma got me. She was always buying me weird things, but I slept with that duck for years. I wouldn't go to bed without it. I have no idea what happened to it."

Matt took a hard breath as he wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt. "I keep thinking about her having to go to sleep without it every night now. If I can't save her, I wish I could at least get this to her, so she'd have something to hold on to."

Xander kissed Matt's forehead. "Hopefully, someday soon, you can hand it to her and she won't have to ever sleep without it again."

Matt sighed, slipping out of Xander's arms, and moving back to the floor. He turned, leaning his back against Faith's bed. "I feel like I'm losing hope. I feel like if I give up, I lose all chance of getting her home, but then the longer I go without her, the more I feel like I need to just give up." Matt raised his gaze to meet Xander's. "I don't want to give up on her."

Xander wasn't sure what to say. Everything sounded so cliché. He slid around, his back against the wall so he was facing Matt straight on. "I have news, but I don't want it to give you false hope, but I think you deserve to know everything. Bryon disagrees, but I can't keep secrets from you."

Matt's head snapped up. "About Faith?"

"No, but about the information the psychic gave you."

"It's true?"

"They are still looking into it, but there is a location they've found that matches what the file said. They need more time to dig into who lives there and do all that computer digging that you guys do, but I thought you deserved to know that the place does exist. This doesn't mean the woman didn't just pick some random location and lie."

Matt nodded. "But Faith might be there?" He shook his head. "Could she really be there?"

"I don't know. Bryon didn't want to talk to you until they knew for sure, but I knew you'd want to know."

"He's afraid I'll go there myself."

Xander gave a single nod.

"Do you know where it is?"

"I didn't ask. I'm letting them do their job. We handle this case the same way we do any other. For now, every other case is on hold while they deal with yours. They are putting every resource into it. If Faith is there, we will know it, and we will get her."

Matt ran his fingers through his hair. "They're right, you know? If I knew where it was, I'd go. I'd break down the door, search the house, kill anyone who tried to stop me."

"I know, that's why no one is telling you where this is. You need to be here when Faith comes home, not arrested and sitting in a prison cell."

Matt stood, holding the zebra in his hands. "It might not be there."

"No, it might be nothing."

"But it might be something." Matt set the zebra on the bed, then ran his fingers over the pillow. "I thought I was handling things okay. The team helped to keep me busy, I was starting to feel like I could actually breathe and get through the day when I woke up. Then tonight, I was just sitting there reading and I thought I heard her laugh. It cut right through me. I came into her room to remember, and just lost it. It's like everything I've been holding in for the last few weeks bubbled up and I just couldn't be strong anymore."

Xander stood, closing the distance between them. "You don't have to be strong all the time. It's okay to be scared, it's okay to worry, and it's okay to miss her." He pulled Matt into his arms. "It's good to come in here and remember the good times."

Matt started to cry again, his head pressed against Xander's chest. "I miss her so much."

Xander closed his eyes, wishing he had a magic button to push to go back in time and stop all of this from happening. He hated that there was nothing he could do or say to help. He held Matt for several minutes, letting him cry.

When Matt pulled back finally, he stepped away. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't put this all on you."

Xander laughed. "What? We're supposed to just have sex and forget that we're human, with other emotions and things going on in our lives?" As soon as he said the words, his own heart skipped. That was exactly what he did with every other man he had sex with. It was sex and nothing more. He didn't get close, didn't let them in his life. How had things changed so much with Matt? He wanted the closeness, the conversations, the support they could give to each other. It was Matt he ran to after a bad sting, and now, here he was offering to be whatever Matt needed him to be.

The thought should have scared him, but it didn't. For the first time in his life, he wanted someone he could confide in. Not just like he did with Dyson, but on an even closer level, a lover's level.

"I just..." Matt sighed. "I'm fucked up right now. It's a lot to deal with. I don't want you thinking you have to—"

"Have I given you the impression it bothers me? I mean, if you don't want me to be here, if you need to be alone, then I'll go, but I'm here because I want to be. I want to help you through this. You're not fucked up, the situation is. If you need someone, I'm here if you want me to be."

"No, I want you here. I just... I'm not the type to lose it like this."

"This is kind of an out of the ordinary situation. I think even the strongest person would lose it from time to time when their child is missing. I'd worry about you if you didn't." Xander gripped Matt's shoulders. "It's okay to lean on someone, to let it out. You don't always have to be okay. I sure the hell know I wouldn't be if it was my daughter."

"What are the chances this psychic is right?"

"Honestly, if you'd asked me when she showed up, I'd have said none, but after talking to Bry, I can't guess."

Matt bit his lip, then looked back up at Xander. "She knew about us."

"What do you mean she knew about us?" No one knew about them. They had been careful not to let the team know, and they'd never shown any kind of affection in public.

"As she walked away, she said I shouldn't let the man with the long beard that I'm seeing push me away." Matt shrugged. "I haven't told anyone that we're sleeping together. That was when I decided I really did need to follow up on what she gave me."

"She knew about me?" Xander was shocked. "How is that possible?"

"I don't know. I mean we've only slept together a few times. It's not like we're dating or anything. There is no way I can think of that anyone would know, let alone a stranger."

"Fuck." Xander wrapped his hand around his beard, wondering if this woman was really able to see things.

"I had to listen to her after that."

"Yeah, that would have gotten my attention too." Xander released his beard. "It still doesn't mean she's right about Faith."

"No, but she could be."

"Yeah, she could be, and that's why I wanted you to know everything going on. Even if it's just simple things. Bryon's wrong to not let you know."

"Thank you. I want to know. I mean, it's hard. It gives me more hope, and I know that is dangerous, because I could really be let down if it's nothing, but as you saw tonight, I need all the hope I can get. Every day that goes by, it gets harder to believe that she's still alive, that I'll ever get to hold her again."

"Never give up. I won't let you. Until the day comes you have proof one way or the other, you have to have hope, you have to fight to find her."

"I'm sorry you walked in on me like this."

"I'm not. I wish you would have called me. I was going to call the other day, after your dinner with your mom, but I got busy. Had I known this was all going on, I would have been here."

"Honestly, I handed the file to Bryon and tried to forget about it. I've never been a huge believer in that kind of stuff. Jill was. She loved learning and reading about all kinds of stuff like that. She watched all those ghost shows on TV. It was never my thing. I thought the lady was nuts, but then she didn't ask for anything in return, then she mentioned you. It was enough to make me wonder."

"All we can do now is wait. Bryon will make sure he checks it all out." Xander offered Matt his hand. "Got any ice cream?"

Matt laughed. "Yeah, bought some more today. It's a new kind, want to try it?"

"Sounds good." Linking his hand with Matt's he led him out of the room, hoping that someday Faith might join them for ice cream and all of this would be nothing more than bad memories.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"What are you doing?" Matt opened his eyes, looking down his body to where Xander was teasing the head of his cock with his tongue.

"I was hungry." Xander sucked the head between his lips then released it.

"And this is what you were craving?" Matt closed his eyes as Xander palmed his balls.

"It's part of what I'm craving." Xander took Matt's cock deeper into his mouth, working his lips up and down the shaft.

"Fuck, you can have this anytime you want." Matt tried to relax and enjoy the pleasure Xander was giving him, but it was so intense he tensed as he lifted his hips, feeding his cock deeper into Xander's throat. "You're so good at this."

Xander hummed around him, continuing what he was doing, going deeper, and his lips tightening even more around him.

"Turn so I can play too." Matt reached out and tapped Xander's naked hip.

Xander turned, going up on his knees, straddling Matt's chest. His cock was already hard, his heavy balls hanging down, perfectly in position for Matt to lift his head and lick over them. He didn't try reaching for Xander's cock, that wasn't really what he wanted right now. He was more interested in the perfectly rounded ass that was inches from his face.

Matt teased Xander's balls for several minutes, sucking and licking over them, enjoying the soft moans that vibrated around his cock each time he scraped his teeth over Xander's sensitive flesh. Sliding one hand over the soft skin of Xander's ass, he smiled as he slid his finger down the crack of his ass and over the hole.

Xander groaned, causing Matt's cock to jerk.

Lifting his head, he pulled Xander's ass closer to him, finally able to reach his ass and slide his tongue over the same spot his finger had been. He loved Xander's hard body, the muscles and the ink turned him on more than he would ever admit, surprising him, because he'd never found himself attracted to men like Xander before.

Even his ass was covered in ink, the lines and curves of tribal art playing over the arcs, giving Matt something to trace with his fingers as he buried his mouth hard against Xander's ass and started to tease. He licked and sucked against him, loving the way Xander's body trembled over his own.

Once he had him wet, Matt eased back against the pillows, using his fingers to open Xander up and probe inside him. With the intense sucking Xander was doing on his cock, and the look of his ass spreading around his fingers, Matt struggled to not lose control. He wanted to bury himself deep inside Xander and fuck him as hard as he could until they both came.

Xander's mouth was like fire around his cock, sucking and pulling against him as he hit just the right areas with his tongue to add just enough intensity to cause Matt to nearly lose his mind.

He fucked Xander hard with his fingers, stretching him open as Xander pushed back against them.

Enough was enough, he couldn't wait anymore. "Need inside you." Matt bucked his hips, nearly coming as Xander pulled his mouth off him with a pop.

"Condom?" Xander asked.

"Nightstand." He had to go out and buy a box after realizing that sex between them was going to be an ongoing thing.

Xander turned and reached for the nightstand. Once he had the condom out, he ripped it open and smiled as he rolled it down Matt's cock. "Stay just like that."

Matt didn't move as Xander grabbed the lube, first covering Matt's cock with it before dripping it over his fingers and moving them to his own ass. Matt struggled to breathe as he watched Xander's fingers press into himself. "Fuck, that is so hot."

Xander laughed as he pulled his fingers free and moved to straddle Matt's body. He positioned himself just over Matt's cock. "Better than coffee first thing in the morning."

Matt laughed as he held the base of his cock, brushing the head over Xander's ass. He groaned as Xander slowly lowered onto him, taking him deep inside. Once he was all the way settled, Xander bent and kissed Matt gently.

"Give me your hands." Xander lifted his out.

Matt linked hands with Xander, his cock throbbing as Xander lifted off his knees and went to his feet, squatting over him as he started to move. There was no slow start, no easing into things. Xander rode him hard, slapping his ass down, then raising quickly back up before doing it again as he balanced himself using Matt's hands.

Matt tried to thrust up, but it ruined the flow of their movements, so he just gave in and let Xander do all the work. Needing to do something, he managed to hold both of Xander's hands in one of his, so he could reach out and stroke Xander's cock as it bounced in front of him.

"Fuck!" Xander's head arched back as Matt's fist worked over him. "You're going to make me come."

"That's the idea." Matt laughed, his own orgasm building in his balls.

This was a new position for them, and one that Matt was loving. He was always worried he was taking Xander too hard, but it was clear by the way Xander was slamming his ass down against him, hard was exactly what he liked and needed. That was fine with Matt. He loved it rough and wild. He stroked Xander faster, sliding his hand over the head, drawing the precum down with his palm, coating him to ease the movement of his hand. "Xan, you better be close because I can't hold...." Matt's orgasm rushed through him and he cried out, his body tensing, his cock pulsing, and his heart racing as he came.

Unlike when he was on top, he couldn't stop the motion and give his cock a chance to recover. Xander kept moving, sliding his ass up and down him, milking him for every drop. The pleasure was almost painful as he gripped Xander's cock tighter, wanting him to feel the same pleasure of release.

"Faster!" Xander cried, his neck muscles tightening as his ass started to clamp around Matt's already spent cock. "Oh fuck, holy shit. I'm..." Xander grunted as his body stilled, dropping to his knees again as his cock blew, hot streams of come shooting out over Matt's stomach.

"Fuck that was amazing." Xander fell forward, his head resting on Matt's shoulder.

"Yeah, it was." Matt wrapped one arm around Xander as his cock slipped free from his ass. "What a way to wake up in the morning."

Xander laughed. "I was wondering how long it would take. I'd been teasing you a good five minutes. I was starting to worry I'd lost my touch."

"Oh no. You still have it." Matt sighed. "Now I want a nap."

"Me too." Xander rolled to his side, stopping to strip the condom off Matt's cock before flopping back down beside him.

"It's a good thing our job doesn't make us work normal hours." Matt glanced at the clock, seeing it was after ten in the morning. He had been drained when he went to bed, emotionally burned out after breaking down, then trying to digest the fact that at least some of the information the psychic had given was real.

"Yeah, I'd never make it working a nine-to-five." Xander sighed.

"You know, when I signed up, Bryon told me how much I'd get paid, but I never thought to ask, who pays us? Where does the money come from?"

Xander rolled to his side, going up on one arm as he looked down at Matt. "Are you sure you want to know?"

"Do I?" Matt narrowed his eyes. "Is it legal?"

"Um, technically, no."

Matt sighed. "How bad?"

"I personally don't think it's bad at all. It's not a secret Bryon keeps from the team. We all know. I'm sure he just wanted to get you hooked on the job before telling you everything."

Matt rolled to his side, so he was facing Xander, resting a hand on his tattooed hip. "Okay, let's hear this." He caressed his fingers gently over the skin, hoping whatever he was about to find out wasn't so horrible he would have to quit working for the team. The money was nice, but so was the job itself. He loved knowing he was saving people.

"Well, Carter might work his magic and rearrange some of the pedophile's bank accounts a bit. He might transfer some money here, and some there. He claims there is no way to trace it all. From what they say, Bryon and he invest the money, then draw our weekly wages off that. I've never really dug into how they do it all, but honestly, I have no issue taking money from these assholes anyway. I'm just glad that Carter or Bryon know what they are doing when it comes to investments. I enjoy those payments every Friday."

Matt sucked on his bottom lip, thinking it all over. He really didn't feel guilty about where his money was coming from. If the pedophiles had the money still, they would probably use it to groom, buy, or manipulate children one way or another. "I guess that's not so bad. I mean, it isn't legal, but I've seen what some of these assholes do with the money. I've seen the

sex trafficking and the parties and other things they do. If taking their money might stop this while helping us to find them, then I'm all for it."

Xander nodded. "That's the way I feel about it too."

Matt leaned over and kissed Xander softly. "Thanks for being so honest, especially last night. You were right to tell me about the case, even if it's just a small thing, it is something. I'll talk to Bryon later today or tomorrow and let him know I do want all the facts." Matt stretched.

"Probably tomorrow. Today I'm not feeling like doing much. Do you have a job tonight?"

"No, I'm actually leaving town day after tomorrow to do a sting in Texas. Kasey, Dyson, and I are all headed there. There are eight kids being held and four adults at all times securing them. We'll be back in the area a couple of days after."

"There's four of them and only three of you?" Matt didn't want to examine the wave of fear that went through him at the thought that Xander might get hurt. Honestly, any of them, but it was Xander that he was most concerned about.

"We'll be okay. We've done it before. We'd like to add a few members to the team, but as you can guess, this isn't a job we can post a notice online about, and even then, not many people would be willing to do what we do. It takes a strong mind and stomach some days."

"Yeah, I couldn't do it." Matt still got nauseated thinking about exactly what Xander did to people. He wasn't upset by it by any means, but he had trouble with the visual of the whole thing. There would be no way he could do it or even watch it in person.

Matt's phone buzzed on the nightstand, and he rolled picking it up. "It's Bryon," he said to Xander before answering, "hello?"

"Hey, Matt, I was wondering if you could come to the house. We've got some information for you." Bryon sounded more serious and professional than he usually did.

"It's about Faith?" Matt sat up straight in bed.

Xander sat up beside him, his hand going to Matt's thigh.

"We'll talk when you get in here, there are some leads we need to discuss, but it's best we do it in person," Bryon told him.

"Is she there?" Matt glanced at Xander, his heart pounding at what Bryon could need to talk about.

"We'll talk when you get here. Do I need to send someone to pick you up?" Bryon's tone changed to concerned.

"No, no, it's okay. I'll be there in fifteen minutes." Matt climbed out of bed.

"Make it twenty, don't speed. What we have to talk about isn't urgent enough to get yourself killed. Get here safe," Bryon warned.

"I'll be there." Matt hung up, pulling on a pair of pants, ignoring the dried cum on his stomach as he buttoned them up and glanced over at Xander. "He says he needs to talk to me. It has to be about Faith, right?"

"I assume—" The sound of Xander's phone ringing interrupted what he was going to say. He picked it up and nodded to Matt. "It's Bryon. Hello?"

Matt continued to get dressed as he tried to guess what Bryon was saying to Xander.

"Yeah, I'm on my way." Xander ended the call. "He asked me to come in for a team meeting."

"What does that mean?" Matt struggled to stay calm, his mind racing every which way.

"It doesn't mean anything. He calls these all the time. You've been called for them before, but the fact he didn't say team meeting to you, but that he had to talk to you makes me think this could be about Faith. We won't know until we get there." Xander pulled his shirt on.

"Fuck, I shouldn't hope this is something big, should I?" Matt moved to the bathroom that connected to his room and ran a brush through his hair before brushing his teeth.

"Hope isn't a bad thing, as long as if it ends up not going how you want, you don't let it crush you." Xander came up behind him and wrapped his arms around him from behind. "We'll deal with whatever it is he has to tell you. I can't see him calling you in to tell you it was a dead end. That's something he could easily say over the phone, but it could just be to tell you that more information has panned out. It doesn't mean he knows where Faith is or that he has confirmation she's alive. It just means he needs to talk about something. Don't let your mind go places until you have more information." Xander kissed Matt's neck before borrowing his brush.

Matt braced his hands on the bathroom sink. "I'm glad you're here. I'm not sure I could drive."

"Me too." Xander met his gaze in the mirror. "Now let's go. Bryon better have coffee waiting since we don't have time to make any." Xander

swatted Matt's ass with the brush before dropping in on the bathroom counter and walking out.

Matt took a moment to shut the door and pee, but quickly finished and followed Xander out of the house and to his car.

As he sat down in the passenger seat, he tried to push back the feeling that this could be it. He could be minutes away from knowing where Faith was, but just as easily, he could be minutes away from still knowing nothing. If he could survive this, he could survive anything.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Xander pulled up in front of the team house, trying to think of anything to calm Matt's nerves. Honestly, there was nothing he could say because he didn't know any more than Matt did. He hoped that if Bryon felt the need to call them in this way, he would have some good news.

"You okay?" Xander asked, putting his cigarette out, then turning to Matt before they got out of the car.

"Yeah, I will be. I just hate not knowing, wondering." Matt pushed the passenger door open. "Let's go see what is going on."

Xander followed, fisting his beard nervously as they walked into the house, surprised when Bryon met them near the front window.

"I'm assuming you two were together since Xander wouldn't have had time to pick you up and get here this fast?" Bryon raised a brow.

"Save it for later." Xander snapped, not in the mood to deal with Bryon playing authoritarian. "Be glad I was. He wasn't in any shape to drive after your veiled request for him to come in."

"He wouldn't have assumed it was about Faith if you hadn't run off and told him about it, would he?" Bryon glared back at him.

"You know what, Bry? Just fuck off. You're not our father. You're just part of the team. We give you respect because you're the oldest member, but we don't need you telling us how to live our lives or deciding what is right or wrong. I'm sick of you playing god." Xander shoved past Bryon, glad to see Beau, Dyson, Becca, and Carter in the living room.

Matt followed, turning to Bryon once he was in the room. "Do you have news or not?"

"Kasey should be here any minute and we'll talk. Everyone needs to hear this." Bryon turned and headed down the hall to the geek cave.

Xander sighed, reaching out and pulling Matt to the couch by his side. As he rested his hand on Matt's thigh, he ignored the looks from the others as they watched them. "Does anyone know what this is about?" Xander looked at Carter, who was the one who would know the most out of the group.

"There's a lot to go over. It's best to wait." Carter looked at Matt. "It's good news," he said in a lower voice.

Beside him, Matt blew out a long breath, some of the tension leaving his body, but he still fisted his hands in his lap and tapped his foot nervously.

No one said a word as they waited, and when the front door opened, and Kasey walked in, the tension in the room increased.

"Bry, everyone's here," Carter called.

A few seconds later, Bryon and Trenton walked into the room.

"Thanks for coming on short notice." Bryon glanced at Trenton, then at the file in his hands, then back at Matt. "I'm sorry for being vague, but I needed you in a controlled environment when you heard the news. Faith is alive, and we know where she is being held."

Matt stood up. "She's alive?"

"She is, but that's all we know. We don't know her condition or what has happened to her." Bryon smiled. "But, we've confirmed it's her."

"Where?" Matt's hands shook.

Xander reached over and braced a hand on Matt's back, needing to support him somehow, though he doubted Matt even noticed.

"There are two other children with her. We were able to use some of our government programs to look at heat sources. It looks like two adults and three children. The building is alarmed and secure, but we can gain entry."

"Just call the police on this one, Bry," Becca spoke up.

"We've thought about that, but they won't act on a random call. They'll send out officers to investigate the home, but they won't be able to get a warrant or anything without solid information. We could give them that, but then we put the team at risk when they try to figure out where it all came from. That's why I wanted you all in for this meeting. Faith is Matt's daughter, and if we need to get the police out there now, we can, but it's going to be a slower process than if we act on our own as if this was just another sting." Bryon stepped toward Matt. "If you want us to call the police we can, but I honestly think us going in is faster, but there are conditions if we go in."

Matt was shaking so badly Xander thought he was going to collapse. Xander looked up, speaking for Matt. "What conditions?"

"We do it tonight, just like we do any other sting. I'll send two in, you take care of the perps and call the police. You don't bring Faith or the other children out. We leave them for the police just like we do with any other case. We let the police call you to meet them at the hospital. You act like you had no idea this was going to happen."

"You can't leave her—" Matt started.

Xander stood up, turning to Matt. "She'll be safe. We'll make sure. If they are in danger we'll get them out, I promise, but it's better for the case if the police deal with the children and not us."

Matt shook his head.

"If we let the police do this, we give them information, and we have to wait for them to verify it all before they will act on it. They may send a detective out to ask questions, but this will just give the perps warning that something is up, or someone is on to them. I'm sorry, Matt, but I can't go in and change up how we do things for even one case. It puts all of us at risk, not to mention the future of the team. I won't do that, even for your daughter. If she was in danger between the time we handle the perps and the time the cops get there, we would do everything we could to get her out, but this way, the team stays safe. The cops are used to how we work, there won't be any surprises if we stick to our M.O., and I promise we will have the house under surveillance until the police arrive."

Matt sank back down onto the couch. "How do you know for sure it's Faith?"

Bryon glanced at Carter, but it was Trenton who spoke. "We have hacked into the computers on site and they have uploaded photos of Faith and the other girls they are holding."

"Fuck," Dyson cursed.

Xander sat back down beside Matt, his hand going to his back. "One step at a time. Let's get her home, then we can deal with the rest, okay?"

Tears fell down Matt's cheeks as he nodded. "How soon can we go in?"

"Eleven tonight." Bryon glanced at his watch. "That will give the guys eleven hours to learn the layout of the house and everything they need to know about the perps. I'll send Dyson and Kasey in the moment it's safe. I don't dare go any earlier."

"I want Xander to go." Matt reached for Xander's hand. "He needs to be the one."

"I don't think—" Bryon started.

"This once, don't think, Bry, let Xander go in my place. I'll stay here with Matt." Dyson glanced over at Xander. "If Matt wants Xander to handle this, he has his reasons."

"Can you disconnect your personal feelings on this, Xan?" Bryon narrowed his eyes as he stared at Matt holding Xander's hand.

Xander fought back his anger. "The same way I disconnect with every case, Bry. The same way we all find a way to keep from feeding the perps their own balls every time we go in, knowing what they've done to the children."

"Bry, you know we are always professional. Give Xander a break. Today is not the time to hound him on whatever is going on between the two of them." Kasey smiled at Xander and Matt.

"Thanks, guys." Xander glanced back at Bryon. "I've got this. If Matt wants me in, then I'm in, if he wants me here with him, I'll stay."

"I want you to go." Matt turned to him, wiping tears with the back of his hand. "Make sure she's safe. Make sure you get them all, so they can't hurt her anymore."

"I promise. Kase and I will make sure it's secure before we walk out. We won't leave anyone there to hurt her. We'll wait outside until we know the police are there, then I'm coming right back to wait with you for that phone call, okay?"

Matt nodded. "I'll really get to see her tonight, won't I?" He buried his face in his arms and sobbed.

Xander couldn't imagine what Matt was feeling. His emotions had to be all over the place. As much as Xander hated waiting the long hours to go in and get her, it was for the best. There was no way that the police would act as fast as they could, and the police wouldn't make sure that the perps never hurt another child again.

"Here." Becca was suddenly in front of them, handing Xander a box of tissue and two bottles of water. "We're behind you no matter what you need."

"Thanks." Xander smiled at her, even though her words were meant for Matt.

"I'll be at the hospital when they bring her in. They'll bring her to Children's Hospital. I'm not working tonight, but since I'm part of the child sexual assault team, if I'm there, they'll call me in on Faith's case. This way, I can get you honest and straightforward information. You won't have to

deal with all the bullshit, at least from the doctor's side. There will be a million questions and a ton of offers of help, but that can all wait."

"We have a counselor for the team if you wish to speak to her in time," Bryon said.

Xander held up his hand. "All this can wait. Let's give him time to get used to what is going on now and tonight." He leaned in close. "Do you want to be alone for a bit? We can go to the guest room if you want."

Matt shook his head. "No, I want to see the file you've got, Trenton. I want to know what I'm going to be dealing with once Faith is home. I need to know everything that you know."

Xander bit his lip, not sure that it was the wisest move, but then again, he'd have to know sooner or later. At least letting Matt see the file, Xander wouldn't feel as if he was keeping things from Matt. They would both know everything.

"You're sure you want to do this now? It's not going to be easy," Trenton warned him.

"I'd rather break down here with you guys than in front of Faith. I need to be strong for her." He glanced at Bryon. "I'm going to need some time off."

"Already planned on it. You take as long as you need. The team is here for you no matter what. You just have to call." Bryon nodded to Trenton. "Let him look through the file, and get Xander and Kase the information they need to be studying."

Matt stood, his eyes red and swollen, his face pale. "Thanks." He took the water Xander handed him and went to the kitchen, sitting down at the table.

Xander wanted to go with him, but something told him that this was something Matt needed to do alone.

After watching Trenton hand Matt the main file, he took the files that were handed to him and Kase. "Anything major we need to know?"

Carter sighed. "More than you're going to want to hear about, but not the worst we've seen."

As Kasey moved over to sit on one side of him, and Carter the other, Xander forced himself to focus. He needed a clear head for tonight. This case mattered more than any other because, for the first time, he'd see the after results happening right before his eyes.

"Okay, first security systems." Carter opened the file and demanded they get to work.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

Xander glanced over at Kasey as they pulled up just down the street from the old blue farmhouse they were about to break into. Thanks to Carter and his knowledge, the alarm would be hacked and disconnected before they got to the side door where they would enter.

The location didn't make it easy on them, while there weren't any close neighbors, the house itself was huge, and from what little surveillance they could do, the man and woman inside didn't spend much time together. That meant that Kasey and he would have to split up, something they never liked doing if they didn't have to. Depending on where they found the adults, they would either get to work where they were or drag them into the same room.

"I hate that we have to leave Faith." Kasey sighed. "I would love to rush her home to Matt."

"So would I, but Bry is right, this is the best way. We do anything different and it will put suspicion on Matt. We need him to be just another hysterical parent right now. He can't let on he knows anything about the perps or what happened to them, and he has to act surprised when the call comes in."

"I can't even imagine what he must be going through." Kasey shook his head. "I'd lose my fucking mind."

"I don't know how he hasn't." Xander stared out the window, wishing they would get the confirmation text telling them to go.

"What's up with you two anyway?" Kasey asked.

"Nothing really, just friends."

"You and I are friends and don't hold hands or touch all the time."

Xander laughed. "I never knew you wanted to."

"Fuck off, You two a thing or not?"

"Not. We just found a way to work off a little steam together. Call it stress relief. It's nothing serious. I think he needed the distraction, and you know how we get after a job.... Sex is a good way to work off some of that shit."

"So, you're just fucking?"

"And friends. I don't know what will happen once Faith is home. I'm guessing he might not want me around much while he deals with everything. I don't know, we haven't really talked about it."

"He was married to a woman before, right?"

"Yeah, she died a few years ago."

"So now men?"

"He dated men too before he got married. He's bisexual."

"That okay with you?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"I don't know. When I told you I was bi, you acted like I was mental." Kasey shrugged.

"No, not mental, well at least not because of that. You mentioned being asexual and that was what got me. Like you don't crave sex, want it with anyone."

"I'm not completely asexual. That's the wrong term. It's just I find sex to be boring most of the time. I mean, I like to get off, but it's better doing a solo run, if you know what I mean." Kasey fidgeted with his phone. "I guess there's probably a better word for it. I just don't know it. I like going it alone. I haven't met many who make me want to take the time to get to the sex part of a relationship."

"You know, you can have sex without a relationship." Xander smirked.

"Right, like you and Dyson do all the time. No thanks, I don't want to be sticking my dick in just anyone. I'll leave that to you two."

"Don't know what you're missing," Xander teased.

Before Kasey could answer, Xander's phone beeped.

Confirmed go. Be safe. STK

"Let's get this done." Xander double checked he had everything he needed as Kasey did the same.

With a final glance around them, the two exited the car, walking side by side as if they were just two friends on a walk. They'd gone over the plan several times, both ready to do exactly what they needed to so nothing went wrong.

They silently made their way to the side door, Xander trusting that Carter had cut the alarm. Using his lock pick, he quickly got the door open, slowly pushing it wider, making sure there was no one in sight.

Once inside, Kasey nodded to Xander and they both went off their separate ways. Xander walked through the darkened house as if he'd lived there his entire life. He always made sure he was prepared, but this sting was even more important. He wanted Faith back in Matt's arms where she belonged.

Refusing to distract himself with thoughts of Matt and what they were still going to have to face once she was home, he turned the corner, smiling to himself when he saw the man sitting at his computer. Photos of young girls filled the monitor as Xander quietly moved into position right behind the man's chair, syringe at the ready.

He didn't say a word as he slid the needle into the man's neck. The last thing he needed was for any sound to alert the woman they were there, since he didn't know exactly where or what Kasey was doing at the moment.

As the man jerked, then slumped in his chair, Xander carefully moved him to the floor. He grinned at the man, softly whispering, "I have looked forward to meeting you."

The man stared back at him, unable to move anything other than his eyes.

Xander didn't waste any time. The sooner they were done, the sooner they could leave and get the police in, and Faith safe. He tied his arms, then cut the clothes off the man, ignoring the look of fear in his eyes as he ripped them from his body. He didn't bother with the shirt. He only needed the pants off.

"Well, not much there to work with, is there?" He quickly tied the string to the man's cock and balls. "You shouldn't miss that little bit."

Tears fell down the man's cheeks.

"Stop crying. This is no worse than what you put those girls through." His voice was low, but he was sure the man could hear every word.

It took him only minutes to cut the man's balls and cock off. He tossed them aside before reaching for the tube. He inserted it, then quickly cauterized the area, finding the smell of burning flesh oddly satisfying this time around.

His stomach tightened at the thought of what this man was doing to Faith. He hadn't gone through the pictures, but he knew enough. This was one time he wanted to kill the man, let him bleed out slowly and suffer for

what he did. If there was any other way to let him live and make him suffer, he would have gladly done it.

Kasey appeared in the doorway. "Done?"

"Yeah, everything okay?" Xander pulled the zip ties out and secured the man's legs to the heavy desk.

"She's tied in the bedroom. I've already spray painted the trail. Once you finish up, we can get out of here."

"Placed the file?" Xander asked.

"Right beside her." Kasey glanced at the pieces of flesh that Xander cut from the man. "Didn't give you much to work with, did he?"

Xander grinned as he gathered the last of the items and made sure there was nothing that would leave a clue to who had done this. "Had to cut close."

"Let's go." He followed Kasey out of the room and to the side door. "I hate leaving her."

"I know, but there's a spot where we can sit and watch for the police just over the hill. It looks like a lover's lane type lookout."

"Ah, you taking me parking, Kase?" Xander made his way outside, quickly moving up the road toward the car, glad when he could lift the mask from his face.

"If the cops come close, you're damn right I'm going to rip off your clothes and make us look like lovers instead of suspects. I'll suck your cock to keep out of prison."

Xander laughed as he pulled out the burner phone as he slid into the car. "Ready?" He held up the phone.

"Yep, make the call."

Xander hit 911. "Yes, there is a need for medical at 1834 Jasmine Road. Two victims." He hung up the phone without saying anything more.

Kasey pulled down the road as Xander fished out his own cell and sent a quick message to the team.

Completed. No issues. Waiting on response. STK

He sent it to the team, then sent another to Matt's phone.

We are done. Police on the way. She'll be with you soon.

He glanced at Kasey as he set his phone down. "I hope they are right and she's in there."

"Carter and Bry wouldn't say she was unless they knew for sure." Kasey pulled off the road to a small overlook point that gave them a perfect view of the ranch house. "You saw the photos on the computer the man was using. They were of Faith."

Xander nodded. "What was the woman doing?"

"Sleeping. I walked in and had her subdued before she even woke up." Kasey put the car in park, then took a deep breath, resting his head back against the seat. "There was a ton of little girls' clothes in the room. My guess would be they dressed them up before photographing them. The cops will have their hands full going through this home."

"Good, let's hope it leads them to others." Xander stared down at the farmhouse. "How long do you think before they identify Faith and call Matt?"

"I don't know. I'm kind of curious about that myself. I'd hope it's right away, but I guess a lot will depend on the condition of the kids, if they can give their information to the police or if the cops have to figure it out on their own." Kasey tapped his fingers on the steering wheel.

"Waiting is going to kill Matt."

"Dyson and the others will take care of him, and even if they don't call and alert him right away, Beau will call and update them. She'll be in good hands, at least better hands than she's been in." He glanced over. "Is Matt going to be okay with all that he's going to have to deal with?"

"I don't know. Honestly, I don't know if I should keep coming around or give them space. I want to be there for them, but I don't want to be in the way either. I don't think Matt can do this alone. I know he's got family, but they aren't going to support him, they'll be there for Faith." Xander started to really think about things, trying to figure out why he was so uncomfortable with the idea of not seeing Matt as often as he was.

"Just wait and see how it goes. She'll be in the hospital for a few days I'm guessing, while they run tests and make sure she's physically okay, then I don't want to even think about her mental state." Kasey shook his head. "I wish there was a way to make these fucks suffer more than we already do."

"So do I." Xander pointed. "Cops are there with medical staging. We can go unless you wanted to start that make out session with me."

Kasey laughed. "Dude, you have too much hair on your face for me to get freaky with. Shave that shit and maybe we can have a go at it."

"Never." Xander gripped his beard protectively. "I haven't been clean shaven since I left the Army. I don't even want to think what I'd look like."

"Ah, it might actually help your looks." Kasey pulled the car onto the road.

"Right, like you know what good looks are. I saw your last—"

"Don't go there." Kasey cast a side glance at him with a teasing smile.

Xander laughed and pulled out his phone again, quickly sending a message to Matt.

Police are there along with medical. I'll be there in forty minutes or so.

He hated that they were so far away from the house, but he had to trust the rest of the team to take care of Matt and keep him from going nuts as he waited for information.

What was the house like?

Matt's question had him biting at his lip. What was he supposed to say? Most of the houses they went into were normal, with no sign of the horrendous things that went on inside them. It could have been any neighbor's house, any family members.

It was a normal home, clean, like any other. Will explain when I get there.

He glanced at Kasey. "Matt's asking about the house. Do you think he hopes it was nice, so Faith wasn't held in filth or that it was something out of a horror story?"

"I don't know. Honestly, does it matter?"

"No, but I guess it's where any parent's mind would go."

"There and a lot worse places." Kasey turned onto the road that would take them to the lake.

"Yeah, I can't imagine."

"Look at your past. It happened in the home. There is no one type of place it happens. Homes, churches, schools, friend's houses, it can happen

anywhere."

Xander nodded. "We take out so many, and more show up. When does it ever end?"

"I don't know." Kasey pulled up to a turnoff by the lake. "Let's do some stargazing."

"Wow, had no idea you were such a romantic date, first lover's lane, then stargazing. What's next, rose petals on silk sheets?" Xander got out of the car, his tools already bagged to be disposed of.

"Keep it up and I'm going to think you really do want my ass." Kasey tossed his smaller bag of things into the water.

"I've always liked the shy, quiet type." Xander threw his own bag, then the burner phone into the lake.

"I'm not shy or quiet, just picky." Kasey slid onto the hood of the car, looking out over the water.

Xander leaned against the car, anxious to get back to the house, but not wanting to rush Kasey if he needed a few minutes to clear his head after what they'd just done. He took the quiet moment to ask something that had always had him wondering. "Remember after my father's trial and you guys offered me a job?"

"Yeah." Kasey looked over at him.

"Why me? What made you think I was the right person to do this?"

Kasey shrugged. "What makes any of us the right person? We've all been touched by pedophilia, one way or another. Some recover from it, some let it consume their lives, and some, like us, fight back. You had a look in your eye the day they sent your dad to prison. It was a look that scared me, but not Bryon. Bryon said to us, we can save him by offering him a job and a way to deal with his pain or we can watch him self-destruct and take his pain out on everyone around him. It wasn't a hard choice to make. We knew you weren't squeamish. Your past, both personal and military, were enough to show that. Like with any other member we bring in, there was a risk you'd tell us to fuck off, but Bryon was sure you wouldn't."

"He was right. When he came and talked to me about it, I was ready to start that night. I hated that I had to go through training and wait. I kept hoping that just once I'd walk into a sting and see one of those fucks that my dad would give me to."

Kasey met his gaze. "Has it ever happened?"

"No, not yet. I know two of them are dead." Xander held up his hands. "Natural causes. They were the only two I knew the names of. One died before Dad's trial, the other during."

"Would it change how you did things if you did come across one of them?"

Xander shrugged. "I don't know. I'd like to think not, but I don't know." He'd spent more time than he cared to admit thinking what he would do to the men, but honestly, if it came to a sting, anything different would put the team at risk, and saying anything to the men would give away who he was, so no, he probably wouldn't do anything different. He wouldn't jeopardize the team that way.

"Bryon just seems to know who belongs on the team. He hasn't led us wrong yet. I worried about you being too much of a loose cannon, but you surprised me. Somehow you adapted to working as a team. I didn't think you would." Kasey jumped down off the hood. "Come on, let's get you back to your man."

Xander rolled his eyes. "He's not my man."

"He's the closest thing you have right now, so enjoy it. At least you won't have to go bar hopping with Dyson anymore."

"That's if Matt wants to keep up the casual hookups. With Faith home, he might not want anything going on. I'm not sure he's out to her. He's had no reason to ever bring up the fact he likes men too, plus, she might not take well to him seeing someone other than her mom, and right now, keeping things normal for her will be important." Xander climbed back in the car.

"Well, for what it's worth, I think you and Matt are a good thing. If he wants to continue, then go for it. I think you're just what the other needs right now." Kasey pulled out on the road.

As they drove back to the house, Xander wondered about that. How could Kasey know what he needed when he'd spent his entire life trying to answer that same question?

CHAPTER TWENTY

"Why haven't they called?" Matt paced the team house, trying not to shove past everyone and rush to the hospital where Faith was.

"I don't know. Maybe they haven't verified who she is yet. You know they can't call until they are absolutely sure." Becca curled her feet under her as she sat on the couch.

Matt stared out the window. It had only been thirty minutes since Xander had messaged him, telling him the cops were there. He was restless, angry, and scared, but more than anything, he just wanted to see Faith again.

"Beau will call as soon as she gets to the hospital. The scanner traffic says they are en route with three girls." Bryon sat on the edge of the coffee table.

"How long does it take usually?" Matt asked.

"I don't know. We don't usually follow up on anything after we leave. We make sure the kids are found, and leave the rest to the cops." Trenton gave him a sympathetic smile. "I'm sure she's telling them who she is right now, and they are contacting the detective in charge of your case."

"If she can tell them." Matt sighed, praying that Faith was alert and not injured.

"You saw our heat signature scan of the house. All three kids were moving around in the room they were in. That's a good sign." Carter handed Matt another bottle of water before sitting down on the couch beside Becca.

Matt closed his eyes, leaning his head against the cool glass of the window. He'd seen all the scans of the house, seen the pictures of Faith that the fuckers who held her had taken, he'd seen it all. It made him sick to think of what Faith had gone through. Any hope that she wasn't abused went out the window with the first photograph he'd seen. They had dressed her up, put make-up on her, and had her pose in ways that a child should never have to. Several times, he had to leave the room, afraid he was going to get sick at some of the images he'd seen. Even then, he was glad he knew. He didn't have to wonder what had happened to her, what she might not tell

him. He was prepared for whatever might come up in talks or in therapy. There would be no surprises.

He turned, looking at the group sitting around waiting with him. He hardly knew many of them, but they were supporting him as if they'd been friends for years. He didn't want to think about how hard this would have been to deal with alone. He would have called Jason or his sister to meet him at the hospital, but either one of them would have honestly been more of a hindrance than a help. The team seemed to know that he needed his space, and he was sure once he was with Faith, that would be even more so. He didn't feel pressure to talk about what he was feeling or tell them he was okay. They all knew he wasn't.

Lights flashed as a car turned into the driveway.

"That's Kasey and Xan," Trenton told them.

Matt's stomach ached, wondering what the people who were holding Faith were like. He'd seen their pictures, but that was all. He didn't know who they were, what they did, or even what they had planned for his daughter and the others they held.

Xander climbed out of the car and their gaze met through the window. Matt took a deep breath and watched as Xander did the same. Was he wrong to have asked Xander to go? He'd wanted someone he trusted there. Not that he didn't trust the others, but Xander would have gone the extra mile if he'd needed to, he wasn't sure the others would.

The door opened, and Kasey walked in, followed by Xander. The two looked tired, but both came over to him once the door was closed.

"I'm sorry I couldn't bring her to you." Xander pulled Matt into his arms.

"I know, it's okay." Matt took a heavy breath, trying to find comfort in Xander's embrace. He was barely holding it together. "Were they horrible?"

Xander pulled back and looked at him. "Yes, the fact they had Faith made them horrible. As for who they were, what they were like, neither of them had a chance to even speak. We took them by surprise and had them down before they could even respond. I can't tell you anything about them other than they deserved what they got, and what they will get."

Matt stiffened. "I didn't think about that. Faith will have to go through court, won't she?"

Becca stood. "The courts will do everything they can to keep the children from having to testify. There is enough evidence against these guys

that I don't think they will have to. It's never a guaranteed thing, but I don't know of a judge or prosecutor that wants to make a child take the stand."

Matt nodded as he glanced at Kasey, then at Xander. "Thank you, both of you."

"We were doing our jobs," Kasey told him. "But tonight might have meant a little more because we knew it would bring your daughter home again."

Xander nodded. "Has there been any news yet?"

Matt shook his head. "Nothing."

"It's early yet. I bet they are just getting them to the hospital." Xander wrapped an arm around Matt, letting him lean against his chest.

Bryon's phone rang, and he glanced at Matt as he looked at who was calling. "It's Beau." He answered the call, nodding as he listened to whatever was being said. When he hung up, he looked back at Matt. "She's at the hospital. Beau has seen her, but not examined her. He verifies it's Faith. She's alert and scared, but he said she has no visible injuries as of now."

Matt pinched the bridge of his nose, for a moment, hoping that no visible injuries might mean she hadn't been.... He shook his head. He'd seen the pictures. He knew she had been abused. Just because they couldn't see them didn't mean there weren't injuries. He was sure once she was examined they would find some.

He hated the thought of his ten-year-old daughter having to go through the exams that she would have to. No child should ever have to be put through that. He wondered if they could knock her out before doing anything.

"He's waiting for them to officially call him in to examine her and will call once he knows anything more," Bryon told him.

"What if they don't call him in?"

"Only a handful of doctors are trained in handling child sexual assault cases. Beau is one of them. Since he's there, it makes sense they'd just have him help instead of calling another doctor in," Carter said.

Matt nodded. "I want to see her."

"I know you do, but if you go running in there, they are going to wonder how you knew. They'll investigate you for what Xander and Kasey did. It's too big a risk. We have to wait." Dyson pulled another water out of the fridge.

"Grab me one," Xander asked.

"Me too." Kasey stepped into the kitchen.

It was nearly an hour before Matt's phone finally rang. He picked it up on the second ring, hoping he could keep his voice level and not give away that he already knew they had his daughter. "Hello?"

"Mr. Springton, this is Detective Michaels. We've found Faith. She is at Children's Hospital right now. Can I send someone to pick you up?"

Matt's heart pounded. "You found her? Is she okay?"

"Doctors are examining her now. She is alert and is asking for you. I can have a car pick you up in ten minutes."

"No, that is okay. I have a friend here who can drive me." He looked up at Xander, who nodded.

"Just come into the emergency room and ask for me. We can go from there." The detective hung up.

Matt struggled to stay standing. Hearing the detective say she was there made it all real. Not that he didn't trust the team, but having the police call him meant he could be with his daughter. After months of worrying about her, she'd be back in his arms. He swore he'd never let her go again.

"You'll drive me?" He looked at Xander even though he'd already gotten an answer.

"Anything you need." Xander continued to stay right by his side.

"What do you need from us?" Bryon asked as Matt started for the door.

"Nothing now, you guys have all done enough. Thank you. I'll pay you back somehow, but right now, I just need my daughter." Matt walked out the door, not looking back.

Xander had the car unlocked by the time they got to it, and once inside, neither said a word. Matt was glad because his mind was racing, and he didn't know what to say about everything anyway.

He'd imagined this moment for so long, but now that it was really happening, he had no idea what he was supposed to do or say. How was he supposed to help Faith heal from everything she'd gone through? How was he supposed to be enough to let her know that it would never happen again?

Xander lit a cigarette, occasionally glancing over at him. "Are you okay?"

"Scared to death. What do I say to her?"

"How about a simple I love you. I bet that's what she needs to hear more than anything."

Matt nodded. "I should have thought and grabbed her zebra. I didn't think about grabbing anything for her."

"Do you want to tell me what to grab and I can go get it and bring it back? They'll probably keep her for a few days for evaluation," Xander asked.

"Would you mind? I don't want to have to leave her."

"Of course, I don't mind. Reach in the glovebox, there's a pen and paper in there. Write down what you'll need, both for her and you." Xander stopped at a red light. "I want you both as comfortable as you can be."

"Thanks, but I'm only worried about Faith right now." Matt started writing down a list of things Faith might want. There were so many, but he tried to limit it since she would be in the hospital, and he didn't want Xander having to pack up her whole room. Hopefully soon, she would be back in her own bed at home.

He wondered if she would be able to sleep alone. He had no problem with her sleeping in his bed for a while if she was scared. It would probably comfort him almost more than it would her, but it had him thinking about how different things might be once she was home. Would she be the same kid that she had been?

He pulled the completed list off the pad of paper, holding it tightly in his hands as he watched the hospital come into view. Faith was inside, and in just minutes, he would get to see her again. His heart raced as he tried to fight back tears of relief. There had been so many times he thought this moment would never come.

"I'll walk you in, then leave you to reunite with Faith. I'll bring the stuff as soon as I can gather it. Call me if she asks for something more or if you think of anything you forgot." Xander found a parking spot.

"I don't know if I can do this," Matt whispered.

"Of course, you can."

"What if she blames me? What if she hates me for not protecting her?"

Xander reached over and gripped his thigh. "She isn't going to hate you. You are the one secure and safe thing in her life. My guess is she is going to grab on and never let you go."

Matt nodded, but he didn't feel the confidence Xander seemed to. He handed the list to Xander. "Thank you for everything. You've been the one to help me through this. I couldn't have done it without you."

"You would have found a way." Xander smiled. "Now let's get you inside. I am sure Faith is going nuts looking for you."

Matt slowly got out of the car, gripping the door for a moment to stop his knees from shaking. He was so scared about what he was going to walk in and see. Even with Beau saying she had no visible injuries, in his mind, he saw her beaten and bruised. The vision was almost more than he could handle.

Xander was at his side, wrapping an arm around his waist. "I got you." He pushed the door shut, locking it. "Where do we go?"

"Emergency." Matt let Xander lead him to the entryway.

Once inside, he struggled not to have a panic attack. Every breath he took didn't seem enough, and he fought off a tightness in his chest. He had to hold it together. The last thing he needed was to break down just as he was finally getting Faith back.

"Mr. Springton." The detective walked over to them as they came in the door.

"Thanks for calling." Matt didn't know what else to say.

"Let me get her doctor, then he'll walk you back. You'll need to sign in and show ID to get back. The hospital is secure," Detective Michaels told them before walking off.

"Secure?" Matt looked over at Xander.

"It's policy. No one can enter without showing ID and being on an approved visitor list. It's a way to protect the children. You probably remember doing the same thing when Faith was born." Xander led them to the front desk.

Matt nodded, remembering the wristbands that they had to wear and match with the tiny one around Faith's ankle. He looked at the woman behind the desk. "My daughter was brought in. They said I needed to sign in to see her."

The woman nodded, asking for their ID's and information.

"Just him." Xander went to step back.

"No, I want you to get one too. I might need you with me."

Xander nodded and pulled out his driver's license.

"Mr. Springton?" Beau walked over to them, his face showing no sign of recognizing them. "I'm Dr. Maddington. I'll be your daughter's doctor while she is here or until you have her primary doctor come in." Beau offered his hand.

"Call me Matt, please." He shook Beau's hand. "How is she?"

"She's upset and will be happy to see you. It's best if we wait until we get in back before I talk about her injuries." Beau looked around the busy waiting room.

"Right." Matt nodded.

"And you are?" Beau looked at Xander.

"Xander, I'm a friend."

"Family," Beau said in a low whisper.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Matt caught on to what Beau was saying. "He's my..." He didn't know what to say.

Beau smiled. "Your fiancée? Congratulations." Beau grinned as Xander cast a quick glare at him.

Matt ignored them. He didn't care what they called Xander as long as they hurried and let him back to see Faith.

"All signed in?" Beau looked to the lady behind the desk.

She nodded and held out two wristbands. "You can scan these to get in the main doors. If you don't have them on, or should you want to remove someone from the approved list, just go to any of the information areas and someone can help you." She put the band on Matt's wrist before putting another around Xander's.

"If you'll follow me." Beau led them through a door and into the main part of the emergency. "We can talk in here." He opened a door to what looked like a small waiting room. Once the door was closed, Beau seemed to relax. "I'm going to be blunt because I know you saw the file and the pictures."

Matt nodded, glad that Xander reached for his hand and stepped closer to him.

"She's got some vaginal bruising and tears, but other than that I can find nothing wrong with her. The tears are nearly healed, and the bruising should heal quickly. Understandably, she's scared and worried. She's a strong little girl, Matt. She has cried, but answered every question I've had to ask her. I'm sorry I couldn't wait for you to be with her while I examined her, but there was a rape crisis team present the whole time to get her through it."

Xander glanced up. "You don't need parent permission to run a rape kit?"

"Not when she's brought in as an emergency case. We had to make sure there were no medical issues that needed immediate attention. From here on out, all questioning and exams will be approved by Matt," Beau told them. "She's going to need counseling, but that is for later. Tonight, just let her know you're there and she's safe. I've given her some medication to help with any pain she has, and something to help calm her, so if she seems tired, it's probably from that. The best thing to do right now is let her rest. I'll give you a bit to reunite, then I'll move her up to the medical wing. They've already been told to bring in a cot, so you can stay with her."

"Thank you." Matt gripped Xander's hand tighter.

"Let me know if she complains of any pain or if you're concerned about anything. There will be a few more tests to run tomorrow, but for the most part, we just need to keep her a night or two for observation." Beau stepped back. "Ready to see her?"

Matt nodded.

Xander released his hand. "This is where I go. You don't need me in there scaring her the first time you see her. I'll run and get her things. Call me if you need me, but I should be back in an hour or two." Xander leaned in and brushed a kiss over Matt's lips. "Go see your daughter."

"Thanks." Matt almost asked Xander to stay, but he was right, taking a stranger into her room right now wasn't the best idea. He'd get through this himself for now and let her know Xander was coming later.

"Good luck." Xander slipped out of the room, leaving Matt with Beau.

"Anything I need to do or say?"

Beau shook his head. "Just listen if she needs to talk and let her know she's safe."

"Thanks." Matt took a deep breath. "Okay, let's do this."

In his mind over the last few months, he'd always imagined himself running into Faith's room, a crazed parent, so excited to get his daughter back, but it was nothing like that. He was scared to death as he followed Beau down the hall, hoping that when he stepped into the room, Faith wouldn't hate him.

"She's in here." Beau stood to the side of the doorway.

Matt took another deep breath, forced a smile on his face, and walked through the door.

A nurse was sitting beside Faith as he walked in, but the moment Faith looked up and saw him, it was like there wasn't anyone else around.

"Daddy!" Faith sat up, tears flowing down her face as she stretched her arms out for him.

"Baby!" Matt was at the bed in two long strides, pulling Faith into his arms as he turned and sat down on the bed with her. "I'm so glad you're home." He didn't even try to fight his own tears as he kissed her head several times before pulling back and looking at her.

Faith cried as she clung to his arms.

"You're okay?" He ran his hands down her arms, holding them out as if he was inspecting her.

"I think so, but I was so scared." She threw herself against his chest again, her tears wetting his shirt.

He smelled her hair, ran his hand over her back, memorizing everything about her. He'd taken so much for granted before, but now, he knew better. He was going to make sure she was safe, make sure she healed, and more than anything, he was going to make sure she knew she was loved.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It was strange walking through Matt's house without him home. Even though he'd spent a lot of time there, it was as if he was invading Matt's space as he pulled a bag out of the closet and started to fill it with Matt's stuff.

Even though Matt had said he didn't need anything, Xander decided to put in a couple of changes of clothes and his toothbrush and other things that he was going to need. He doubted Matt would leave the hospital until Faith did, so the more comfortable he could make him, the better.

Once he had Matt's things, Xander headed into Faith's room. He'd only been in there the one night he'd found Matt crying, and entering the room without Matt seemed wrong, still, he needed to get Faith her things.

He read the list, grabbing what he could from the dresser, then moved over to the bed, picking up the stuffed zebra. He held it for a moment, thinking how one simple item could bring such comfort to a person.

For years, he'd taken down pedophiles and moved on to the next, but now, he was going to see what happened after. He was going to see the recovery and healing that Faith would have to go through.

It wouldn't be much different than his own recovery after his abuse. Faith would hopefully have a better support system than he did, but a lot of the emotions and feelings she would have would be exactly what he had felt too. It wasn't going to be easy for her.

Xander sighed, the memories of his past coming back fast, haunting him even years later. He'd been older than Faith when the abuse stopped, but younger than her when it started. He still remembered the fear and the pain of each attack. It didn't matter how much time had passed, he could remember it like it was yesterday.

He forced the thoughts back, needing to focus on the here and now. Faith was who mattered, and he would do whatever he could to help her heal and to make sure that Matt had all the support he needed while she did. In many ways, Matt would need to heal as well. Already, he could see the guilt starting to eat at him. This was not Matt's fault and Xander would do everything he could to make sure he knew that.

After grabbing a few more things from her room, Xander headed back out to his car. It was nearly dawn, and he was tired, but he wouldn't stop and rest until he was sure that Matt and Faith were okay. There would be time to catch up on sleep later.

He made his way to the hospital, wondering how Faith would take to him. He didn't have a lot of experience with kids. There weren't any around in his life, but he'd always liked them. There was something refreshing about a child who hadn't been tainted by the world. Of course, Faith didn't fall into that category anymore. She had experienced the worst of the worst. Much more than most children would ever have to face in their lifetime.

The hospital parking lot was more crowded than it had been when he'd left, and he had to park farther away. With the two bags in hand, and a stuffed zebra under his arm, Xander made his way inside.

He stopped at the information desk, sure that Faith had been moved upstairs by now. Once he gave her name, showed his wristband, and explained why he was there after visiting hours, he was allowed inside after being directed where to go.

The hospital was eerily quiet as he walked down the halls. It broke his heart to glance in so many rooms and see children sleeping in the hospital beds. He could only guess what brought them there, but it didn't change the fact that in a perfect world, a child would never need a place like this.

Xander paused as he came to Faith's room. Her door was partially closed, but there was a light coming through. Glancing in, he saw Faith sleeping in her bed. His heart skipped at his first sight of her. She was the spitting image of Matt but in female form. She shared his dark hair and his ivory skin. She looked so young, so innocent as she slept.

Beside her bed, Matt was asleep on a cot, and Xander almost hesitated entering, not wanting to bother either of them. Deciding that he would quietly drop off the stuff and leave, giving them a chance to rest, he eased into the room, trying to be as silent as he could. He set Matt's bag down on the floor beside the bed, but as he went to set Faith's down, he found her staring up at him, her eyes wide, tinged with fear.

Worried he would scare her, he took a step back, whispering, "I'm a friend of your dad, he asked me to grab some things from your house." He held up the stuffed zebra.

"Zee..." She reached out for the stuffed animal.

Xander grinned as he handed it to her. "Is that his name?"

"Her name." Faith hugged the animal tightly. "I missed her."

"I'm sure she missed you too. I know your dad kept her company, so she didn't get lonely while you were away. I saw him hugging her." Xander winked. "I also got you some clothes your dad said you might want and a pink blanket he said you liked."

"Can I have the blanket?" Faith glanced up at him nervously. It was clear she wasn't completely comfortable with him.

Xander kneeled and opened the bag he'd packed for her, pulling out the soft blanket. He was surprised that Faith didn't seem more scared of him. He thought for sure a strange man, especially one who looked like him, would freak her out. Maybe it was the fact he'd walked in holding things that were familiar to her that helped ease her mind. "Here ya go. Want me to put it over you?"

Faith nodded.

Xander laid the blanket over her, then stepped back. "Can I sit with you?" He nodded to a chair on the other side of the bed.

Faith nodded again.

Moving around the bed, he took a seat beside her. "My name's Xander. It's nice to finally meet you. Your dad told me a lot about you."

"How do you know him?" She glanced at him, showing the first sign of nervousness.

"Well, your dad was searching for you, and I work with a group who helps find missing kids. We met that way, but became really good friends too while we worked to get you back home." Xander had no clue what story Matt would want to tell her, but he figured keeping it as close to the truth was best. She didn't need details, simple would be enough. "I'm glad you're safe and back with your dad."

"Me too. I was so scared." She hugged the zebra to her.

"He was scared too." Xander looked over at Matt. "He missed you so much."

"Where's Beth and Carrie?" she asked.

Xander hated that he had to lie to her, but he couldn't let on he knew there were other girls with her. "Who are they?"

"The bad guy took them too. They were with me in the room he made us stay in."

"Were they with you when the police came?"

She nodded.

"Then I am guessing they are here in the hospital too, with their parents. Maybe tomorrow we can ask if you can see them if you want."

"I want to." Faith looked at her dad. "Is he mad at me?"

Xander leaned closer. "Why would he be mad at you?"

"Because I wasn't careful. Because I let the bad guy take me."

"No, he's not mad at you. He's mad at the bad guy. He knows you didn't want to go with him."

"I didn't even see him. He just grabbed me as I walked past the van." Faith closed her eyes. "I didn't think I'd ever get to see my dad again."

"He hasn't stopped searching for you. It's all he thought about. He loves you so much."

Faith smiled. "I love him too." She looked back at Xander. "Did that hurt?"

"Did what hurt?" He was confused.

She pointed at his arms. "The tattoos."

"Ah, a little bit." Xander rubbed his arms. "It's uncomfortable, but doesn't really hurt. It's like a bunch of little pinches when you get the tattoo, but the feeling goes away fast."

"Do you have them all over?"

Xander grinned. "Almost my whole body, my back, arms, and legs."

"How did you know what to get?"

"It took a long time to decide. I wasn't sure what I wanted at first, but I got these." He rubbed his hand over the thick bands around his upper arm. "Then the others later."

"I like those. They are like Zee's stripes." She lifted her stuffed animal, so he could see.

"You're right, they are. Maybe I like zebras too."

"Have you been to the zoo?"

"Not in a long time. My mom took me when I was about your age. I think that was the last time."

"That was a long time ago then because you're old."

Xander laughed. "You're right. It was a long time ago. Maybe once you get better, you and your dad can talk me into going with you. Would you like that?"

"Yeah, I love the zoo. It's one of my favorite places. Where is your favorite place?"

Xander thought about it. Did he even have one? "Um, I don't know. There is this great place I used to hike where there was this huge waterfall. I liked to go up there and sit. It helped me think and feel happy when I was sad. That might be my favorite place."

Faith frowned. "Why were you sad?"

Xander held his breath for a moment, wondering how to answer. He glanced at Matt, seeing him still sound asleep. Did he dare open up to Faith about things or would that upset Matt? She'd been through so much, and knowing she wasn't the only one to go through bad things might be a good thing for her. He gripped his beard, trying to think. "Well, when I was about your age, someone did some very bad things to me. Sometimes, even still, I get sad when I think about it." Actually, he got pissed off and angry, but he wasn't going to tell her that.

"They did bad things to me too." Faith stared at her zebra. "I don't want to tell, Daddy."

Xander nodded. "It's not easy to talk about sometimes. I didn't tell anyone for a long time, but when I did talk to someone, it helped. If you can't tell your dad, there will be other people you can talk to. I have a friend who I talk to sometimes. Maybe you could talk to her too."

"Maybe." She hugged her zebra closer to her.

Xander got the feeling it was better to change the subject. He didn't want to push her too fast to open up. Hell, he was shocked she'd told him as much as she did. "So, I'm guessing since you love Zee so much, zebras are your favorite animal?"

Faith slowly glanced over at him, then a small smile formed. "Yeah."

"How come?"

"Have you seen the movie Madagascar?"

He shook his head.

"There is a zebra named Marty. He's my favorite. He makes me laugh so hard." She leaned back on the pillow and grinned. "It's my favorite movie."

"Hmm, you'll have to watch it with me one night, so I can see what it's about. We'll get your dad to make popcorn and we'll have ice cream. We'll make a party out of it."

"Why am I the one who has to make the popcorn?" Matt mumbled from the cot.

Xander laughed. "Because I don't own a popcorn maker and I'm guessing you do."

Matt sat up, rubbing his eyes before standing and coming to Faith. "Hey, how are you feeling?"

"Okay. Xander brought me Zee." She held up her stuffed animal. "And my blanket too." She ran her hand over it.

"That was very nice of him. I'm sorry I fell asleep."

"It's okay. I did too. I woke up when Xander came in." She glanced over at him. "He says he's your friend."

"He is. I met him and a few other nice people while I was searching for you."

"I wanted to call you, but they wouldn't let me." Tears filled Faith's eyes.

"I know, honey, and it's okay. You're home now, and I promise I will do everything I can to make sure nothing bad ever happens to you again."

Xander hated that promise. There was no way to stop all bad things from happening. Sure, Matt could try, but bad touched everyone from time to time. Some more than others. He watched Matt with Faith, taking in the two of them together for the first time. The love Matt had for his daughter was evident in his eyes, and he hoped that as time went on, Matt would be able to deal with the issues that Faith was going to have. Right now, she seemed okay, better than Xander expected. He'd figured she'd be a hysterical mess. She hadn't really blinked at him when he walked in the room other than a few nervous glances. He hoped she was a fighter and could get through this better than he had. His abuse had fucked up his entire life. He still struggled to control his temper at times, and he trusted very few people because of what was done to him.

He didn't want that life for Faith. He didn't want that for Matt.

"How's your pain?" Matt asked.

"I'm okay. Just tired." Faith leaned into her father's touch.

"I'm tired too." Xander stood. "I'm going to head home and let you two rest. Is it okay if I come by later and visit again?" He looked at Faith.

She glanced at Matt, and when he nodded, she nodded too.

Xander smiled. "Call me if you think of anything else I can bring when I come." He glanced up at Matt. "You okay?"

Matt nodded. "My girl's back home. I couldn't be better." He reached a hand over the bed to Xander. "Thank you, for everything."

Xander gripped Matt's hand, nodding. "Anytime." He smiled at Faith. "Welcome home, Faith. I look forward to seeing that movie sometime." He released Matt's hand. "You two have a good night, and I'll see you soon."

Matt brushed Faith's hair back, but still looked at Xander. "Night."

Xander turned, and walked out of the room, glad that Faith was home, and for the most part, seemed okay. There would be a lot of hard times to come, but they had her safe, had her home. Three kids returned to their parents thanks to what his team did. He couldn't lose focus. As happy as he was to save them, there were plenty more out there who still needed to be found.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Matt watched as Faith played on her swing in the backyard. Even though she claimed she was okay, he didn't miss the way that she jumped at every loud noise and kept looking around her as if she expected someone to be standing behind her.

It broke his heart to see how different she was now. She smiled less, laughed less, and even his touch made her tense up when he would try to hold her. He didn't want this for her, and would do anything to take it away if he could.

"Where's Xander?" She asked as she kicked the swing higher.

"He had to go out of town for a few days." Matt was surprised at how well Faith had taken to Xander. He'd been shocked to wake up the first night in the hospital and see them talking, then when Xander had come to the hospital later, Faith had sat with him and played nearly three hours' worth of cards with him.

It was strange to watch them together. He'd never taken Xander to be the type of person to get along with kids, but Faith seemed to love him. Other men she withdrew from. She would move closer to Matt when the doctors came in, and when the cops came to ask more questions, she hardly spoke.

He was glad she was comfortable with Xander, but he couldn't figure out why. He was the one person, just off his appearance, he thought she would shy away from.

"Will he come see us when he gets back?"

Matt nodded. "I'll make sure he knows to come by." He almost wanted to call him now and let Faith talk to him, but it was already six, and that meant it was later in Texas where the team was getting ready for a huge sting.

His stomach tightened at the thought of the danger they were putting themselves in tonight. He almost wished he'd asked Xander to let him know when he was done so he knew they were all safe.

The sound of the doorbell pulled Matt from his thoughts. He stood, glancing at Faith. "I'll be right back."

A look of panic hit her face as she jumped off the swing. "No, I'll go with you." She ran to his side, keeping close to him as they walked inside.

It was clear that Faith didn't like to be alone. Even the few nights she'd been home, she'd asked to sleep in his bed, only going into her room when she had to change or grab something. The counselors they'd both talked to at the hospital said it was normal, so he let her do it. If he was honest, he was happier to have her by his side than she probably was. They had an appointment with Katie in the morning, and he hoped that Faith would finally open up to her about everything she refused to talk about so far.

As they got to the door, Faith stayed behind him, touching his back, but hiding from sight as he opened it wide.

"Hey, hope I'm not bothering you." Trish looked nervous.

He'd asked his family to give them some time, but he couldn't blame Trish for wanting to see Faith. They'd been close before the kidnapping, and he hoped that would still be the case. His only worry was that Trish would either baby Faith in sympathy or push her too hard to open up about everything that had happened.

"No, come on in." Matt stepped back, Faith staying behind him. "Faith, it's Aunt Trish."

Faith peered around Matt's leg. "Hi."

Trish's eyes filled with tears as she dropped to her knees beside Faith. "I am so glad you are home. I missed you so much." She opened her arms, but Faith didn't move from Matt's side.

Ignoring the look of hurt on Trish's face, Matt smiled at Faith. "Maybe Aunt Trish would like to have a piece of that chocolate cake we made, and you can tell her about the movie we watched earlier?"

Faith nodded, looking at Trish. "Do you want cake?"

"I'd love some." Trish took the hand Matt offered to help her up. "You made it?"

"Well, Dad did, but I frosted it." Faith smiled. "The frosting is the best part."

"I agree." Trish laughed. "What movie did you watch?"

Faith detached herself from him, but still kept her distance from Trish as they started to talk about the movie. It was clear Faith didn't have trouble with talking, but touching was an issue. He was glad that she didn't seem to have a problem hugging and holding him.

Matt served the cake, almost becoming emotional each time he would look across the kitchen table and see his daughter sitting there. It was a sight he didn't think he'd ever see again.

As he listened to his sister and Faith talk, he wondered how long it would take for things to get back to normal. Would they ever? He hated the thought that Faith would always withdraw from touch, and be nervous, always watching over her shoulder.

The buzz of his phone pulled him from his thoughts, and he was shocked to see Xander calling. He smiled at the girls as he stood, quickly answering as he walked into the other room. "Hello."

"Hey, I thought I'd call and see how you're holding up." Xander sounded relaxed.

"I'm okay. My sister is here visiting with Faith."

"That's good. The sooner things get back to normal, the better," Xander told him.

"How are you? Didn't you have a sting tonight?"

"Yeah, we leave in about two hours. I'm sitting around the hotel room, bored."

"Rough life." Matt would give anything to get away for a few days.

"It is when you're stuck with Dyson and Kasey." Xander laughed.

"How's Faith doing?"

"Okay, she's offish around people, nervous, jumpy, but all things considered, I think she's doing okay. We meet with Katie tomorrow."

"You've met with her already, right?" Xander asked.

"Yeah, once after I started. I'm going to sit in on the first session with Faith, then we'll decide from there if she needs me with her or is better one on one with Katie."

"Good. Katie won't push her hard. She has helped a lot of kids in Faith's position."

"Faith asked about you tonight. Wanted to know where you were and when you'd stop by again. I told her you were gone for a few days, but would drop by when you got home." Matt smiled hearing Faith and Trish laugh about something.

"Ah, tell her I miss her and... You know what? Think she'll talk to me on the phone?" Xander asked.

"Um, she'd probably be excited about it. Just a second." Matt held the phone down and called to his daughter. "Faith, Xander is on the phone, do

you want to talk to him?"

The sound of her fork hitting her plate echoed, then she was running toward him. "He called?"

"He did." He held the phone up high. "You don't want to talk to him, do you?" He laughed.

"Dad, give me the phone." She jumped for it.

Matt laughed harder. "Alright, but it's going to cost you putting the cake plates in the dishwasher later."

"Fine, now give me the phone." She jumped up again, trying to reach it.

"When you're done, I want to speak to him again." He handed her the phone.

"Hi." Faith took the phone and moved to the couch.

"Who's Xander?" Trish stood watching Faith.

"He's a friend of mine. He came and saw her in the hospital and she took to him." Matt shrugged as he went back in the kitchen to his cake.

"Your friend showed up at the hospital, but you told me and Mom to wait?" Trish glared at him.

"No, it's not like that. Xander was with me when the call came in. He drove me there." He brushed his fingers through his hair. "He was there for me, but Faith took to him."

Trish narrowed her eyes. "He was there for you? Shouldn't your family have been there?" She sat down, still glaring across the table at him. "Who is this guy, Matt?"

Matt shrugged. "Just a friend I made at my new job."

"You just met him, and you trust him with Faith?"

"He'd never hurt her, he'd cut off his own balls before he hurt a child, trust me. Besides, it's a phone call. It's not like I'm sending her off on camping trips with him alone. If he's who makes Faith smile right now, who am I to stop that? I don't like that she gets more excited to talk to him than she does to me, but for some reason she trusts him. I don't question it because right now she needs people around her she can trust."

"But a stranger?" Trish shook her head.

"He's hardly a stranger, Trish. Damn it, she's my daughter. I don't need to justify anything with you. I know him. I trust him. That should be enough for you." He was pissed that she would think he'd put Faith in danger. "I know what she's been through. I'm not going to let her get hurt again."

"So, what now? Are you going to walk her to and from school every day? Put your job at risk because you have to be with her all the time? How are you going to do this, Matt?"

"Fuck, Trish, did you come over here to start a fight with me? If so, can it wait? Faith is in the next room and I don't need her hearing your bullshit." He was sure their mother had put half this worry in Trish's head, at least the stuff about school and protecting her.

Matt stood and went to the door leading into the living room. He watched as Faith sat on the couch, her knees tucked under her chin as she laughed at something Xander was saying to her. As he listened to her laugh, he realized how much he really did trust Xander with her. He wasn't worried he was telling her one of his perverted jokes, or talking about anything that wasn't fit for a ten-year-old to hear. Xander wasn't like that. There was something Faith saw in him, and Matt was not going to get in the way of anything that made Faith smile. She needed to laugh and be happy.

"How's she sleeping?" Trish was behind him, watching.

"She has nightmares, but won't talk about them. She's jumpy and nervous, doesn't like to be left alone. We start with her new therapist tomorrow. Everyone says it will just take time."

Trish nodded. "I'm sorry I yelled at you. You're right, she is your daughter, and you know what is right for her. It's just hard. We were all worried, and now that we have her back, I guess we're all going to be a little overprotective of her." Trish leaned against the wall. "You'll let me know if you need help?"

"I promise. Right now, it's just finding out what she's comfortable with. My work is great. They have no problem with me taking as much time off as I need to, so that won't be an issue. I'm just taking it one day at a time. We'll see how she does and what she needs."

Trish nodded. "And the other girls?"

Matt sighed. "Faith got to see them before we left the hospital. I have their numbers if she wants to talk to them again. I'm not against that. Only the three of them can really know what they went through. One is close, the other lives in Nevada. One of the girls wasn't doing well. She was having a hard time when we saw her."

"Mentally?"

Matt nodded.

"Honestly, I expected Faith to have the same problem."

"So did I. She's either stronger than we thought, or she's hiding it well. I'm not sure which. Only time will tell."

"And the perverts who had her?" Trish asked.

Matt bit his lip, wishing he could tell Trish the truth. "They are being held without bond. The police promised me they wouldn't get out anytime soon. Now we just wait to see if this goes to trial or not."

"Keep us posted?"

"I will." Matt stepped back as Faith got off the couch and walked toward them. "Here, you can talk to him now." She handed the phone to him.

"Thanks." Matt messed with her hair with one hand as he grabbed the phone with the other. "Go finish your cake. I'll be back in a minute." He stepped out the back door, needing fresh air after arguing with his sister. "Hey, thanks for talking to her."

"You don't have to thank me. She makes me laugh. Honestly, she helped take my mind off the sting for a bit. It's a big one tonight, and I needed to relax."

"Well, she lights up when she talks to you. It's good to hear her laughing." He wasn't about to admit how jealous he was that Xander could get her to laugh and he couldn't.

"I promised her I'd drop by the day after tomorrow. I won't be in until late tomorrow night. She'll already be in bed."

"You know you're welcome here anytime." He missed having time alone with Xander, but Faith had to be his priority.

"Thanks. Well, I better get ready to go. Dyson wants to run through everything again. I'll try and call tomorrow if I can, but I'll be over the day after for sure," Xander told him.

"At least send me a quick text and let me know everything goes okay tonight?"

"Sure, but it will be late, so don't worry if you don't get one soon. This could take a couple of hours once we are in. It's a big site."

"Be safe, and tell the others to do the same." He was nervous for them. This was the biggest job he'd seen them do since joining the team, and also the first one out of state.

"I will. Goodnight, and tell Faith goodnight too." Xander hung up.

Matt sighed as the line went dead. Xander and the team knew what they were doing, but he still worried. There was so much that could go

wrong. With them out of state, there was no way to help them if things went bad. They were on their own.

Forcing his worry for the team back, he headed inside to sit with Faith and Trish. He found Faith telling Trish a story that Xander had told her about seeing wild zebras while he was in the Army. There was no denying that Xander cheered Faith up because, through the whole story, she never stopped smiling. He glanced up, exchanging looks with Trish, glad that she noticed it too.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Xander stumbled through the door, sweat beading down his body as he tried to catch his breath. He'd gotten home after midnight, and couldn't sleep. The images of the child sex ring they'd taken down the night before still fresh in his mind.

They'd gotten in without a problem, but what they didn't expect was children scattered throughout the complex. Even though their masks kept their identity secret, they'd had to move past the bound children to get to the adults. He tried not to make eye contact, but it was impossible. Each child had stared at him, not even one begging for help, but looking lost and as if they'd just given up on hope. The images were going to haunt him for a long time.

He'd finally given up trying to sleep and went for a run, but even after seven miles of sweating, he was still worked up. They'd been warned the sting wouldn't be an easy one. They'd expected eight kids, but what they'd found had been double that, both girls and boys. They were lucky the number of adults wasn't larger. With four, they'd already been outnumbered, but the fact they only had to inject the needle into their necks to subdue them made it easy to take them out.

Kasey had ended up struggling with one man, and had a black eye to show for it, but all in all the night had been a success. They'd isolated the adults, taking care of business where no children could see, then got out, calling the police to rescue the kids. It was a big enough sting that it had made the local news, but luckily, none of the information seemed focused on STK and what they did, only that the children had been found.

That was how Xander wanted it. How STK wanted it. They didn't want the glory. They wanted the public aware of what was being done to the children and how they could better protect their children. What STK did was happily done without any notice. Talking about the pedophile's injuries only brought them into the media, and they didn't want that. Let the perps remain nameless now that they could no longer hurt anyone.

He glanced at the clock, seeing it was just after six in the morning, wondering what time Matt and Faith would be up. The best thing for his

mind was to have something else to focus on, and between Matt and Faith, they would be able to pull him from his darkened thoughts.

He'd talked to Matt a little after the sting by text, letting him know he was okay. But he'd kept it short, aware how late it was for Matt to have to be up. He'd spent the next day with Dyson and Kasey, acting like friends on vacation, just in case anyone looked into people coming into the area to try and connect them to the sting. They never left right after a job when they were out of town. They always took a day or two extra to make sure nothing pointed at them and leave an appearance of just being guys on a getaway.

He stripped his sweaty clothes off and stepped into the shower, closing his eyes as he leaned against the wall and let the water hit him. What he really needed was some good hard sex, but since Faith was back, he hadn't had a chance to hook up with Matt. He understood that, and accepted it, but it didn't help calm the building need that was settling in his balls.

He'd debated on going out and picking someone up for a night, but the thought left him feeling oddly empty. He didn't want someone he didn't know. He wanted Matt. Sex with Matt was amazing, and while it wasn't the whole of their friendship, it was a big part, one of the best parts.

His cock stirred to life as he thought about it, but he ignored it. He didn't want to use his hand. He needed more than a quick yank in the shower could give him. He needed to feel someone pressing into him, someone taking him hard, someone forcing him to give up all control and forget about everything for a while.

Frustrated, he quickly finished his shower, trying to figure out what he could do all day. He planned on dropping by Matt's with pizza later, but he didn't want to show up this early. With nothing to do and nowhere to be, he dressed, grabbed his keys, and headed to the team house. At least there, he wouldn't be alone, even if there was nothing to do other than watch movies and play video games in the basement.

It was early, but there was always someone working at the house. Bryon lived there, but even when he slept, Carter or Trenton seemed to be working. Even if Bry was still in bed, he could kick back and watch TV without bothering him.

As he pulled up in front of the house, he was shocked to find several cars there, including Matt's. His worry shot up since Matt was taking several weeks off to help Faith get back on her feet. He glanced around

seeing Trenton's, Carter's, and Becca's cars there as well. Xander hurried inside, wondering what he'd missed out on, and why all of them weren't called in if it was important.

"Xander!" Faith waved the moment he opened the door.

He smiled, taking in Faith and Becca on the couch in front of the TV. "Hey, what are you doing here?" He went into the living room, sitting in a chair across from her. "I was going to come see you tonight."

"Dad said he had to come into work for a bit. He's back with the other guys. Becca and I are watching The Lego Movie." She nodded to the TV. "You're staying, right?"

Becca grinned at him, biting her lip as if holding back a snide comment.

"Of course, now that I know you're here. You should have had your dad call me," he told Faith.

"He said you didn't get back in town until late and needed to sleep."

"He's right. It was really late, but I woke up early and went for a run."

Faith made a face. "Why?"

Xander shrugged. "It helps me think better sometimes."

Faith stared at him. "Sad things?"

He nodded. "Some of them."

"Do you think running will help me?" She ignored the TV as she turned to fully face him.

"I don't know. We all have things that help us. It's just a matter of finding out what works."

"The lady yesterday, the therapist, she told me to write things down in a journal, but I don't like that idea. I don't want anyone to read what I'm thinking about all the time."

Becca raised a brow at him.

Xander ignored Becca, keeping his attention on Faith. "You'll find what works. It takes time, and it might be different things. Today a run helped me, but other times hiking helps, or even just eating ice cream."

"Dad said you like ice cream." Faith laughed.

"He told you that? Hmm, did he mention how much he likes it too?" Xander laughed.

"Don't give away my secrets," Matt suddenly said from behind Xander.

"I didn't know loving ice cream was a secret." Xander turned.

"It is when Faith wants it all the time and I have to tell her no. If she knows how much I love it, she'll use it against me."

Xander winked at Faith. "You wouldn't do that, would you?"

"Maybe." Faith laughed.

Xander glanced back at Matt. "You had to come in?"

"For a few hours. Carter had an issue he needed help with on the computer. I think we know what we need to do, but it's going to be a few more hours. You got any plans?"

Xander shook his head.

"Do you mind keeping Faith company for a bit? I know Becca has to get into work soon."

Becca nodded. "In an hour."

"I don't mind at all, if Faith is okay with it. I can take her downstairs and show her the game room."

Becca laughed, looking at Faith. "Don't get him started on video games. You'll be there all day."

"Is there a lot of games?" Faith asked.

"Tons, from pinball, to arcade games, to pool, and then a collection of video games they've all collected."

"I want to see. Can I, Dad?"

Matt grinned. "Are you okay alone with Xander?"

"Of course." She rolled her eyes as if it was a stupid question.

Xander was shocked how easily she trusted him. They'd talked a lot, but he'd seen how she reacted around other people. She clung to Matt and withdrew the moment anyone else tried to interact with her, especially men.

"Then, by all means, go play. I'll be right down the hall if you need me. You can come up and knock on the door anytime." Matt bent and kissed Faith on the head.

"Thanks." Faith stood up.

Matt gripped Xander's shoulder. "Thank you."

Xander met his stare, holding it for a moment. "You're welcome." He got up, ignoring the urge to hug Matt, and turned to Faith instead. "Come on. Let's find out what kind of gamer you are." He led her downstairs.

He was glad they kept the place clean. Usually, it was just the guys down there, having a few beers and playing Mortal Kombat. Oddly, Bryon had a bunch of games for younger kids too. He'd never thought about it

before, but as he turned on the lights and glanced at the game cases on the bookshelf, there were a lot that would be perfect for Faith.

"So, did you have fun on your trip?" Faith flopped down in a beanbag.

"I did," he lied, not about to tell her how fucked up the whole thing had been. "I went with a couple of guys that work here with your dad and me. You'll meet them soon."

She nodded. "Dad says everyone here is really nice. I like Becca."

"Me too." Xander turned on the TV. "Do you want to look and see if there's a game you like or know how to play?"

"Sure." She went over and looked through the cases, finally pulling one out and setting it on the coffee table before stepping back.

Xander didn't miss how she kept her distance from him. She might be okay with his company, but she wasn't okay with contact or closeness. He made a mental note to keep his distance, so he didn't freak her out.

He put the video game in and for the next two hours, he laughed with Faith as they battled through one game after another. They were games he usually never played, so she was kicking his ass on most of them.

He was surprised when Faith set the controller down and turned to him.

"You said someone hurt you too when you were little?" She looked nervously at him.

Unsure where this conversation would lead, he nodded. "I was about eight when it started, and it didn't stop until I was about fifteen."

"That's a long time." She leaned back against the arm of the couch facing him as he sat on the other end.

"Too long."

"No one saved you the way the police saved me?"

He shook his head. "No one knew, and I was too scared to tell. He said he'd kill me if I did."

"The guy who hurt me told me that too. Do you think he will?" She bit her lip as she stared at him.

"I promise you that he won't. He's locked up in jail right now, and will probably end up going to prison for a very long time. Even if he didn't, I promise you, I will make sure he never gets close to you again."

"Did the guy who hurt you go to prison too?"

Xander nodded. "He's still there and won't ever get out."

"Good. I hope the guy who hurt me doesn't either." She stared at her hands for a minute. "Dad says I can talk to him, but I don't want to tell him

anything. I don't want him sad that I was hurt."

Xander tried to figure out what to say, sure that talking to Matt about this would be the best thing for Faith, but he also remembered how hard it had been for him to talk to anyone about what happened. "Your dad would be okay if you want to talk to him. He might be sad someone hurt you, but he'd be happy you're home now and that no one will hurt you again."

"I'm not ready to talk to him. Katie says I don't have to if I'm not ready."

"That's true, you don't. But it's important that if you do need to talk, you talk to someone like Katie."

"Or you?" she asked. "Cause you were hurt too, so you understand."

Xander nodded. "You can talk to me anytime if you want to."

"I'm scared. Dad says no one will hurt me again, but I dream about them. The woman would make us dress in these really itchy clothes and then she'd take pictures of us. I hated those clothes."

Xander forced himself to remain calm and not react to what she said. "You dream of her?"

"Mostly, but sometimes of him. I don't like dreaming about him because that was when it hurt so bad. I wake up screaming, and Dad asks me if I'm okay, but I can't tell him, so I lie and act like I am, but really I am scared that they are going to come take me again."

Xander wished he'd killed the couple who held her. At least then, he could tell Faith they were dead. "I still have dreams sometimes too."

"What do you do?"

"I sit in bed and focus on something else. Most of the time I'll stare at my tattoos and trace the lines. It helps calm me. It might be something different that works for you, but you could try counting Zee's stripes and running your finger over them."

"That might work." She bit her lip, then looked back up at him. "I have to sleep with Dad to feel safe, but want to sleep in my own bed too. How do I stop being scared?"

"I don't know how. It's just something that will happen in time. There is nothing wrong with sleeping with your dad for now." Xander missed sleeping in Matt's bed too. He brushed his hand down his beard, forcing himself to focus on the conversation and not on where he wanted to lay his head at night. "Time is the only thing I know that will make it easier. Slowly, you'll start to feel safe again. Knowing that the bad guys are locked

up and can't hurt you again helps too. Your dad put that new security system in. It's one of the best. No one is going to get in the house. I promise that."

Faith nodded.

"Tell me some stuff that makes you feel safe."

"Um, Dad, Zee, you."

He was surprised she included him. "That's good. I'm glad I make you feel safe, because you are safe anytime you're with me, just like you are with your dad."

"Am I too old for a nightlight?" She played with a loose string on her pant leg.

"I don't think so. I know adults who leave a light on. It's not a bad thing to want to see in the dark. Do you think that will help?"

"Maybe. My room's so dark and there's shadows on the walls that scare me. I keep thinking it's them coming for me again."

"We can get you a light. I'm sure we can find one you like. I bet if we look hard enough, we might even find one that's a zebra."

"I'd like that." She grinned.

"I want you to know that there is nothing wrong with being scared. I was too for a long time. A lot of men hurt me. So many that every time I'd have to leave the house I was scared I'd see one of them. Every day things got a little easier and I wasn't so scared. It took time, just like it will for you, but I promise, it will get better." He wished he could make it all okay now, but that wasn't going to happen. "Would you like to maybe learn karate or something? Would that help make you feel safer if you learned how to fight?"

She chewed on her lip. "Can girls do that?"

Xander laughed. "Girls can, and they do it well. I'll tell you a secret if you promise not to tell anyone I told you."

She looked up at him as she nodded.

"I was in the Army, and during training, there was this one girl. She was amazing. She grew up learning all kinds of things like karate and other stuff. She beat all of the boys in training. None of us could win if we had to spar with her."

"Spar?"

"Play fight. You fight to practice, but you don't really hurt each other."

"And she beat you?"

Xander nodded. "She beat all of us. It took her a lot of practice to get that good, but if you want, we can talk to your dad about signing you up for classes."

"I'd have to go alone, right?"

"You'd learn with a group of people, and your dad can be there in the room with you. It's like a gym class at school kind of." He didn't have any idea how to explain it to her.

"Maybe, as long as I wasn't alone with people I don't know." She bit her lip again before looking up at him. "Will I have to go back to school?"

Xander nodded. "It's kind of important to learn." He had no clue what Matt's plans were for that. "It's summer now, so you have time to figure out what you're going to do. I think there's still a month or two of summer vacation left. A lot can change in that time. Have you seen any of your friends yet?"

"Melissa called and I talked to her, but she asked a lot of questions about what happened, and I didn't want to talk about it."

"Did you tell her that?"

"No, I felt bad."

"Don't. Just be honest with your friends. They should understand. Get together and just play like you used to before all this happened. It will help." He had to remind himself how recent all this happened and be careful not to push her too hard.

Faith sat up, swinging her legs down off the couch. "Will you tell Dad what we talk about?"

Xander was already asking himself the same question. "Some of it. Like maybe your fear about going back to school, and you wanting a nightlight, and maybe about karate, but I won't tell him anything you don't want me to."

"I don't want him to know what they did to me."

"You know that the police told him? That the doctors had to tell him about your exams and stuff, right?"

She nodded. "I know he knows, but I don't want to have to talk to him about it."

"That's okay. You don't have to. You can talk to Katie or anyone else you're comfortable talking about it to."

"How long will I have to see Katie?"

Xander shrugged. "I still see Katie."

"You do?"

"Not as often as I used to, but I still go in every couple of months to talk about things." She didn't need to know that it was mostly about team stuff now. He just wanted her to know it was okay to talk to her and not feel like she was weak because she went in.

"Hmm..." She stood and went to one of the beanbags, flopping down in it. "Dad needs to get some of these for my room. I like them." She puffed the area around her head before relaxing.

"I'll tell him that." Xander smiled as he leaned back on the couch and blew out a long breath. He hoped he helped her, but it was hard knowing what was right or wrong to say. All he could do was go by his own past and try and guide her in the right direction.

He glanced back over at her, finding her asleep. He watched her for a long time, glad she was comfortable enough with him to let her guard down. He turned the volume to the TV down all the way and put in his favorite game, wondering how much longer Matt would be.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Matt made his way down the stairs to the game room, surprised when he got to the bottom and found Faith sound asleep in a large, green bean bag. He quietly walked over to where Xander was playing a game and sat down beside him. "Sorry that took so long." He kept his voice low.

"It's okay. We had fun." Xander ended the game and turned to Matt. "Everything okay?"

Matt nodded. "Carter needed help getting through some security stuff at one of the new sites he's found. It was a mess, but we got in." He glanced at Faith. "I figured it was safe to bring her here."

"It was. It's good for her to meet the people you work with, but I could use a smoke."

"We can go upstairs. She'll be okay." Matt glanced back at Faith. Xander had been with her for hours, and it wasn't like him to go that long without smoking.

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. I leave her alone in bed when I get up. It's time she gets used to being alone sometimes." Matt stood, walking up the steps, Xander following behind.

"She mentioned that. She wants a nightlight or something."

"For her room?"

"I think so."

Matt nodded. "We can get one. What else did she say?"

Xander stepped outside and lit a cigarette. "We talked about a lot of things. She's scared, rightfully so, nervous they'll come back and get her." He blew out a long trail of smoke, then reached over and pulled Matt to him. "I've missed you." He bent his head and kissed him softly.

Matt relaxed against Xander, his body instantly leaning into him, finding comfort in his touch and closeness as he kissed him back. When he broke the kiss, he smiled. "I've missed you too."

Xander continued to hold Matt against him. "Faith is strong, but it's going to take time to open up. She's thinking about a lot, but scared to mention it to anyone. She's trying to protect you, keep you from hurting

more than she already knows you are." Xander brushed his lips over Matt's neck. "She's nervous about school starting, things like that."

"Yeah, I'm not sure how to handle that one." Matt pressed his forehead to Xander's strong chest. "School scares me too."

"At least the job you have now will let you drop her off and pick her up. The sooner you can get her back into normal routines, the better she'll be."

Matt nodded, wondering why Faith would talk to Xander about all this instead of him. "She did well in therapy, but I felt like she was holding back."

"She probably is, but it's all new. Katie hasn't earned her trust yet. In time, she'll get used to her and open up a bit more. It takes time, sometimes even years. She's only been home a week. She's doing pretty amazing so soon." Xander turned Matt, drawing him so his back was to his chest, then wrapping an arm around him. "How are you doing?"

"I'm struggling. So scared I'm going to say or do something wrong. I don't know what she needs. How do I assure her she's safe? I watch her jump at the slightest sound, see her watching over her shoulder. I want to make it all okay." Matt closed his eyes, wondering if things would ever get back to normal, and if not, how did he at least make it easier.

"It's just going to take time. You can't rush healing." Xander lifted his head up as he took another drag off his smoke.

"I'm glad you showed up today. I was worried what I'd do when Becca left."

"You should have called me. I'm always happy to hang with Faith. She kicked my ass on Mario Kart."

Matt laughed. "That's always been one of her favorites."

"It's good to hear you laugh," Xander whispered against his ear.

Matt smiled. "It's been a while since I felt like laughing." He arched his head back. "I miss our time."

"So do I." Xander's palm splayed over Matt's stomach as he bent and kissed him.

"Dad?"

Matt tensed as he saw Faith in the doorway, but Xander's arm tightened around him, refusing to let him step away like he wanted to. He prayed his cheeks weren't as red as they felt. "Hey, you. Get a good nap?"

She looked at him, then up at Xander. "Are you dating my dad?"

Matt wondered why she asked Xander and not him.

"Would you mind if I was?" Xander asked, still not letting Matt go.

She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth, tilting her head as she looked at them. "I didn't know you liked boys."

"Me?" Matt asked, not sure if she was asking him or Xander.

"Well, both of you."

Matt smiled. "Does it bother you if I do?"

She shook her head.

"I like Xander," Matt told her.

She smiled. "I like him too."

Xander kissed Matt's cheek. "So, this is okay with you? You'll let me date your dad?"

"You won't leave me alone, will you?"

Matt pulled from Xander's arm and knelt in front of Faith. "No, I won't leave you. Not until you're ready for me to, and even then, you'd be with Grandma or Aunt Trish." He hugged her. "It would just mean Xander might be around the house more. He would hang out with us."

"I'm okay with that." She looked up at Xander. "You like my dad?"

"I do." He nodded. "He likes ice cream and pizza. That makes him good enough for me."

Matt laughed as he glanced up at Xander, thankful that he was making this so simple. He hadn't really thought much about letting Faith know they were seeing each other. It wasn't like it had been anything official, but Faith wouldn't understand the casual thing. He hated that this forced Xander to make it seem like it was more than it was, but for Faith, it was best they play it that way.

Matt hugged Faith. "I love you, and no matter what, you come first. You are most important. I need you to know that."

She nodded. "I know, Dad, and Xander is cool. I like that he might be around more." She smiled up at Xander. "And he might let me have more ice cream than you do."

Matt laughed.

Xander shook his head. "Your dad's still the boss. If he says we can't have it, we can't."

Faith pouted. "I thought he'd be nicer to you."

Xander laughed as he stepped forward and rested his hand on Matt's shoulder. "Nope, he's just as mean to me as he is to you. In fact, I'd bet you

can talk him into things easier than I can." He gently squeezed Matt's shoulder. "Are you done here?"

"Yeah, I'm done."

"Then, with your permission, how about we head back to your place? I'll stop on the way and pick up a couple of pizzas for dinner, then, if Faith can talk you into it, we can eat ice cream and watch a movie."

Faith nodded. "Can we, Dad?"

"I guess we can do that. I'd planned on having fish for dinner." He grinned at Faith since it was the food she hated most.

"Eww, Dad, pizza is so much better." She shoved him playfully. "So, can we go?"

"Yep, let me walk in and talk to Carter for a second, then I'll be out. You okay here with Xan?"

"Yep." She leaned against the wall.

As he walked inside, he wondered what the two of them would talk about. This was not the way he wanted Faith to find out, but after seeing her reaction, maybe it was easier this way. Xander hadn't seemed upset, and he'd taken control of the situation by not pulling away like two guilty teenagers like Matt would have done. He treated Faith like an adult, not lying to her or trying to make it look like something it wasn't. The only issue now was how Xander felt about Faith thinking they were dating.

"I'm heading out. You guys okay?" He stood behind Carter and Bryon.

"Yep, thanks for your help. Hopefully, we can get enough information now to take this ring down." Bryon glanced back at him. "Faith okay?"

"Yeah, she's with Xander. She had fun downstairs."

"I bet. That place was built for kids. Maybe big ones like the team, but it's still a cool place."

"Thanks for letting her hang." Matt gave a wave. "Call me if you need anything."

He walked out, excited to spend the evening with Faith and Xander. He'd missed Xander over the last few days, and it would make it easier now that Faith wouldn't be shocked if they kissed or held hands. He wondered if she was confused that he liked a man now after years of being married to her mother, but that was a conversation for another time. He needed to think about how to bring that up and talk to her about the whole liking boys and girls thing.

"Ready?" Matt gripped Faith's shoulder.

"Yep, can I pick the movie tonight?" Faith walked with them toward their cars.

Matt and Xander exchanged amused glances. "You can pick."

"Yay!" Faith got into the passenger seat of the car.

Matt turned to Xander. "Thank you for handling that so well. I didn't expect her to see us."

"It's for the best." Xander cupped Matt's face. "Now I don't have to hide this." He dipped his head and kissed Matt softly. When he pulled back, he continued to hold Matt's face in his hands. "Anything I should get on the pizzas?"

"Faith hates mushrooms, but anything else is good." Matt pressed his cheek to Xander's hand. "Thanks for being so good to her."

"She makes it easy." Xander kissed him again before stepping back. "See you in a half an hour."

Matt nodded, watching Xander stride toward his car, wondering when they could steal some alone time together because the taste he'd gotten of Xander today only increased his desire for more. Faith had to come first, but as soon as he found time, he was going to make sure Xander knew just how much he missed him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Xander nodded to Faith as she slept on the makeshift bed she'd made of pillows and blankets on the floor. "She looks so peaceful."

Matt leaned closer to Xander, nestling tighter against his side. "I wish it would last. She wakes up every few hours with nightmares."

"She told me. That's one of the reasons I detoured from getting pizza and got that nightlight for her. I think it will help. She said the shadows scared her." Xander tightened his arm around Matt, not wanting to let go. After the week they'd both had, it was nice to relax and not have to stress over anything for a few hours.

The movie Faith had picked actually turned out to be enjoyable, and they'd eaten ice cream and laughed at the comedy as if there wasn't a darkness cloaking them all. For a couple hours, Xander was able to put the negative things aside and just enjoy the company. He hoped it had been the same for the two of them. "Want me to carry her into bed?"

"I don't know. She hasn't let anyone touch her other than me since she got home." Matt frowned as he stared at his daughter.

"Then I'll let you do it. I don't want her to wake up and freak out at my ugly face holding her," Xander teased. It would destroy him to have Faith panic because of something he did.

"It's nothing personal." Matt looked worried.

"I know that. She's been through a lot. She'll come around in time." Xander picked up the empty ice cream bowls. "I'll get these taken care of while you get her to bed."

He left Matt to deal with Faith and headed into the kitchen, wondering if he dared sneak into the bathroom or even the garage for a quickie with Matt once he got back. It was horrible to be thinking about sex when Faith was just a few rooms away and could wake up at any time, but after sitting beside Matt all night, sharing soft touches and looks, his body was strung tight. It was going to take some getting used to having a child around all the time.

He rinsed the dishes and set them in the dishwasher as he waited. His mood had improved since his run earlier, but he still struggled with visions

of the sting they'd had in Texas. Several times he'd wanted to pull out his phone and browse for news on it, but he resisted. As soon as there was news, Trenton would let them know.

"Hey." Matt came up behind up, pressing tightly against his back, his cock nestling against his ass.

"Mmm, I've missed that feeling." Xander pressed back, his cock going instantly hard.

Matt's lips pressed to the back of his neck. "Faith decided she was going to try sleeping in her room. She said something about having the light, so she would try. That means, as long as we're careful, we have my room."

Xander turned, wrapping his arms around Matt's waist as he thrust his hips forward, drawing his cock against Matt's, enjoying his hardness through the thin layers of clothing between them. "Think it's safe?"

"No, but I don't want you to leave tonight." Matt sucked Xander's bottom lip between his, then opened, kissing him deeply.

"We can stay here, go outside, maybe the garage." Xander worked his hips back and forth as he slid his hands under Matt's shirt. It had only been just over a week, but it seemed like forever since he'd enjoyed Matt's body against his own.

"She's going to have to get used to you being here." Matt licked up Xander's neck. "We'll have to be careful, but I don't want to have to hide."

The fleeting thought of how serious this was starting to feel hit him hard, but he forced it back, focusing on his arousal instead. "We can make it quick." Xander slid his hands around the front of Matt's chest, his fingers teasing Matt's nipples for a moment as he tugged at his earlobe with his mouth.

"Quick is better than nothing." Matt groaned. "Come on." He stepped back, forcing them apart.

"Go lock up. I'll get the lights and meet you in the bedroom." Xander tugged him back for another long kiss before releasing him and turning for the living room.

His cock ached as it pressed tightly against the zipper of his jeans, and he couldn't wait to get to the bedroom and release it from the confines of his clothes, but even more, he couldn't wait to drop to his knees and suck Matt into his mouth. He wanted to taste him, feel him, and give him the escape from reality that Matt needed even more than he did.

With the lights off, he walked down the hallway, smiling at the dim light that showed underneath Faith's door. The nightlight he'd gotten wasn't a cool zebra one like he wanted to find her, but it was a teddy bear that he hoped would soften the room and help her fight the demons that haunted her at night.

Once in the bedroom, Xander started to undress. Memories of each time they'd been together flashed through his mind as he looked at the bed. Sex had never been so good, and he worried that he'd have trouble finding someone to satisfy him as well when things ended with Matt.

"Couldn't wait for me?" Matt smiled as he stepped into the room, shutting the door before lifting his own shirt over his head.

"Figured there was nothing wrong with getting a head start." Xander licked his lips as he watched Matt work open his pants and push them down his legs. When Matt's thick cock sprang free, Xander nearly groaned at the need that shot through him. He wasted no time falling to his knees and pulling Matt closer. "Do you know how many showers I've taken this week thinking about doing this?"

"Is this all we do in your fantasies?" Matt reached down, tangling his fingers in Matt's hair.

"No, but we'll get to that." Xander took Matt's cock into his mouth, closing his eyes as he took him deep, enjoying the gasp of pleasure he heard above him.

Using one hand to fist around his own cock, Xander moved his mouth up and down Matt's length, teasing along the bottom, then sucking harder on the head. They'd done this enough that they knew what each other liked. When Matt started to thrust harder, forcing Xander to take him deeper, he gladly welcomed the aggressiveness and opened his throat to take him the best he could.

Matt was the one to finally pull back. "Get on the bed."

Xander didn't have to be told twice. He climbed onto the bed, staying up on his hands and knees.

"No, on your back, legs hanging off the foot of the bed." Matt reached into the nightstand for a condom and lube.

Understanding how Matt planned to take him had Xander's cock dripping. He positioned himself the way Matt wanted him, and smiled when Matt stepped between his legs.

"So fucking perfect." Matt ran his hands down Xander's chest and over his stomach. "Look how hard you are." He bent and licked over the glistening tip of Xander's cock.

"Fuck, I need you," Xander growled as Matt released his cock and tore open the condom.

Matt lifted Xander's legs, tugging him so his ass hung off the edge of the bed. "It's going to be fast and hard."

Xander fisted the base of his own cock tightly. "Exactly what I need."

"Good, because looking at that ass, I don't think I could go slow and easy." Matt dripped lube over Xander's ass, then pushed two fingers into him without warning.

"Fuck yes!" Xander's head arched back, his eyes closed, and it seemed as if his cock grew two more inches.

"You want me here?" Matt fucked his fingers in and out of him.

"Hard." Xander braced his legs on Matt's shoulders.

"That won't be a problem." Matt pulled his fingers free and moved the head of his cock to Xander's hole. "I wish you could see how hot you look right now." Matt cupped Xander's balls, rolling them over his fingers before he started to press his cock forward, easing inside him.

"Jesus, I've missed this." Xander gritted his teeth as his cock jerked in his fist. "Make me come!"

"Bossy." Matt slid deeper and settled. He swatted a hand over Matt's hip, then started to thrust.

Matt's thickness was just what he needed. The burn, the stretch, the hard thrusting took him to the place he wanted to be. He couldn't focus on anything but the feeling of Matt inside him, the feel of Matt's cock taking him hard. Nothing else mattered, only the two of them and what they were doing. "Please." Xander fisted the blanket beneath him with one hand as he jerked himself off with the other, his hand almost painfully tight around his cock.

Matt kissed his leg, then bit the same spot. It wasn't a gentle bite either. Not enough to break the skin, but enough to get Xander's full attention.

"Do that again." Xander groaned. "Bite me again."

Matt did, this time sinking his teeth into the other leg, then again beside his knee.

"Fuck yes." Xander's fist flew over his cock, his mind a haze of lust and need.

"So fucking tight. I'm not going to make this last." Matt's words were broken, heavy gasps of air coming between each word. "Let me feel you come."

Xander loved that Matt always wanted him to come first. Coming with Matt deep in his ass was the most amazing feeling, and he loved the look on Matt's face when his ass would clamp down around his cock and hold him there. Focusing on nothing but the pleasure coursing through him, Xander worked his fist faster, precum rolling down the head, his body trembling as his balls pulled tight, his spine tingled, and he let out a silent cry, somehow aware that they had to be quieter than usual this time. His body exploded, cum shooting over him as he bucked his hips, forcing his cock into his fisted hand.

"I'm going to lick every drop of that off you." Matt started to move again, thrusting deep and hard. "In fact, I think I'll add my own to it." Matt jerked his cock free, tore off the condom and started stroking himself. It took only seconds before his cum was mixing with Xander's all over his stomach.

Xander dropped his legs from Matt's shoulder, then laughed as Matt bent and started licking the cum from his stomach and hips. "Come here." Xander reached for him, pulling Matt on top of his body, and kissing him hard, tasting their shared pleasure as their tongues met.

"That was fucking amazing." Matt collapsed on top of Xander, their skin wet with sweat as he rested his head against his shoulder.

"It always is with us." Xander smiled.

"Yeah, it is." Matt glanced up at him. "You'll stay all night, right?"

Xander brushed a stray hair back from Matt's face. "Are you sure I should?"

"No, but I need you here," Matt admitted.

"She's not stupid. She'll know I stayed with you." Xander wanted to be sure that Faith wasn't going to have a problem with things, and as fast as this was being thrust at her, it could go either way. She liked him, but having him date her dad was another thing.

"I think she needs you as much as I do, honestly." Matt rolled off Xander.

Xander wasn't sure how to take that.

"Stay."

Xander nodded. "Okay, but should she come in and need to sleep here, then I go home. I'm not forcing her out of her comfort zone, and you have to loan me sweats because I don't want to sleep naked when she could walk in at any time."

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea." Matt closed his eyes. "I don't want to move, but could use a shower. Join me?"

"Oh yeah. I'm not turning down any chance to hold you naked against me, even if it is covered in soap." Xander sat up. "Come on."

As they walked into the bathroom, Xander tried not to think about how comfortable all this was becoming. Not only was he at ease with Matt, but he loved hanging out with Faith as well. He needed to be careful. He wasn't the kind of guy to settle down. His job was too dangerous. The fact that he could end up in prison at any minute should have been enough to make him walk away, but as Matt turned on the water and held out his hand, Xander went to him. Walking away was just too hard.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Xander rubbed his eyes, thinking he was dreaming, but the soft sound of crying wasn't in his head. It was coming from down the hallway. He debated on waking Matt, but he'd been up just an hour before when Faith had a nightmare.

She'd been doing better over the last week, sleeping in her own room, and only waking up a couple of times each night. Sometimes she screamed, others she cried, but each night she seemed a little better.

Leaving Matt to sleep, Xander made his way down the hall, softly knocking so he didn't scare Faith to death by just walking in. "Hey, you okay?"

Faith sniffed. "Yeah."

"Do you want me to get your dad?" He leaned against the door.

"No, but can you sit with me for a bit?" She turned, hugging her zebra to her chest.

"Sure." He stepped farther into the room, sliding down the wall across from her bed so he could see her without getting too close.

She still hadn't let anyone touch her besides Matt, and Xander respected that. He kept his distance and hoped in time she would come to him. He'd spent several nights with Matt since she'd caught them kissing, and seemed to be accepting the fact that they were fairly well.

"Bad dream again?"

She nodded. "I tried to count Zee's stripes like I usually do, but then my mind got thinking about other things, then I got scared again."

"Do you want to go sleep with your dad?" Xander was more than happy to move to the guest room or the couch if he needed to.

"No, I'm trying to be brave." She reached for a tissue and wiped her nose.

"Want to talk about it?"

Faith shrugged.

"Sometimes it helps."

"I don't want to make Dad mad." She fisted her hand into the pink blanket that was over her.

"Why would he get mad?" Xander brought his knees to his chest, holding his arms around them.

"Because he wants things to get back to normal, but I can't do that. I've tried."

Xander smiled. "When he says he wants things back to normal, that doesn't mean they have to go back to the way they were before. I think he knows that some things will never be the same. He just wants you comfortable and happy."

"But I can't. I've tried." Faith sniffed again.

"Tried being comfortable or happy?"

"Comfortable."

Again, Xander wished Matt was here to help with the conversation. He was always so scared that he would say something wrong to Faith, yet, she always seemed to find him when she needed to talk, not her dad. "What makes you uncomfortable?"

"I don't like it here, but it's Dad's house, and if I tell him that looking out the window, looking at the place where that guy grabbed me freaks me out, I'm afraid he'll be mad at me." Faith wiped her eyes.

Xander watched her from where he was sitting on the floor, his back against her bedroom wall. She looked so tiny in her bed, curled up with her blanket around her, the small stuffed zebra in her arms. "Your dad would understand. Is that why you're having a hard time sleeping at night?"

"Some of it, but not all."

"Would you sleep better somewhere else?"

"I think so." Faith looked nervously at him. "But I don't want Dad to have to leave his house."

Xander noticed that not once had she called it her house or their house, it was always Matt's. Hoping that Matt understood, and wouldn't be upset with him, leaned forward just a bit. "Would you like me to talk to your dad? I have a big house with extra rooms. If you want, I'll see if your dad is okay if we go stay at my place instead of here."

"The bad guys don't know where you live?"

"Nope, I promise you'd be safe there if you want to go. The choice is yours."

"What if Dad doesn't want to leave?"

"You know what? I'm pretty sure that your dad would be happy anywhere as long as the two of you are together. His home is anywhere you

are." He wanted to move closer and pull her into his arms, give her a sense of security, but because of his own past, he was pretty sure that the last thing she needed right now was anyone holding her. She needed to come to them on her own terms. "How about I go talk to your dad and see if we can head over to my place and see if you like it? If you don't, we can come back here or even get a hotel room for a while, but I know that your dad isn't going to want you to stay somewhere you're not comfortable."

"Did you stay in the same place it happened?"

Xander swallowed hard, memories of his past assaulting him. "For a while, but I hated it too. Things were different for me. I lived with the man who hurt me. I didn't have anywhere to go or anyone to help protect me." He made sure to never mention that it was his own father. He didn't want her to ever think that a father could hurt someone the way the asshole who kidnapped her had. Fathers were supposed to be safe, and for now, he'd keep that part of his story to himself.

"I think I'd be safer at your house." She pulled the stuffed animal tighter to her chest. "You're sure he won't be mad?"

"Nope, he'll do whatever you need to be comfortable. Do you want to go with me to ask him?"

She shook her head.

"You'll be okay while I go talk to him?"

She glanced around the room for a second, then nodded. "You'll come if I scream."

"I will. Just like I did when you woke up a little bit ago." He pushed up, staying close to the wall so he didn't scare her. "I'll be right back, okay?"

"Hurry." She curled tighter into the blanket.

"I will." He smiled at her before leaving the room.

Once in the hall, he blew out a long breath. It was hard seeing Faith go through a lot of the same things he did as a child. The nightmares still woke him from time to time. He admired how strong Faith was. She'd been through hell, and it would be some time before that hell ended completely.

Going into Matt's room, he sat down on the edge of the bed, watching him sleep for a minute. He'd been so tired that he hated to wake him, but if leaving here was what Faith needed, it was worth a few more hours of missed sleep. Once they were safe in his house, he could let them both sleep as long as they wanted to.

"Matt, Matt, wake up." He gently rested his hand on Matt's shoulder.

"Hmm?" Matt rolled, slowly opening his eyes.

"Hey, can you wake up a bit more for me? We need to talk."

"Now?"

"It's about Faith."

That got Matt's attention. He rubbed his eyes as he sat up, then reached for the lamp beside the bed, switching it on. "Is she okay?"

"She had another nightmare. I've been in talking to her for the last hour."

"Shit, I'm sorry. I'll go—"

"Hey, relax. She's okay, but she asked me to talk to you about something she's scared to bring up." Xander gently ran his fingers down Matt's arm, hoping to help him relax.

"What can't she talk to me about?" Matt looked almost hurt.

"She's afraid of hurting your feelings, but she says she hates staying here. She says the bad guys know where she lives, and every time she looks out the window, she sees the place that man took her."

"Fuck, I didn't even think of that."

"I didn't either." Xander let his fingers fall to Matt's hand, linking them together. "I offered to let you guys come stay at my house if she wanted to or get a hotel room. I left it up to her."

"What does she want?"

"To have you guys come stay with me for a while."

Matt nodded as he chewed on his lip for a second as if he was thinking everything over. "Are you okay with that?"

"I wouldn't have offered if I wasn't. I've got plenty of room. It's up to you, but you're both welcome to come stay as long as you need." Xander gave his hand a squeeze. "Faith thinks you'll be mad leaving the house."

"No, not at all, if that's what she needs. It's just a house. Walls. Nothing more." Matt released his hand and pushed back the blankets. "I'll talk to her."

Xander stood, giving Matt room to get out of bed. "If she wants to go now, we can, or we can wait until morning. It's up to you two. Tell her she can pack a few things and we'll go anytime she wants. The rest of the stuff, I can come back and get later for her."

Matt reached out and grabbed hold of Xander's arm. "Thank you. I never heard her scream tonight."

"She didn't scream, but I heard her crying. She's okay. We have some good conversations. You needed your rest."

"Thank you." Matt leaned in and kissed Xander softly. "I never meant for you to get mixed up in all this."

"Hey..." Xander cupped Matt's cheeks, forcing him to look directly at him. "I'm where I want to be, okay? Don't ever think you're making me do anything. I'm worried about both of you. I'll do anything I can to make this easier for you two, for us."

The two of them had never really discussed what was going on between them, but Xander figured it was clear to both of them there was more than just casual sex going on. It was hardly the time to have this discussion, but it was one he hoped the two of them would have soon.

Matt closed his eyes, leaning in, wrapping his arms around Xander as he rested his head against his chest. "Thank you."

Xander kissed his temple. "You're welcome. Now go see your daughter. Find out when she wants to leave."

Matt nodded as he pulled back, giving Xander a long, tired look before he turned and headed out of the room.

As Xander watched him go, he wondered when his heart became so involved in everything that was going on, and why for the first time in his life, he was excited to see what the future held.

He sat on the bed, wondering if he should start helping pack a few things when Faith and Matt walked back into the bedroom. "Hi." He smiled, patting a spot on the bed.

Surprising him, Faith jumped up and sat right beside him.

"I was telling Faith that we can go to your place, but she has to understand there might be new rules there that she has to follow, and she needs to remember to leave your stuff alone." Matt sat down on the other side of the bed.

"Not a lot of different rules. You'll still have to help with the dishes and cleaning, just like you do here." He smiled when she moaned. "The only new rule I might have is I have been building a fire pit in the backyard over the summer, and if you're going to live there with me for a while, you and your dad are going to have to help me finish it, so we can have a barbecue. Oh, and when my friend Dyson comes over, you have to beat him in Mario Kart, because I've tried and can never win."

Matt laughed. "Leave it to you and Dyson to fight over Mario Kart."

"I don't like losing, especially to him. If Faith beats him, I won't feel too bad," Xander teased.

"I can do that." She glanced at her dad. "You're really not mad?"

"Not at all. I wish you'd told me sooner. I didn't even think about that bothering you, but it makes sense it would. We can find a new house somewhere and sell this one. We'll get a house that we both like." Matt reached over and ran his hand through her hair. "I want you to be able to talk to me about things like this. If I'd known this bothered you weeks ago, we could have saved you from being scared all this time." He gripped her knee. "I love you, and you come first. I'm not going to choose a house over you, Pumpkin."

Xander winked at her. "Told you he'd be just fine with it."

"Thank you for letting us stay with you."

"You're welcome. I think we'll have fun." Xander had no clue if Faith would like his house, but if it helped her feel safe, he'd sign the whole place over to her.

Matt looked over Faith and smiled at Xander. "Thank you," he mouthed.

Xander nodded back, hoping that Matt was really okay with them moving in with him. He'd just taken them from dating to living together in a matter of twenty minutes, and because it was what Faith wanted, Matt hadn't really had a choice. Maybe he should have talked to Matt before offering his place, but his first reaction had been to help Faith feel safe. It was something they were going to have to talk about.

One of many things they needed to discuss, because like it or not, things were getting serious, and if they didn't talk it over soon, they were both going to be lost in the roller coaster of emotions they seemed to be riding lately. No matter what the future held, he didn't want to see Matt or Faith hurt, and that meant things needed to slow down, or they were going to crash and crash hard, and as hard as it would be for Matt and Faith, Xander worried even more what would happen to him.

"So, when are we leaving?" Xander asked.

Faith glanced at her dad. "In the morning. I'll be okay tonight." She sounded braver than she looked.

"Okay, then in the morning, we'll figure out what you want to take. We don't want to clutter Xan's house with a bunch of junk," Matt said. "Once we get settled there, we can start looking for a new house that we both like."

But I need you to be honest with me from here on out. If something bothers you, talk to me. I can't help you if I don't know."

Faith nodded. "I promise." She turned to Xander. "Do you have a dog?"

Xander shook his head.

"Do you want one?" She looked up at him, hopeful.

Matt laughed as he reached over and lifted her off the bed. "That's enough for tonight. Back to bed. If we're moving tomorrow, you're going to need your sleep."

Faith laughed. "Night, Xan."

Xander waved. "Sweet dreams."

As he watched Matt and Faith leave the room, he realized he was fucked. No matter how hard he tried not to let his heart get involved, it already was, and that meant it was going to hurt like hell when Matt finally moved on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Matt glanced over at Bryon as he parked the car. "You sure it's okay we came?"

"I think she'll be happy to meet Faith." Bryon glanced into the back seat and smiled at Faith. "There is something about seeing the good you do standing right in front of you."

Matt wondered if that was how the team felt seeing Faith. It was rare that they ever found out what happened after a sting. With Faith, they saw first-hand how it was for the child to be reunited with her family and try to start living again.

"Who is she again?" Faith asked as she stared out the window at the small house.

"Her name is Gretchen Price," Matt told her. He'd hesitated, trying to figure out how much to tell Faith, but she deserved to know that the woman had a hand in helping get her home. He'd talked to Bryon about it before they came. Smiling at Faith, he hoped she would understand. "You have to promise me you won't tell anyone what I'm about to say. It could get a lot of people in trouble, but it's because of Gretchen the police were able to find you."

"Really? What did she do?" Faith's eyes went wide.

"Have you ever heard of a psychic?" Bryon asked.

"Don't they see into the future and talk to dead people and stuff like that?" Faith wrinkled her brow.

"Some, but what Gretchen does is see people in trouble, like you were. She then gives the police information on what she sees. Like she might say, big lake by a cabin, with horses close by. It's not an exact location, but sometimes it's enough to help people know where to look," Matt explained.

"But, a lot of people don't believe in that stuff, so we have to make sure we don't tell anyone what Gretchen does because it could make people be mean to her." Bryon opened the car door.

"Okay." Faith pushed her door open and waited for Matt to come around and take her hand. She was still nervous in new places, and around

people she didn't know, but she was slowly getting used to Bryon and the rest of the team the more they hung out at the team house.

They walked up to the front door together, Matt hoping that coming here was the right thing. They'd made an appointment for a psychic reading, wanting a cover for what they were really going for.

As Bryon knocked, Matt held his breath.

The door swung open and Gretchen smiled. "I knew you were coming." She patted Matt on the cheek without even a hello, then turned to Faith. "You must be Faith." Gretchen grinned at her. "You don't know how much it warms my heart to see you."

Faith blushed. "Thank you for helping them find me."

"Oh, honey, it was my pleasure." Gretchen nodded to the door. "Come inside and have some lemonade. I know we have much to discuss."

Matt got the feeling the last comment was directed at Bryon. It was almost eerie wondering how much this woman really knew about everything going on.

"We'll sit in the backyard, if that's okay." She led them through the house and into the backyard. "I just love summer. Everything is so fresh and pretty."

"Wow, look at all the flowers." Faith looked at the yard in awe.

"Go smell them. I'll have your lemonade here when you're done. It's always good to smell the roses." Gretchen laughed as she set a pitcher on the table with four glasses before sitting down. "She looks good. I'm glad you found her." She turned to Matt as he watched Faith walk around the small yard.

"It was because of you. If you hadn't given us that information, she might not have ever come home. I don't know how to thank you." Matt had tears in his eyes as he looked at Gretchen. "You saved her life."

"Now, I don't know about that, but I'm glad I could have a hand in getting her home. I'm guessing you didn't give my information to the police. They never seem to follow up on anything I give them."

Matt shook his head. "I was lucky enough to have friends."

"Which brings us to you." She patted Bryon's hand, staring into his eyes. "You do some interesting work."

"I'll take that as a compliment." Bryon smiled. "I was hoping you might work with us."

It was odd not to hear Bryon explain the job or what the team did. It was as if Gretchen already knew everything.

"You are a believer?" She asked Bryon.

He gestured to Faith. "How can I not be? It was your information that allowed us to find her and the other girls."

"You are resourceful. I didn't give you much to go on."

"It was enough for my team," Bryon said proudly.

"So, what would you need from me?" Gretchen asked as if she didn't already know.

Matt bit back a smile.

"Just the same information that you've been giving the police. Unlike them, we will follow up on it as soon as it's in our hands. My team will go in, take care of what we do, then leave the rest for the police. No one would ever know you were involved, in fact, I'd like to keep you as distant from the team as I can. It's safer for you that way."

Gretchen nodded. "I've seen images of things, but don't know all the dastardly details, which is probably best. If any of my information can bring a child home, then I am more than happy to assist."

"I was hoping you'd say that. We'll pay you as well. You would be an official member of our team."

"I don't need the money." She waved him off.

"Need it or not, it's yours. Do what you want with it," Bryon insisted. "What I was thinking, is when you have something for us, you could just give Matt a call and ask him and Faith to come visit. It will look like nothing more than Faith coming to see her grandmother or something of that sort. You can pass the files to Matt, and we will take it from there."

Gretchen smiled as she looked out in the yard where Faith was watching a ladybug climb up her arm. "I'd like a granddaughter."

"She'd be happy to have you as another grandma." Matt smiled.

"Now, I get information on a lot of things. Not all of it is in the news, do you want that as well?"

"Anything that has to do with children being hurt, kidnapped, or even abused," Bryon said.

"Sadly, I should keep you pretty busy." She sighed as she stood. "I'll be right back."

Matt looked at Bryon. "I like her."

"So do I, but it's kind of scary thinking how much she must know about each of us."

Matt blushed. "She knew about Xander and me before we'd let anyone know."

"That's how she won your trust?" Bryon laughed.

Matt nodded. "No one knew, but she did. It proved a lot to me."

"I guess it would." Bryon glanced up as Gretchen walked back out.

"Here you go." She set a large stack of files down. "This is everything I have given the police in the last ten years. I'm guessing none of it has been researched. Some may be too old to do anything with, but once a pedophile, always a pedophile. They don't change. So, even if we can't help some of the kids from the older cases, the information may lead you to new ones." She stared at the files. "I don't know why I see so much of this. My sister, she had the gift too. She only saw happy things. She could predict the sex of a baby before the mother even conceived. Me, I can see all that too, but I also get this." She waved her hand at the file.

"It takes a strong soul to handle what you've had to." Matt couldn't imagine having visions of abused children haunting him.

"Up until now, I wasn't sure it did any good, but I had to try. Now, I have hope that it hasn't all been in vain. In fact, she is proof it hasn't." Gretchen smiled as Faith walked back to them.

"Your flowers are so pretty." Faith sat down beside Matt.

"Thank you. I enjoy working with them. I always said I'd have done well to own a flower shop." Gretchen grinned. "Maybe someday you and your dad can come out and you can learn all about flowers. I'd love to pass my knowledge on to someone."

"We'd enjoy that." Matt reached for Faith's hand.

"I want to learn the names of them all," Faith told her.

"Well, let's start now." Gretchen stood. "I'll be right back." She grabbed a pair of clippers off the patio and walked into the yard, cutting several roses from one of her bushes.

They were a beautiful pastel pink, and Matt wondered what she was up to.

When Gretchen returned, she handed the flowers to Faith. "These are one of my favorite flowers. They are called the Faith rose."

Faith's eyes went wide. "They have my name?"

"They do, and just like you, they are strong and beautiful," Gretchen told her.

Surprising everyone, Faith reached out and wrapped her arms around Gretchen, hugging her tightly.

It was the first contact Matt had seen her have with anyone other than him since she'd come home. He swallowed back emotion as he met Gretchen's gaze as Faith continued to hug her. No matter what anyone said, the day was a total success.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Xander watched as Faith finished with the clay she'd been using, carefully putting the unused portion away. They'd gone to the craft store earlier, and she'd talked him into not only buying her the markers she wanted, but also clay, so she could make animals to set around her bedroom. He was impressed with how well she molded the clay and how realistic the animals looked.

"Want me to set them up on the shelf to dry all night?" He nodded to the board the animals now sat on.

"Yeah, thanks. Do you think we can get more clay tomorrow?" Faith asked as she went to wash her hands.

"I think you still have enough. Besides, your dad will be home tomorrow, and I can't sneak you things when he's around. He's already going to kill me for spoiling you today."

"You're not spoiling me. I needed those things." Faith grinned.

"If I got you what you needed, we'd be at the bookstore and not the craft store." He tapped her gently on the top of her head.

"When will Dad be home?"

"I'm not sure. He had some stuff to do at work. It's a big case they are working on and it might take a few more hours." He sat down at the table with her. "We can watch a movie or something if you want."

When Matt had been asked to come into work, Xander didn't think twice about offering to stay with Faith. She trusted him, and there had been a few other times Matt had left them alone when he had to run errands or other things.

They were still slowly moving things from Matt's old house to his, and sticking the rest in storage. The plan was to sell the old house, then find a new one that Faith felt safe in. It was going to take time, but Xander didn't mind having them stay with him. He'd come a long way in the last few months, going from a man who never had anyone over to living with the man he was fucking.

"You pick the movie this time." Faith went to the cupboard and pulled out the microwavable popcorn. "I'll cook."

"Okay, but you better make two. You know I won't get any if you only make one." He winked at her.

"Liar." She laughed. "You're the one who eats it all." She grabbed a second bag out.

He kept an eye on her as he scanned the list of kid-friendly movies, finally settling on something about a pig living on a farm. It was hardly the type of movie he'd pick to enjoy, but at least it wasn't animated like so many others they'd sat through.

"I hear you're going out with your grandma this weekend. Are you excited?"

Faith frowned. "I don't know. She wants to take me to some fair thing. She says I'll have fun, but Grandma is kind of boring."

It was the first time she was going to go out without Matt around, and they were all curious how it would go. Matt was more a mess about letting her go than Faith was about going, and Xander didn't blame him. It was hard to get over the fear that she could be taken again, and as much as Matt wanted to be with her all the time to protect her, it was unrealistic to think he could. The older Faith got, the more she'd go out with others, and it was something Matt had to get used to. Xander planned on distracting Matt the whole time as best he could to keep his mind off what Faith was up to, and to keep him from driving his mother crazy with phone calls checking up on them every ten minutes.

"Grandparents can be boring. Mine used to travel a lot, then they'd come home and make me watch videos of their vacations. I was like seven, trying to understand where they'd gone and why they were so excited to see boring stuff." Xander reached into the fridge and pulled out two juice boxes. He'd much rather a beer, but as with everything else in his life, things were different when you were hanging with a ten-year-old. He'd cut his smoking habit in half since Faith moved in.

As they sat down on the couch with their popcorn and apple juice, Xander thought about how different his life had become. He'd never dreamed he would be sitting with a child watching movies in his own living room. It wasn't who he was, or at least who he had been. Obviously, it was who he was now. He glanced over at Faith and smiled as he hit play. "Don't fall asleep."

She rolled her eyes. "It's early still. You're the one who falls asleep on the couch all the time."

"I'm old. That's what old people do," he teased.

"You're not old." She tugged on his beard. "See, no gray hair. Old people have gray hair like Grandma or Gretchen."

"That is true, they do. So, I guess I'm just lazy then?" He nudged her with his elbow, glad that she was finally getting used to the small touches and didn't shy away when he was close to her.

"Yep, Daddy is too. He fell asleep in my bed the other night while reading me a story. I had to finish the book myself."

Xander laughed. He remembered that night. Matt hadn't come into bed until well after midnight. Xander thought he'd been talking to Faith, but when he'd stumbled into bed, Matt had mumbled something about falling asleep on Faith's bed and his back hurting from laying on the stuffed animals that she kept around her.

"Enjoy being young." He smiled down at her, sad that she had to grow up too fast in so many ways.

Settling down, they watched the movie in silence, the only sound was the crunch of the popcorn they ate. He loved sitting with her like this, doing everyday things that not so long ago she was at risk of never experiencing again.

When the movie ended, Faith turned to him, reaching up and pulling free a piece of popcorn that had dropped into his beard. "That was a good movie. Can we get a pig?"

Xander nearly choked. "A pig? Um, no. I might help you talk your dad into a dog or cat, but I'm pretty sure he will say no to a pig."

"You'd let me get a dog, right? It's just Daddy saying no?"

"I would, but it's not up to me."

Faith sighed, then suddenly looked up at him, staring straight into his eyes.

"Are you going to be my other daddy?"

Xander froze, unsure what to say. Matt had talked to Faith soon after she'd seen them kiss about him dating a man, and made sure she was really okay with it, but other than that, their relationship hadn't even been talked about. As comfortable as he was with Faith and Matt, he hadn't ever thought about the long term. The simple thought that Faith was asking meant she was thinking about the future and was becoming attached. Xander swallowed hard, unsure how to answer. "You know I don't want to replace

your mom, right?" He hoped talking about her mother might distract her from the conversation she'd started to have with him.

"Oh, I know. My mommy will always be my mommy, but I have a friend, Claire. She has two daddies. She was adopted. She sees her mommy sometimes, but her mommy was nice enough to let her daddies raise her. All her mommy did was carry her in her tummy. I know you won't be my mommy, but since she's dead, you can be my daddy now, right?"

Xander's pulse raced. How had he gone from casual sex to having Faith want him as her father? As flattered as he was, the thought of settling down, of committing to something long-term, scared the hell out of him. It was one thing when it was just Matt and him trying to have fun, enjoy each other's company, but now Faith wanted something long-term, and Xander wasn't ready for that. He'd never been the type of guy to settle down. "Um, I'm not sure if I'd make a good daddy, but I do promise I'll always be your friend."

"You love me and Daddy, don't you?"

Xander took a deep breath, unable to think clearly. What was he supposed to say? He stared at Faith, seeing the hope and trust in her deep brown eyes, and his chest tightened. "I care about you and your daddy very much. You know I would do anything for either one of you, but what you are talking about is something more."

Faith sighed. "It doesn't have to be so hard. Adults are funny." She shook her head. "If you like each other, why can't you be my other daddy?"

"Because that is something more, something that your daddy and I would have to decide later. Right now, we just want to make sure you're okay. Let you know how happy we are that you're home. Is that alright?"

Faith nodded. "I guess. I just like it here. Daddy's looking for a new house and I don't want to go. I like your house. It's safe here."

Xander would never regret bringing Faith to his house, but now she wanted to stay, and he wasn't sure what to do about that. Maybe he could move and let Matt keep the house.

What he had with Matt was comfortable, and Xander wouldn't deny that he cared about Matt and Faith more than he did any other people in the world, but she was talking marriage, lifelong commitments. That wasn't something Xander was ready for. He wasn't the settle down and play house kind of guy. "We'll figure it out. I promise you that no matter what happens, where you move, or what happens between your daddy and me, I will

always make sure you are safe, okay? I won't let anyone hurt you again." It was a promise he would do everything he could to keep, even if it meant following her life well into adulthood to make sure she was safe.

Faith moved so quickly, he almost fell when she threw herself into his arms. It was the first time she'd let him hug her, and he welcomed her, wrapping his arms around her and smiling. He might be able to run from his feelings for Matt, but he couldn't run from his feelings for her. "I love you." He kissed the top of her head as she hugged him back.

"I love you too, and I hope you're wrong. You're who I want for a daddy." She pulled back. "Daddy said I could have ice cream, can I?"

Xander laughed. "Of course, but then you have to brush your teeth and get ready for bed without a fight, okay?"

She nodded as she grabbed his hand. "Come on, I know where Daddy hid the chocolate syrup."

Xander did the only thing he could do and let her lead him to the kitchen. He hoped when the time came for this all to end, he'd be able to walk away without hurting her, because he was sure that leaving her was going to tear him apart.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Xander glanced at the file in front of him, memorizing all the information inside. It was a simple sting, in and out, no kids on site, but the man he was going after was a vile creature. Kent Jenkins was a seventy-year-old with a history of child abuse that started in his early twenties. How the guy wasn't sitting in a prison cell was beyond him. If anyone should be locked up, it was this man. His criminal history was a mile long and got progressively worse with his age.

Kent was the center of one of the largest photo exchanges STK had ever seen. Where Kent was getting the photos was unknown, but almost nightly he would post several hundred photographs to the dark web, and many of the children were recently missing.

Carter and Matt were digging hard to find his sources, hopefully leading them to the location of the children, but one thing was for sure, they needed to put a stop to what Kent was doing before he gained even more fame in the midst of the dark web and the disgusting creatures who lurked there.

"When you going in?" Bryon asked as he sat down beside Xander.

"Shouldn't you be telling me?" Xander glanced over, wondering what Bryon was up to. None of them ever went in without the rest of the team ready.

"I haven't talked to Carter or Matt. Wasn't sure how close they are." Bryon twisted the cap on his water bottle.

"I'm guessing tomorrow or the next day." Xander tapped the file with his finger. "The guy is on blood thinners. It could be dangerous."

"You saying you don't think we should go in?" Bryon asked.

"No, I think we should, but I'm going to have to work fast, and with his age and medical issues, there is no telling if he'll recover from this." The thought of the man dying didn't bother Xander, but the team needed to be careful that they didn't get a reputation as murderers. That wasn't what they were about. Deaths happened. They all had had a sting go bad, but they tried hard to keep the death toll down. That wasn't what the team was about.

Bryon nodded. "So, we need to talk."

Xander sighed. He'd been waiting for this. He gave Bryon an exasperated look. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"You know the rules about dating team members." Bryon stared at him.

Xander rolled his eyes. "We'll be okay. We don't really work together. It's not like I'm dating Dyson or Kasey. Matt and I exchange information. Our paths don't cross. I could see worrying about it if I was dating Dyson, but Matt's in the office."

"It's the rules." Bryon tried to sound authoritative.

"So, you're going to quit seeing Becca?"

"Who says—"

"We all know, Bry. Anyone who has eyes sees the way you two look at each other. We know she spends the night here from time to time, and funny how the guest rooms are never used on those nights." Xander wasn't going to be called out for something when Bryon was breaking the same rules.

"It's different," Bryon objected.

At least he wasn't denying it. "How?"

"She isn't here all the time."

"Neither am I."

"But she's..." Bryon shook his head. "You're right. It's not different."

Xander smiled, inwardly enjoying that he had put Bryon in his place. "What's the issue with Matt and me dating? We keep it professional when we have to. I'm not pulling him off the computers and doing him up against the wall. He doesn't distract me from the stings. If anything, he gets the rough end of the deal having to sit here and wait for me to check in every night I go out. If we want to spend our nights together, what does that hurt the team?"

"I just don't want anyone distracted."

"We're professionals. Most of us have done this for years. We aren't thinking about what we had for dinner or where we're going on our next date when we walk into a sting. We are focused on what we are there to do. The kids come first, they always have and always will. Every single one of us would give our lives to save the kids. We put our lives on the line each time we go into a sting, or when you guys hack a computer. We all know we could end up in prison for a long time, yet we do it. If I'm not professional enough to stay focused and do the job right, then I don't belong on this team." Xander stood. "You handle this how you want, but I'm not making a choice here. I won't choose the job over Matt or Matt over the job. You

make that call and let me know if I still have a job." He hurried out the door to his car, pissed off that the conversation even had to come up.

By the time he got home, he was still mad. He was sure Bryon wouldn't fire him, but the fact that he was dating Becca, yet thought he could tell everyone else not to date within the team, rubbed him wrong.

"Didn't expect you home so soon." Matt stood in the kitchen, emptying the dishwasher.

"Had a fight with Bryon. Faith with her grandma?" Xander came over, wrapping his arms around Matt and kissing him softly.

Living together had been easier than Xander thought it would be. Having Matt and Faith around hadn't disrupted his life like he thought it might. In fact, it added to it. He loved hearing their laughter and watching them interact with each other. He loved how Faith had made herself at home, even going as far as decorating her new bedroom by helping Matt and him paint her walls with zebra stripes.

Matt didn't know it, but it was one of the ways Faith was learning to stop her panic attacks and recover from her bad dreams. She would count the stripes. It started with just her stuffed animal, but she'd told Xander she needed more, so they'd come up with the idea to paint stripes across her walls. With her love for zebras, Matt never thought anything about it.

"She is. They're having fun. Called about an hour ago." He brushed his fingers down Xander's cheek. "I figured that a fight was coming. I thought Bryon might come to me first." Matt sighed. "What did he say?"

"That we were a distraction to each other and it wasn't good for the team."

"But we don't work together."

"That's what I said, then he said it didn't matter, and I brought up how he's seeing Becca, and that was no different. I think he'll back off now, but I left the choice to him. I told him I wasn't going to stop seeing you, and it was up to him if he kicked me off the team because of it," Xander told him.

"He won't kick you off the team. You, Dyson, and Kasey do all the dirty work none of us want to do. It's not like you're easily replaced. The demand for what we do increases, he can't cut a man from the team and keep up the pace we do." Matt tugged him close. "I'm sorry I've caused problems."

Xander shook his head. "You didn't cause this. Neither one of us expected this to turn in to what it has." He cupped his hand against Matt's

cheek. "There are some things we need to talk about though."

Matt tensed. "You want us to leave, don't you? It's too much having us here?"

Xander shook his head. "No, I don't want you to leave. In fact, I've never enjoyed being home more since you've come to live with me." He kissed Matt softly. "Leave the dishes for later. Let's go sit down." He linked their hands and gently tugged him to the couch.

"What's up? You have me nervous."

"It's about something Faith said to me. I didn't know how to respond." Xander released Matt's hand and tugged on his beard, trying to think of how to start the conversation.

"Stop that." Matt swatted Xander's hand from his beard. "You do that when you're nervous."

"I do?" Xander laughed. "I never thought about it before." He released his beard and tried to relax with his hands on his lap.

"What did Faith say?" Matt turned to him.

"She asked me if I was going to be her other daddy." Xander reached for his beard, but stopped himself before he gripped it.

Matt's mouth opened, and he made a gargled sound, then shut it again. His eyes were wide as he shook his head. "Wow, I didn't expect that."

"Yeah, me neither. I told her I cared about you and I would always be part of her life, but that me being her daddy was something that you and I would figure out in the future." Xander gripped his beard again. "Fuck, that sounded wrong. I don't want you to think that I plan on us—"

"No, I understand. You were talking to Faith. You had to say something. I just never expected this from her."

"We can't blame her. Since she came home, she's seen us together and learned to lean on us to get her through the bad days. We can't blame her for wanting it to last. It's just that you and I have never really talked about what we are to each other. It started out as just casual sex, but it's morphed into...." He shrugged. "I don't know what we are now."

Matt stared at him. "What do you want to be?"

Xander ran his hand over his beard, moving it from the bottom back to right under his chin, then sliding his fist down it again. "I don't know. I mean, I'm not the domestic kind of guy. I don't know how to be a family man."

Matt laughed. "What do you think you've been doing for the last few weeks?"

Xander swallowed hard. "I could go to prison at any moment. How can I be a good father when I could get arrested any night I go to work?"

"And I couldn't be? I'm hacking into systems." Matt sighed. "That is the hardest part for me. If I ever got caught, I'd lose Faith."

"We wouldn't let that happen." Xander didn't know how he'd stop it, but he'd take the blame for everything to keep Matt safe. "Besides, you'd probably be offered a job for the government hacking for them instead of serving any time. They love people with minds like yours."

"Still, it scares me, but I don't want to stop. We do too much good."

Xander nodded. "We do."

Matt rubbed his hands down his pant legs. "You sound like you don't want anything long-term between us. If that's true, then it's okay, but you're right, for Faith's sake, we should figure out what we are doing. It's not fair for her to hope that—"

"I don't know what I want. She freaked me out when she asked, and my first thought was to panic and a million reasons why we wouldn't work went through my mind. I mean, she said she didn't want to move, she liked living here, and I actually thought about giving you the house and getting a new place for me to avoid thinking of us having a future. But then I had a couple of days to think about it, and I realized, we already are pretty much doing the married thing. We might not have said the words, signed the paper, but in every way that matters, we act married. So that forced me to think about my feelings, which is something I've never been good at. I've always stayed away from relationships. Until you, I'd meet someone, spend a night or even a few hours at their place, and move on. Until you, I never had another man in my bed." Xander stood, needing to think. He started to pace the living room. "But now, the thought of you and Faith not being here, the thought of being here alone, I don't like it."

Matt nodded.

Xander leaned against the wall, staring at Matt. "What I feel doesn't matter. What do you feel? What do you want?"

Matt sat silent for a moment, and Xander was sure he wasn't going to like whatever Matt was going to say. He braced himself for the worst.

"When I lost Jill, I never thought I'd want to be serious with anyone again. My focus was on being everything Faith needed. I was so worried

about being there for her, that I forgot that I had needs too. It was after Faith was taken, when you suddenly appeared in my life, that I realized I needed someone there. I needed someone to lean on, to help get me through the bad days, to make me laugh. Then she came home, and I thought I'd be okay, but I needed you more then. I didn't know how to react to her, but you, you have a way with Faith that I'll never understand. When I couldn't be enough for her, you were."

Xander stepped forward, kneeling in front of Matt. He really needed to tell Matt about his past, but now wasn't the time. "You are always enough for her. Don't you ever think differently."

"I might have been, but you made it easier, you connect with her in a way I can't. You and her share something that I don't have with her. You make her smile when I can't. It wasn't until you started talking to her that she'd sleep alone. She started opening up more. She would sit alone with you and not anyone else." Matt smiled weakly. "It's a good thing. It might be hard at times for me to understand, but you are what Faith needs, just as much as you're what I need."

Xander braced his hands on Matt's leg. "So, we have to make a choice here."

Matt nodded. "I don't want you to feel pressured because Faith wants us together."

"I know, but that's kind of impossible. I have to think about what her reaction would be if we ended things. How it might hurt her."

Matt looked up. "It would hurt me."

Xander leaned in, resting his forehead on Matt's shoulder. "It would hurt me too."

Matt wrapped his arms around Xander's head, kissing the top of it. "So, are you saying you want to work for a future? I'm not saying you have to be Faith's daddy now, I don't think any of us are ready for that yet, but can we make what we have a little more official?"

Xander lifted his head. "I'd like that. Maybe you can quit house hunting and we can make living together permanent?"

"Are you sure?"

Xander laughed. "Don't make me think about it because I'll panic, but yes, it's what I want, even if my mind keeps telling me it's not. I can't imagine living here now without the two of you."

"If you change your mind, panic, or whatever, you'll say something? I never want you to feel trapped."

"The same with you."

"Fair enough." Matt reached over and gripped Xander's beard in his fist. "I know I should have said this to begin with, but I guess, like you, I was scared, but I do love you."

Xander smiled, closing his eyes as he got used to the way the words felt. When he opened his eyes and looked into Matt's, he was sure of his response. "I love you too." He pulled Matt to him, holding him tight.

After several silent moment's Matt pulled back. "So, Faith is gone for a few more hours, and there's still several rooms in the house we haven't broken in yet." He wiggled his eyebrows.

Xander didn't have to be asked twice. With his arms around Matt's waist, he pulled him forward, figuring the living room was the perfect place to start.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Matt hung up the phone, his temper flaring. He rubbed his hand over the back of his neck as he thought about what he'd just been told by Faith's therapist. He was used to the weekly calls. Faith saw Katie three days a week for an hour, and once a month, she would have family therapy with him sitting in on the session.

Faith hadn't opened up much about the actual kidnapping or what happened after she was taken, but no one was surprised by that. Everyone he talked to who had been through something similar said that it took time for their child to talk about what had been done to them.

What had him angry now was the fact that Faith had requested that Xander come with her to the next family session instead of him.

He tried to understand, tried not to be hurt, but she was his daughter. Yes, she was close to Xander too, and they shared a bond he didn't understand, but he should be there for family sessions. If she wanted Xander there, he could join them, but for her to request that he not go, that wasn't right.

He stared out the window, trying to figure out what to do.

Katie had suggested they do what Faith requested and reminded him that all sessions with Faith were private, and unless Katie thought Faith was in danger or needed further counseling or medical treatment, she didn't have the right to discuss their conversations even with him.

For months, he'd tried to ignore the way Faith would talk to Xander instead of him. He watched them whispering, saw them talking in her room late into the night. He saw how she would say things to him, but then notice he was close by and look ashamed at whatever she said.

Wanting the best for his daughter, he let it go this whole time, glad that Faith had someone to talk to if she couldn't talk to him, but now, he'd finally reached his breaking point.

Why did she want Xander there instead of him?

He debated on going to Faith's room and asking her, but he hated to make her feel guilty or put her on the spot. For whatever reason, she wanted Xander there. He couldn't take that from her, but he needed to at least let

Xander know what he was feeling before it ate him up inside and caused bigger issues.

Trying not to feel like a jealous fool, he headed to the bedroom where Xander was showering before going in to work for a sting. If he didn't talk to him before he left, he'd stew about it all night and make it worse.

Xander was standing in front of the bathroom mirror with a towel around his waist. "Hey, you're five minutes too late. You could have washed my front."

Matt smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"You okay?" Xander turned to him as if he could instantly tell something was wrong.

"Do you have a minute before you have to leave?" Matt took a deep breath, trying not to appear as upset as he was.

"Sure, what's up?" Xander stepped out of the bathroom.

Matt stared at Xander's chest, following the patterns of his tattoos as he tried to think. "Katie called me about Faith's family session later this week."

"Is Faith okay?" Xander stepped closer, his voice edged with concern.

"She's okay. It's just that, I guess Faith asked that I don't go to the family session this week. She asked that you go instead."

"Oh." Xander nodded. "And that didn't sit well with you."

"No, not at all. I mean I know you and her talk. Hell, from day one she's talked to you more than she talks to me, but now it's with counseling too?"

Xander ran his hand through his still wet hair. "I didn't know she was going to do this. She mentioned that she was ready to talk about what happened after the kidnapping, but I thought she was going to do that with you."

"I'd like to think she would."

Xander nodded. "Have you talked to her about it?"

"No, what am I supposed to say? Tell her she hurt my feelings and make her feel worse, or tell her she's not allowed to do it without me there? There isn't anything I can say to her, but I needed to say it to you because I just don't understand."

"It's complicated." Xander rubbed a hand over his chest.

Matt's temper flared. "She's my daughter, yet you're the one she talks to. You're the one she asks to sit in on her therapy sessions. How do you think that makes me feel?" Matt glared at him.

"What do you want me to do? Tell her no? I know this isn't right and it's not normal, but for some reason, she feels she can talk about it with me. I don't know why," Xander lied. He knew exactly why, but he wasn't sure he was ready to bring his past up with Matt. "She's trying to protect you."

"Why me and not you?" Matt threw his hands up. "Why can't she tell me all this?"

Xander gripped his beard, tugging hard against it, closing his eyes as he tilted his head back, taking a moment to think. Finally, he looked back at Matt. "She talks to me because I told her I understand her, I know what she's been through."

"So do I. I've seen the pictures, read the reports." Matt started to pace.

"No, you're not understanding." Xander took a deep breath. "I understand what she is feeling because when I was her age the same thing was happening to me. I literally understand. I *know* what she is feeling."

Matt turned, his eyes wide. "You?"

Xander nodded, releasing his beard, and turning to sit on the bed. "My mom died when I was seven. My father started abusing me when I was eight or nine, by the time I was eleven, he was selling me to his friends for a night. I was passed around from one man to another. It went on until I was fifteen."

"My God." Matt sat down beside him. "I didn't know."

"I didn't want you to know." Xander reached for Matt's hand. "I didn't want you to think of me as used, broken, or unstable."

"I would never think that of you. I wouldn't think it of Faith. I think of you both as strong and as fighters. I'm not sure I could go through what you two have and come out on the other side as well as you both have."

"It takes time. Faith has a long way to go."

"You told her all this?"

"Not the details. She knows a man hurt me when I was her age, the same way she was hurt. I haven't told her it was my father, and I haven't told her he sold me to his friends. I kept it as simple as I could, but she needed to know that she wasn't alone. That I'd been there, and I'd made it through. It will be okay in time. The pain and memories fade. It might never go away completely, and that's okay, but it does get easier."

"So that's why she feels safe talking to you and not me?" Matt shook his head.

"She's trying to protect you. She said she didn't want you to get sad knowing how bad they hurt her. She's scared of hurting you more by telling you. I've told her you won't be upset, and it's good to talk to you about it, but it's something she has to decide on her own. We can't force her to open up to you about it. It's something we discussed trying to talk about in therapy with Katie, but she has to do it in her own time and on her own terms."

Matt sighed. "I've been so jealous of you. I couldn't understand why my daughter would choose to talk to you and not me, but now it all makes sense."

"I never meant to hurt you." Xander lifted their joined hands to his lips and kissed Matt's knuckles. "I didn't know how to tell you. I guess in a lot of ways I'm still like Faith. I don't want to share my pain, my disgrace, my horror. It's easier to keep it to myself than face any judgment that might come from people."

"I'd never judge you for that. You had no control over any of it."

"I know that, but there's this voice in the back of your mind... It's that voice that I think connects me to Faith or any other survivor. You can tell us it will be okay, you can say it wasn't our fault, you can say you don't judge us, but only someone who has been there can understand. Even at her young age, Faith gets that. She knows that there is a bond of sorts between survivors. It's something only they can understand. She's not trying to hurt you, but she just doesn't want you to know the details. Maybe a better way to say it is she can't say them out loud herself yet, and to me, she doesn't have to say it out loud because I already know. I understand what she can't say."

"I feel like such a fool now." Matt stared at Xander. "I should have been happy she'd talk to someone, anyone. Instead, I got jealous and let it eat at me, when this whole time, watching Faith go through everything had to bring up bad memories for you too."

"No more than I get every night I go to work. Each time I walk into a sting, I wonder if it will be one of the men that hurt me. I wonder what my reaction would be. Working with the team might not make sense after going through what I have, but it's what helps me deal with it. What healed me."

"The team knows?"

"Some more than others. They were all there when my father went on trial. Bryon and Kasey were the ones who stopped Dyson and me from

killing my dad. I'd gotten out of the Army. Dyson and I were living together at the time. My dad had disappeared when I'd finally told someone what he'd done, but he popped up about a year after I got discharged. I wanted him dead, and I talked Dyson into helping. We beat him nearly to death one night. We tied him up and were about to kill him when Kasey and Bryon walked in. They somehow talked me into letting them handle things, promising they would take care of it. They did. My dad went to trial and got life in prison for what he did to me and a bunch of other young boys." Xander closed his eyes, remembering the last time he'd seen his father. He was weak, and the effects of eunuchism had already started to show. He was weaker, thinner, his body becoming more feminine in nature. He'd met his father's eyes right after the verdict had been read, then turned and walked out of the courthouse with the team by his side. "I joined the team after the trial. After seeing what Dy and I did to my father before they showed up, they had a pretty good idea that we were willing to take the job once it was explained to us."

"Shit, I had no idea you'd been through any of this." Matt pressed his hand to Xander's back. "I'm sorry if I said or did anything—"

"You didn't, but even if you had, you didn't know. I've wanted to tell you for a while now, but how do you bring something like that up? It's not something we could talk about over dinner, and it surely isn't pillow talk."

"No, you're right. There really hasn't been a good time. Does it bother you that I know now?"

Xander smiled as he shook his head. "No, I don't want secrets between us. I'm glad you know everything now." He released Matt's hand, bringing his own up to run his fingers through Matt's hair. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I had no idea that it bothered you so much when Faith and I would talk. I should have seen it. I should have explained."

"Now that I know, I understand. I'm glad you're the one Faith leans on, and I want you to be the one at therapy if she is ready to open up. You can call her on her doubts, on her fears, on her insecurities. That's stuff I can't do. I can't understand what she is going through the way you do. I guess Katie knows about your past too?"

"She's the one who helped me get over my anger. For a long time, I was pissed off at the world. I'd start fights, drink too much. Katie helped me find a way to focus the anger, to let it out without hurting myself or others." Xander shrugged. "Well, others who don't deserve it. I have to admit,

working with the team helps. I know I'm saving some other child from going through what I did."

"I love you." Matt kissed him. "I think I love you even more now because I see how much you really have been there for Faith in ways I never even knew."

"I love you too, and I promise, I'll try to include you more when we talk. I'll gently try to get her to open up to you as well."

"Like you said, she will when she's ready." Matt took a deep breath. "Thanks, I feel better now."

"Good. I'm sorry I did anything to make you feel upset. I promise to do better communicating."

"Me too." Matt hugged him tightly, then released him. "You better get going. I've made you late already." He glanced up at the clock on the nightstand.

"It's only six. We won't leave for a few hours, but since Dyson is going in with me, he wanted to go over things again before we go in."

"You'll text me when you're done and on your way home?"

"You know I will." Xander leaned in and kissed him hard, leaving no doubt that things were going to be okay between them.

Matt smiled as Xander stood and started to get dressed, feeling as if so much had been lifted off his chest. He hated what Xander had faced in his past, but knowing why his daughter depended on Xander so much eased his mind. He was sure that now, after talking, they could get through anything.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Matt glanced at the clock, trying not to be nervous, but it was after two in the morning and he had yet to hear from Xander. It was rare that a sting went late, and that made him worry that something had gone wrong. He debated on calling Bryon, but didn't want to look like a worried boyfriend to the rest of the team, but he couldn't get rid of the feeling that something was wrong.

He stared out the living room windows, hoping that headlights would turn into the driveway any minute and it was nothing more than something wrong with Xander's phone.

"Daddy?" Faith leaned against the wall coming from the hallway. "Why are you still up?"

He smiled and patted the couch beside him. "Xander had to work late, so I was waiting up for him to get home."

She smiled as she settled her head on his lap and pulled her zebra to her chest. "Why does he work so late?"

"Because that's when he can help the people he needs to." He brushed a hand down her hair. "I talked to Xander and he told me about you asking him if we could stay here and not buy a new house. Is that what you want?"

She stared up at him. "Will you be mad?"

"Only if you aren't honest with me."

"Then yes, I want to stay here. I feel safe here, and I don't want to live anywhere else."

Matt smiled. "Well, Xander and I decided that is what we would do. If you're happy here, we'll stay living here with him."

Faith sat up, grinning. "Will you marry him?"

"Maybe someday, but we've only been dating a few months. It's too soon to know yet. I love him very much, but we're going to take some time before we think about marriage."

"I don't know why. If you love him, don't you know you want to marry him?"

Matt laughed. If only life was that simple. "We need to focus on some other things first, then decide on that later. I promise that you'll be the first

to know if we decide to."

"Do you miss Mom? Is that why you want to wait?"

Matt pulled Faith against his side. "Baby, I miss your mom every single day. I think about her all the time, but I think she'd be happy that I've found someone to love again. What do you think?"

"I think she'd like Xander, but then Mom used to tell me that tattoos weren't good, so maybe she wouldn't."

"What do you think, are tattoos good or bad?" This was a conversation he'd never thought he'd have with his daughter until she was much older.

"I think they are good. They are like Zee's stripes, and Xander says that counting the stripes helps when we have bad dreams."

Matt looked at her confused. "Counting your stripes?"

"Yeah, Xander says when he has a bad dream he traces his tattoos to calm down. He told me to count Zee's stripes, but when that wasn't enough, he told me we could paint stripes in my bedroom, so I had more to count when I got scared."

Matt's love for Xander increased tenfold hearing what he'd done for Faith. "That's why you put zebra stripes on your wall?"

"Yep." She smiled. "Xander was right, it helps."

"I wish you would have told me all this." He hugged her closer.

"It's hard to talk to you about some things. You get a sad look on your face. I don't want to make you sad."

"I'm just sad that you got hurt and scared. I'm not mad or sad at anything you've done." He kissed the top of her head. "If I try not to look so sad, will you try to talk to me more about things you're comfortable telling me?"

She nodded. "I'll try."

"That's all I ask." He leaned back and closed his eyes, enjoying having her cuddled on his lap.

It was the sudden ringing of his phone that sent chills through him. Xander never called this late. He always sent a text. Careful not to drop Faith's head off his lap, he reached for his phone off the coffee table.

"Hello?"

"Matt, it's Xander, he's been shot," Carter told him.

"What hospital?" He nudged Faith off his lap and stood, trying to make out the conversation in the background on the phone.

"He won't go to a hospital. Dyson is bringing him here. Beau is on the way."

"I'm on my way." Matt hung up the phone, turning to Faith. "Xander's been hurt. We need to go get him." He didn't want to make it sound as serious as it was. There would be time for that later.

"I'm not dressed." She looked down at her footie pajamas.

"That's okay, you can go like that, if you're comfortable." He was grabbing his wallet and keys, trying to think if he needed anything else.

"I'm okay like this. Can I take Zee?" She held the zebra up.

"You can. I don't know how bad this is. When we get there, you might have to go downstairs and either play games or sleep on the couch, okay? I'm not sure how long we'll be." If his sister lived closer he'd drop Faith off to her, but he didn't want to waste the time.

"Okay." Faith frowned. "How bad is he hurt?"

"I don't know, Honey, they didn't say." He didn't need to hear more than shot to know it wasn't good, but he hoped that him refusing to go to the hospital meant it wasn't very bad. At least it told him that Xander was awake enough to say he didn't want to go to the hospital. He glanced around. "You ready to go?"

"Yes." She followed him outside and to the car.

He needed to remember Faith was with him and speeding through town at two in the morning wasn't a good idea. As much as he wanted to get to Xander, he reminded himself that he was in good hands, and there would be nothing he could do that the team wasn't already doing. Dyson was with him, and unless Dy had gotten hurt too, he'd take care of Xander.

The drive to the house seemed to take twice as long as usual. Matt tried not to think the worst, but then again, if he expected the worst and it wasn't that bad, it would be a relief. He resisted the urge to call back and ask Carter questions. The team was busy, and he wasn't the only one who loved Xander and would be worried. If there was something he needed to know, then they would call him.

When he pulled up in front of the team house, his worry grew when he didn't see Dyson's car. That meant they weren't back yet. God, what had gone wrong with the sting for this to happen, and what did it mean for the team? He glanced over at Faith and tried to force a smile on his face. "Okay, we're going to go in. I need you to be quiet and let me find out what happened. I don't think Xander is back yet."

She nodded as she looked around nervously.

It had to be Xander being hurt that bothered her. She'd been to the team house several times and seemed to get more comfortable each time she was there.

Matt got out of the car and reached for Faith's hand as they met in front of the car. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Daddy. I just want to make sure Xander is too." She tugged his hand, leading him to the door.

He pushed it open and they stepped inside to find Carter, Trenton, Bryon, and Becca all staring at them. "Any word?"

Bryon shook his head. "Not yet."

"Hey, Faith." Becca smiled. "Want to come sit?" She patted the spot beside her on the couch.

Faith glanced at him, then rushed over to Becca.

Glad that Becca would keep Faith occupied for a bit, Matt turned to Bryon. "What happened?"

"We don't know. All I got was a call from Dyson saying that there were complications, Xander was shot, but the scene was secure, and the sting completed. I don't know any more than you do, and Dyson hung up after telling me he was headed back here with Xander and to have Beau here and ready to operate."

"He said operate?" Matt's chest tightened.

"Those were his words." Bryon sighed. "We've got everything ready. Beau is on his way. We always knew this could happen, so we have a medical room upstairs. He should have almost everything he could need."

Matt stared out the window. "Dyson would take him to a hospital if he had to, right?"

"He would. Even at a risk to the team. I've always made it clear that human safety comes before the team. If it helps, I could hear Xander swearing at Dyson when they called. He sounds like he's in pain, but the fact he was talking is good." Bryon shook his head. "This was supposed to be simple. Two adults, two kids on site. I don't know what went wrong."

"I'm sure Dyson will tell us when he gets here." Matt's heart skipped as headlights appeared out the window, but once the lights shut off, he saw it was Beau's car pulling up in front of the house.

"Fuck, where are they?" Carter paced.

"The site was almost an hour away. They'll be here." Trenton sat at the kitchen table with the files in front of him.

Matt glanced over at Faith, glad to see her talking quietly to Becca. He really didn't want her here for this, but what choice did he have? He should probably send her to the basement, but he hated making her sit alone before she really needed to.

Beau walked in the door. "What do we know?"

"Not much." Carter sighed as he explained what they knew.

"I'll be in the med room. When he gets here, if you can get him upstairs, we'll work there, if not, put him on the floor, not the couch. I need room to work around him." Beau headed up the stairs.

The room fell silent as they waited, all of them on edge. Matt tried not to let his imagination run wild, but all he could think about was where was he shot and how bad it could be.

All the conversations they'd had recently played through his mind. They'd just decided to live together, just proclaimed their love, and now he was at risk of losing him. He'd lost Jill. He couldn't lose Xander too.

This was part of their lives, and he knew that going in. There was always a danger, always a risk, but now that he was actually facing it, he wasn't sure he could deal. Especially knowing that Faith would be left alone if the whole team was somehow found out. He really needed to think about what he was doing and what consequences it would have on Faith. He'd thought about it before, but now, facing Xander being shot, it made it even more of a reality.

"They're here." Bryon was out the door before he finished his sentence.

Matt rushed after him, his heart pounding as he tried to see through the darkness.

Dyson rushed out of the driver's seat and around the car. "It's a shoulder wound, right side. He lost a lot of blood, but hasn't lost consciousness."

"I'm fine." Xander's voice rang out, filled with pain.

Hearing his voice helped ease Matt's mind, but there was still so much that could go wrong. How bad was the wound, and how much blood had he lost? "Xan?" He stood back as Dyson and Bryon helped him from the car.

"I'm good." Xander nearly fell as he tried to stand, the cigarette he had in his mouth falling onto the ground.

"Here, I've got him." Dyson hefted Xander over his shoulder in a fireman's carry and rushed for the front door.

All Matt could do was follow, trying not to notice how much blood covered the front seat of the car and Xander's body.

Once inside, Matt followed Dyson upstairs.

"I can walk," Xander grunted.

"The hell you can. You almost collapsed on me," Dyson argued back. "Shut up and let us make sure you're okay."

Matt smiled, glad the rest of the team was here to deal with Xander's attitude. If he'd been alone, he would have struggled to force Xander to relax and let them work.

Dyson carefully set Xander on the bed, and they all stood back, allowing Beau to get to work.

"What do you know?" Beau asked.

"Just give me something for the pain. It hurts like hell." Xander squinted as he arched his head back.

"I'll get there. I have to know what I'm dealing with first." Beau was cutting the already torn material of Xander's shirt from his body.

"Careful." Xander glared.

"Shoulder wound. Didn't see an exit. Lost a lot of blood. I managed to get pressure on it, but not much else. I had to secure the scene. He walked to the car, but barely."

"Because it hurts," Xander screamed.

Out of nowhere, Faith pushed past the group, moving onto the bed. "Xan?"

"Faith, you shouldn't be here." Matt went to grab her.

"No, he needs me." She reached out and gripped Xander's beard in her hand and forced him to turn his head toward her. "Look at me." She used her free hand to make a V with her fingers and pointed to his eyes, then to hers. "Focus on me." She still had his beard tightly in her hand. "Breathe." She started to trace the tattoos on his non-injured side gently. "Count with me." She moved her fingers along his tattoos.

Matt paused, leaving her alone as he watched Xander's eyes focus on her as he seemed to relax. He was stunned at how calm Faith was. With the amount of blood all over Xander and the very visible hole in his shoulder, she seemed to only focus on his eyes, staring at him.

Each time Xander tried to look away or cringed from the pain, she pulled on his beard. "Count the stripes." She worked her finger over one line of tattoos, then another.

Xander took a deep breath that seemed to calm him.

"I'm giving you something for pain now," Beau told him.

"Thank God." Xander still stared at Faith.

"Is she in the way?" Matt was torn whether to get Faith out of the room or let her stay since she did seem to be calming Xander the more she ran her fingers over his arm.

"She's fine if she is okay with the blood. This isn't going to be pretty." Beau was setting up an IV.

"Faith?" Matt touched her shoulder.

"I want to help. The blood doesn't scare me." She never tore her eyes from Xander's or released his beard.

Matt stepped back, exchanging worried looks with the rest of the team that had gathered around the foot of the bed. He was amazed at Faith's bravery, but also very aware of the connection she shared with Xander. They'd talked about counting stripes, but now, as he watched his daughter move her hands over Xander's tattoos, he realized he'd seen Xander do the same thing many times. There were nights when he would wake up to find Xander sitting on the edge of the bed. He'd thought he'd been rubbing his arms, but now, he realized that Xander had been tracing the lines, just the same way he'd taught Faith to do with her zebra. It was a coping mechanism they'd both found helped them deal with things.

It was obvious when the medication started to work, and the pain eased. Xander relaxed, his breathing coming evenly and his eyes clearing from the fog that had filled them. Faith released his beard, but Xander continued to stare at her as she continued to run her fingers over his arms.

Matt leaned back against the wall, wishing there was something he could do to help, but not knowing what.

"How is he?" Kasey flew through the door of the med room.

"He'll be okay." Beau looked up from where he was now working on the wound.

"Fuck, how did this happen?" Kasey turned to Dyson.

"There was another person there. We didn't know. We had both our perps drugged. Had just set them on the ground when there was a gunshot from behind us. I turned to see Xander go down as I pulled my gun and took the third perp out." Dyson looked at Bryon. "I had no choice."

"No, I agree." Bryon frowned.

Matt wondered how this would change things up for the team. They weren't in the habit of leaving dead bodies behind.

"I got Xander's bleeding stopped, but he insisted I finish the job. I made quick work of the perps, then made sure I painted a trail to the room the kids were in for the cops to follow. Once I had all that done, I dug the bullet out of the man I'd shot, got Xander out to the car, then went back in for cleanup."

"Bad?" Carter asked.

"Not too." Dyson shrugged. "We were prepared. I used the kit from the trunk of my car."

"What kit?" Matt asked, having never heard of it before.

"It's something we make Xander, Dyson, and Kasey keep in their trunks. It's got supplies to clean up a scene if for some reason DNA evidence is left behind. Kasey cut his hand years back and had to use household items that time. After that, we created a kit for them to carry so no one could trace their DNA."

"I dumped the sodium hydroxide solution over the area Xander had been, used it to wipe down the splatter from when he'd been shot. I'm pretty sure I got everything, but you never know." Dyson sighed. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You did everything right. There is always a risk. What we need to find out is how we didn't know about the third person. We checked the house right before you arrived and there were only two heat signatures other than the children." Trenton looked around the room.

"Maybe he showed up after, but we didn't see anyone else around outside. It was quiet." Dyson glanced at Xander.

"Let's go downstairs and debrief." Bryon gripped Dyson's shoulder. "You need one of us to stay, Beau?"

"No, I got this." Beau didn't look up from whatever he was doing on Xander's shoulder.

"I'm staying." Faith didn't look away from Xander, who was still looking directly at her.

"Faith, it's best if—"

"Let her stay," Xander whispered, sounding tired.

"Beau?" Matt asked, not wanting her to be in the way, but sure that Faith would argue if he tried to move her.

"She's fine if you don't mind her staying," Beau said. "She's keeping him calm."

Matt walked over to Faith, touching her shoulder. "You're sure?"

She nodded. "The blood doesn't bother me, Dad. I want to watch what he does and help Xan." She continued to run her fingers up and down Xander's arms, not so much tracing the tattoos now, instead just caressing him.

"Okay, I'll be downstairs if you need me." He hated leaving her alone, but something told him she needed him to trust her. Beau and Xander would take care of her. Neither man would let her get hurt or be traumatized by anything. "I love you both." He reached out and ran his fingers through Xander's hair before kissing Faith on the top of her head.

"Love you," both Xander and Faith said in unison.

Matt walked downstairs, realizing his hands were shaking as the adrenaline worked through him. He took several deep breaths. Xander would be okay. He had no idea what this meant for the team, what this meant for the future, but only one thing honestly mattered. Whatever came their way, Xander would be by his side for it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Matt stood in the doorway of Faith's room and tried not to laugh at what he was seeing, but it was taking everything he had to hold back and not give himself away.

Xander sat beside Faith at a small card table they'd set up. On the table were a scattered assortment of play make-up and hair accessories, but that wasn't what had his attention. It was the fact that Faith was leaning close, using some kind of brush to put make-up on Xander's eyelids. It looked like a bright purple, but from the distance, he couldn't be sure.

Across his shoulder, Xander had a white bandage, but even it had been colored with markers in zebra stripes that oddly went well with Xander's tattoos. In his hair, Xander had two purple bows somehow clipped at the top of his head.

As he looked closer, he noticed that Xander's fingernails were done in bright red.

Matt bit his lip as he pulled out his phone and quietly hit the video button. He had the urge to do a Facebook live with the video, but decided it would be better to keep private and use for blackmail when he wanted something Xander didn't.

His attention had been so much on Xander, that it took him a minute to realize that Faith had also dressed up, only she wasn't in makeup and bows. Across her arms, down her neck, and if he wasn't mistaken, even on the side of her face, she was covered in tattoos.

He focused the camera on her, watching the screen to get a closer look at what his daughter and boyfriend had done.

Matt's heart burned with love for the two people in front of him. They were everything to him and he couldn't imagine his life without them. It had been a little over a week since Xander had been shot, and he'd struggled not to baby him once he was home. Although, he hadn't really had to. Faith had taken the role of nurse and made sure he had everything he needed. She'd even gone as far as insisting that Beau teach her how to change the bandages and care for the wound, so he wouldn't have to.

Beau welcomed teaching Faith, and even joked that by the time she was graduating medical school, he would be ready to retire, and she could take over being the team's doctor. Matt wasn't sure that he wanted Faith in the middle of what the team did, but if she was, being the doctor was probably the best job for her. No matter how young she was, he let her learn and forced back his fears that it would all be too much for her to handle. She'd proven herself stronger than he ever dreamed.

Keeping the camera on the two of them, Matt walked into the room, finally letting himself laugh. "What do we have here?" He walked around the table, stopping in front of them.

"Doesn't he look pretty?" Faith put the makeup down and gestured to Xander.

"He does look very pretty." Matt stared into Xander's twinkling eyes, seeing no hint of embarrassment from the man he loved.

"And look at Faith. She's got almost as many tattoos as I do." Xander ran a hand over Faith's arm.

"I see that. In fact, I think I like yours more than I do his." He bent down and ran a finger over the one on her cheek. "Except this one. Did you have to put one on your face?"

"Yep, it's a heart." She turned her cheek to him.

Matt laughed. "It is." He pulled her into a hug. "I thought you wanted to be a doctor, now I'm wondering if you will do makeup instead." Matt grinned at Xander over Faith's shoulder.

"I can do both." She pulled back.

Matt's eyes went wider. "Is that glitter in your beard?"

"Yep, he shines now." Faith laughed.

"You don't like it?" Xander put on a huge show of pouting his lips.

"Is that lipstick?" Matt didn't even try not to laugh.

"Yep, give me a kiss." Xander reached out and tried to tug Matt in.

"Nope, not doing it." Matt laughed as he playfully acted like he was resisting.

"Come on, Dad. You used to kiss Mom when she had lipstick on." Faith had her hands on her hips.

How could Matt argue with that? He bent close and gave Xander a lingering kiss. When he pulled back, he wiped his chin, groaning when the back of his hand came back covered in glitter. "You two are going to get glitter all over everything."

"Yep, and it will make everything pretty." Faith smiled.

"Well, I hate to break up this little party, but it is bedtime for someone. You need to run and change clothes and brush your teeth." He tapped his finger on Faith's nose.

"Can't I stay up a little longer? I didn't get to paint his toenails yet."

Matt looked down at Xander's bare feet, almost thankful not to see bright red polish on them. "Maybe tomorrow, but you're done for tonight." He stood up.

"Party-pooper." Xander smirked, but reached out for Faith, hauling her onto his lap. "We will finish my toes tomorrow. You need to get a good night's sleep. You have to change my bandage tomorrow, then I think I remember something about Aunt Trish coming over for dinner."

"But I'm not tired."

"But I am." Xander faked a yawn. "Remember, I'm still healing. Beau told you to make sure I got a lot of rest, and I can't sleep well if I don't know you're sleeping good first."

Matt loved how well Xander could manipulate his daughter to get her to do what they wanted.

"Okay." She hugged him before slipping off his lap, then going to her dresser and pulling out her pajamas. "I'll be right back." She ran off, leaving them alone.

Matt raised a brow. "I've never seen you look so...." He searched for the right word.

"Colorful?" Xander offered as he stood.

"That's one way of saying it." Matt stepped into his arms. "You're going to get glitter all over me."

"Good, we can shower together." Xander swayed his hips.

"You're supposed to be taking it easy." Matt slid his hands down over his ass.

"I can't stand it anymore. I need you." Xander's hardness pressed against his own.

"I'll take care of you tonight, but you're not cleared for sex yet." Matt stepped back. "Besides, we have to behave until she's asleep."

That got Xander to take a deep breath. "Fine, but I know what I'm able to do. I don't care what Beau says."

"Good thing one of us does." Matt shook his head and laughed again. "You look so ridiculous."

"I look beautiful. Faith told me so."

Matt nodded, figuring it was safer not to argue with his daughter's opinion.

"Ready." Faith ran into the room and jumped up on her bed.

"Did you brush well?"

"I did." She smiled as if showing him her teeth.

"Okay, then big hugs and kisses." Matt watched as Xander bent down and hugged her tightly. "Sleep well, Princess."

"You too, Prince." She grinned back as Matt stepped forward. "Goodnight, Daddy."

"Goodnight." He hugged her and kissed her cheek, still trying to get used to seeing her covered in tattoos. "I love you."

"I love you too." She pulled the zebra close as Matt covered her.

Once they'd left the room, Xander was right back to trying to plead his case as they walked into their room. "I don't need to move much for sex. I can just let you do all the work."

Matt laughed. "Don't I always?"

"Hey, that's not fair. I'll top if you really want me to." Xander eased down on his pillow slow enough that Matt could tell the shoulder still bothered him.

"When did you take your pills?"

"I'll take them after sex." Xander grinned.

"You're insistent."

"And you're getting me naked, so you must agree." Xander smiled as Matt worked the button on his pants open.

"Lift up." Matt swatted his hip before tugging his pants down. "I said I'd take care of you. That doesn't mean we're having sex." He eyed Xander's cock and then glanced back up at his face. "It's really hard to get in the mood when you have bows in your hair."

Xander reached up with his good arm and pulled the bows from his hair. "Better?"

"A little." He shook his head at the eyeshadow and lipstick that was still there. "You're getting glitter all over the pillows."

"You complain too much. Focus on my cock." Xander lifted his hips.

He was fully hard, the tip glistening, giving away how aroused he already was. "I should use my hand instead of my mouth just because you tattooed my daughter."

Xander grinned. "She looks badass, doesn't she?"

"That's one way to say it. How long will those stay on? She's got therapy Monday."

"They'll wash off in a few days. I promise no one will have an issue if she goes out in public with fake tats all over her."

Matt crawled over the bed and settled beside Xander, bending in for a kiss as he started to stroke his cock.

Xander kissed him back, all the playfulness disappearing as the kiss became stronger and needier.

Matt hadn't undressed, hoping to keep things from going too far, but now his cock pressed tightly against the zipper of his jeans and he wished he'd at least gotten into something more comfortable. He worked his hips forward, grinding his cock against Xander's thigh as he moved his hand faster over him.

When Xander broke the kiss so they could both breathe, Matt slid lower, replacing his fist with his mouth.

Xander groaned. "I've missed that."

So had Matt, and as he slid his tongue around the head, then took him deep again, he wondered how they went a single day without this. He didn't want to think about how close he'd come to losing him. How easily he could have been alone again.

Xander's fingers combed through his hair as he lifted his hips, feeding his cock to Matt. It wasn't going to take long. They'd both struggled over the last week to keep from touching each other.

"Fuck, I love you so much," Xander told him as Matt cupped his balls with one hand.

Matt felt the same way, but was not about to pull off to tell him. He could feel Xander tensing, feel his balls tightening, and he knew by the look on Xander's face that he was close. He tightened his lips around him, working up and down him faster, teasing the base of his head with each pass of his tongue.

"Urgh..." Xander's hips bucked as he filled Matt's mouth with his release.

Matt continued working over him, taking every drop that Xander had to give, enjoying the sensitive hiss he got when he hit just the right spots as he cleaned him with his tongue.

"Fuck, you are amazing." Xander looked down at him with hooded eyes.

"I love you too." Matt smiled as he licked his lips and moved back up.

"Your turn." Xander reached for him.

"Nope, I said I'd take care of you. There was no talk of me."

"But I can see how hard you are." Xander stared at the bulge in Matt's pants.

"And I'll take care of myself after." He leaned in and kissed Xander softly.

"Let me watch you," Xander whispered against his lips.

Matt groaned, the thought of having Xander watch was more exciting than he thought it would be. How had they gone months without ever watching each other masturbate? "You can't touch."

Xander sighed. "That's mean."

"It's the only way I'll do it. You have to get better, and you heard Beau say the muscles could easily tear if you move wrong. The sooner you heal, the sooner you can touch me again." Matt got up and started to undress. He loved the way Xander's eyes watched as he removed each piece of clothing.

"Like what you see?"

Xander licked his lips.

"You know, that might be sexy if your lips weren't painted bright red." Matt kicked his pants aside before climbing back on the bed. "Where do you want me?"

"Straddling my hips so I can have you come all over my stomach." Xander ran his hand down his chest.

"You know, if you weren't injured, those bright red lips would look damn good around my cock." Matt moved into place.

"You're the only one stopping it from happening."

"I'm not going to risk you hurting yourself worse." Matt settled over Xander's cock, enjoying the way it nestled against his ass.

"Then you're on your own. Just aim for my lips when you come." Xander licked them again.

Matt groaned as he started stroking his cock, focusing on Xander's lips, and imagining his cum dripping off them. He arched his head back and gave Xander a show he wouldn't forget as he worked his fist up and down his length.

Beneath him, Xander's cock stirred back to life, and Matt smiled as he worked his body so the head slipped just between his ass cheeks. "You feel good there." Matt hadn't bottomed in years, but being like this with Xander made him want to. "When you get better, I want you this way."

Xander lifted his hip, trying to push deeper. "Why not now?"

Matt narrowed his eyes at him, but quickly lost his train of thought as his cock throbbed against his palm. Just the thought of all the things the two of them still had to do together nearly pushed him over the edge. As comfortable as they were together, their relationship was still new, and he longed for the things that were still yet to come.

"Fuck! Open your mouth." Matt stared at Xander's tongue as he licked his lips again.

"You going to come in it?" Xander still worked his hips gently.

"Damn right." Matt's fist tightened, and he pushed himself closer to losing control.

When Xander reached out with his good arm and pinched one of Matt's nipples, he was done. He stroked himself two more times, let out a breathy cry, and gave in to the pleasure. Jerking his body forward, he aimed the best he could for Xander's mouth, but lost in bliss, he missed, coating his face, beard, and chest with his release.

"That was the sexiest thing I've ever seen." Xander's voice was thick and husky.

"That's how I felt looking down at you." Matt leaned forward, careful of Xander's shoulder as he kissed him, licking the cum from his face, then smearing it over Xander's lips where he wanted it in the first place.

"You taste good."

Matt grinned as he rolled to Xander's side, needing a minute to recover. He traced his finger over Xander's stomach, happier than he ever remembered being. He glanced up at Xander and grinned. "So, are you going to let Faith do your hair when we get married?"

"If she wan...." Xander's eyes flashed to him. "Married?"

"I've been thinking about it. Why shouldn't we? I'm not asking officially right now, maybe just testing the idea out on you to see if I should or not." Matt hadn't planned on the conversation, but after seeing Xander and Faith together, then the great sex that hadn't even really been sex, it was where his mind was going.

"Wow, I didn't expect this." Xander tried to turn toward him, but his shoulder stopped him. He took a painful breath, easing back down. "So, you really want to? Even after seeing how wrong things can go on a sting, and knowing what could happen?"

"Even more now. I don't want to waste a minute. If the last year has taught me anything, it's that life is short, and we can lose someone we love so quickly. I lost Jill years ago, then this year, I almost lost Faith. I know you getting shot wasn't a life or death moment, but it could have been. I don't want to risk ever wondering what if we'd done it? What if we had been married? I want to marry you, and hopefully, we'll have sixty or seventy great years together, but even if it's just a year, I want that." Matt paused and stared at Xander. "If you do."

Xander smiled as he reached over and ran his fingers down Matt's cheek. "I'll ask Faith tomorrow. If she'll have me, then yes, I want both of you too."

As Matt kissed Xander, he had no doubt Faith would say yes. He couldn't wait to marry Xander and give Faith the family she deserved. No matter what the future held, they would get through it, because as broken as they had all started out, somehow together, things were just right.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Xander gripped Faith's hand tightly in his as they walked out of the courthouse. Beside her, Matt was holding her other hand, all of them silent. It had been a long day, and Xander was glad that it was over. He wanted nothing more than to go home and spend a quiet night with the two of them.

Faith broke the silence as they headed past the water fountains toward the parking structure. "They'll never get out of prison?" She glanced up at Matt.

"Nope. They were sentenced to three fifty-year sentences. That's fifty years for each of you that they kidnapped." Matt paused and knelt beside her, turning her to face him. "That means that they will die in prison because fifty times three is—"

"One hundred and fifty." Faith nodded.

"Right. And seeing as they are in their forties now, that would make them one hundred and ninety when they got out. No one lives for that long." Matt brushed a strand of Faith's hair back from her face.

"Good. I don't want them to ever get out." She glanced back at the courthouse. "I was scared seeing them again," she admitted.

Xander gripped her shoulder in support. They'd debated on allowing her to go to court for the trial, but it was Faith who had insisted she go. She wanted to see what happened to them, and she wanted to make sure the truth was told.

Luckily, she never had to testify. There was plenty of evidence to prove their guilt without the girls having to appear. They had each given statements, but other than that, the court was happy to not have to have them speak. Faith had spent hours talking about the case in therapy, and when it finally came down to deciding if she should go or not, it was Xander who finally said they should allow her to.

In his own experiences, there had been closure in seeing his father get sentenced. Seeing him handcuffed and walked out of the courtroom had given him back some of the control his father had stolen from him when he'd been little. He hoped that even though she was much younger, Faith

would have the same experience and it might help her heal a little faster by knowing for sure that the couple was locked up.

"They didn't look so scary now, did they?" Matt grinned up at Xander.

"No, they looked sick." Faith smiled. "I know it's bad, but I'm glad they're sick."

Xander bit his lip, glad that Faith had seen how weak and frail the couple had become. The case had been postponed due to medical issues that were never released to the public. Xander and the team knew exactly what those issues were. The couple was suffering the effects of what STK had done to them. While the woman would recover somewhat, though never fully be okay due to internal scar tissue, the man's health would keep declining, and depression would slowly get worse. It was common after becoming a eunuch. The body's chemistry changed, the hormones changed, and few people ever regained a normal life after.

There was no guilt. The bastards deserved everything they got for what they had done to children, and knowing that they suffered at his own hand gave Xander more satisfaction than it probably should have.

"It's not bad. It's called karma. When you hurt other people, it comes back to hurt you in some way. That's why I always tell you to treat others like you want to be treated." Matt kissed Faith's cheek. "Are you okay? Do you want to go home and talk more about it?"

"You promised pizza and ice cream." She turned to Xander.

"So I did." He laughed. "Do you want to go to the pizza place with all the video games, or get the pizza and go home?"

Faith didn't hesitate. "Video games."

"She's convinced she can beat you at that one racing game they have there." Matt met Xander's gaze.

"She can try, but I've been practicing." Xander bent and picked Faith up in his arms. "If I win, you have to get only one scoop of ice cream on your cone, but if you win I have to get you two scoops, deal?"

"Does that mean you only get one scoop if I win?" She narrowed her eyes at him.

Matt laughed. "She's smart."

"That she is." Xander kissed her forehead. "That's the deal." He offered his hand to her. "Shake on it?"

She took his big hand in hers. "Deal."

He set her down before she could protest about being too old to be carried. As they all grabbed each other's hands again and continued to the car, Xander thought about all she had been through. Faith amazed him. She was stronger than he'd ever been at that age, dealing with everything so differently than he had. He was so proud of her.

Matt glanced over at him. "You okay?"

Xander nodded. "Better than I think I've ever been."

Matt had been worried the case would stir old emotions, but it had done the opposite. Seeing justice served helped him to come to terms with what the team did for a living. It still might be against the law, but seeing the couple in court, seeing how weak they were, and knowing that because of that, they couldn't hurt another child, Xander found a new passion for what he did. He also found satisfaction that the justice system could work alongside the team, even if they didn't know it. Just like his father, others were spending their lives behind bars, punished for their sins.

As he smiled at Matt, he finally put his own past behind him. Faith and Matt were his future, and they were all that mattered. He might not have had a good start in life, but he had no doubt with Faith and Matt by his side, the last half was going to be a wild ride.

EPILOGUE

Faith stared at the zebras as they wandered around the enclosure, wondering if they were the same ones that had been there when her mom was with her so many years ago. She smiled at the memory. She missed her mom, some days more than others, but she was glad she had so many memories of her to get her through the harder times.

"Faith, smile," Xander called.

She turned and waved as he lifted his phone up to take a picture.

"Wait, I want one with her." Dad ran over to her side and wrapped his arm around her.

"Move to the left and I can get the zebras in the picture with you." Xander motioned.

Faith leaned into her dad's embrace. The zoo was one of her favorite places, and to spend it with both her dads now was exciting. She loved going places with them.

It had been a hard year, even though a lot of good had happened. Her dads getting married was her favorite part, but there was also starting a new school that she had to work through. She was terrified of school, even still, she wouldn't walk out the front doors in the afternoon until one of her dads was there to pick her up and she could see them. In the mornings, they both walked her to her class before saying goodbye.

It was hard not to be scared.

Therapy helped some, but she still didn't like to talk about everything that happened. She was embarrassed and ashamed of a lot of it, even though Xander had told her that she shouldn't be. Xander was easier to talk to than anyone because he knew exactly how she felt. He didn't try to understand, he did understand.

Still, even with him she held back.

"I'm going to run to the bathroom." Dad kissed her cheek before walking away.

"Okay." Faith wandered over to Xander. "I'm having so much fun." She looked around. "Can we go see the tigers again?"

"Sure, anything with stripes, right?" He nudged her playfully.

"They still aren't as cool as zebras." Faith moved with him down the walkway, closer to the bathrooms. "Do you have to work tonight?"

Xander shook his head. "Nope, not until Sunday unless something comes up."

"Can I ask you something?" She glanced around, making sure there was no one too close to hear them.

"Anything."

"Did you save me from the bad people?"

Xander's eyes went wide. "Why would you think that?"

She shrugged. She'd wanted to ask about it for a long time, but had been almost scared to, because they seemed to always be secretive about things that had to do with their work. "Well, Dad told me you work to help kids, then remember when you were shot?"

"I can't forget that." Xander rubbed his shoulder.

"When Dyson was talking about what happened, he said he painted a path to the kids for the police to follow. When the police found me, I heard them say someone had painted a path for them to follow." She stared into his eyes. "You saved me just like you and Dyson did the kids that night you got shot, right?"

Xander didn't say anything for several minutes. "Why are you asking this now? That happened almost a year ago."

"I was scared you'd get mad if I asked, but I guess I'm getting braver."

Xander smiled. "Yes, you are." He hugged her, and as he did, he whispered against her ear, "it's a secret. I'm not allowed to tell you."

She pulled back. "I knew you did." She hugged him hard, then stepped back. "Thank you."

"The police *found* you." He narrowed his eyes at her, but she could tell by the way he was looking at her that the team had been the ones to paint the path for them to follow.

"I love you." She smiled.

"Hey, do I get some of that love too?" Dad walked up.

"I love you too, Dad." She hugged him. "So, can we go see the tigers?"

"We can head that way, then we need to think about leaving," Her dad told her as he exchanged a strange look with Xander.

It was a look that she knew very well. They used it when they were up to something and didn't want to tell her.

"Then can we get ice cream?" She figured she might as well ask while they were in a good mood.

"Sure." Xander reached for Dad's hand, then hers.

"This day can't get any better." She started to walk toward the tiger enclosure.

"And, maybe after ice cream, we can stop by the pet shelter and see about getting a dog," Matt said behind her.

Faith released Xander's hand as she turned to look at her dad. "Really?"

Xander laughed. "Told you she wouldn't believe you."

Dad nodded. "You and Xander have talked me into it. What do you say, still want a dog?"

Faith flew into his arms, tears filling her eyes. "I love you so much."

As Xander stepped into the hug, she'd couldn't remember ever being happier. Life was good, and it was just about to get better.

She hugged her dads hard, never wanting to let go. Well, at least until they got the dog!

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