Risen by the Fallen

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SHARP PAIN AND GRISLY MEMORIES. THEY flash through his mind's eye like a blood-stained war-torn reel of film. Frank DaSilva struggles for breath, but not where he lies on the desert floor. Somewhere deep inside of him, a dark place that holds his secrets close to heart and his intentions furthest from regret. Through a storm of inner turmoil and clashing demons, Frank seeks to unearth the strength lingering dormant beneath the surface.

Only after he has defeated this obstacle do his lips part and his lungs pump fresh air. Frank gasps in the arid desert atmosphere, lets it swim hoarsely through his throat. He chokes on dust and particles of death straggling behind. Squirming around on the ground, it takes Frank longer than perhaps it should have for him to realize he's bound. His mouth, free from a gag thankfully, fights to scream—but he cannot muster the slightest garble. Only a husky groan escapes his throat, but it's without coherency.

Frank's entire body is sore beyond words.

In places there are cuts and dried blood.

How long has he been out? He knows one thing is for sure—his memory isn't as crippled as it leads himself to believe.

Eyes flutter open but there is only a deep murk that's as impenetrable as it is featureless. A degree between cold and

warm, he infers that it's nighttime and he's still out here…under this barn, in the middle of nowhere that happens to be in the middle of nowhere. A place where dead men go to fade away. A place where strong men are beaten and left for dead.

A place of torture and unwarranted cruelty.

"No!" Frank had drawled, bawling. He'd struggled against his restraints with the momentum of every fight he'd ever been in, all rolled into one mean machine. And yet, sound as they'd proven themselves, the restraints didn't budge. He would've burst a vein had his captors not struck him time and time again when it appeared that it might, simply trying to break his PlastiCuffs. An impossible feat for even a man as robust as Frank, although at forty-two years old and more in shape than most, he was still lacking the versatility of youth.

Meanwhile, his parents—both in their high sixties—were bound to chairs, gagged and mauled. Somehow, Frank's abrupt resignation was too much an insult to just let go, resulting in a surprise visit from his former employer's son.

The man's face was young and old at once, handsome and grotesque all at the same time.

The visage of an animal, a monster.

"A bit too old for my taste, eh?" Theodore Donato had said with a sick grin, holding a six-inch serrated blade to his mother's trembling chin. Theo's face distorted in Frank's malformed retention. His voice lilted the wrong way, deepening to become something more fitting. Like a humanoid hyena with too much testosterone in all the wrong places.

"Leave them out of this, Theo!" Frank's voice roared, reverberating now through the confines of his miserable skull. "This is between *you*…and *me*!"

"Well, technically, ya know—" Theo had murmured, briefly turning away from Eleanor DaSilva to glare down at Frank "—this whole situation was initially between you and my father. But, as it were, I'm here to do him a favor…and, *ah*, we actually kind o' like it around here. Nice, clean air. Friendly people."

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The man was clearly out of his mind.

"But I don't think you're that grateful, Frank," he added, punctuating with a sudden backwards thrust that buried four inches of the knife's blade into Eleanor's left shoulder. She screamed behind her gag before going limp in his chair.

Frank howled after her, struggling to his feet only to be beat down by two of Theo's goons in the same instant.

His father, Bernard, was not a small man. Frank undoubtedly got his musculature and grit from him, beneath what he's built himself, but at his age and current conditions Bernard was futile in his efforts. He managed to lift his chair from the ground, growling incoherently behind his gag and trying to charge Theo. A goon fired a loud shot that obliterated Bernard's left calf and brought him down in a split second.

Frank was about out of breath.

His cheeks were caked with tears and new ones were already forming. Spittle had surged from his lips and draped down his chin in viscous strands. He fought for something, but by then he didn't know what exactly. He had failed his mother, more or less brought this upon her. Upon them. And now his father—he was surrounded by Theo and the eight goons in his company. None of them were small men.

Frank envisioned his failures pile up and knew there was no way out of this.

He just wanted it to be over. He wanted a bullet between the eyes, but knew that it wouldn't be so easy.

And then Theo's steel-toed boot struck Frank in the stomach, rolling him across the dirt. As he fought for his breath yet again, Frank found himself on a downward spiral that just might never end. But when he rolled back onto his left side and found himself staring into his father's eyes twelve feet away, he knew that the finish line was within sight—

Just like that.

Frank bawled as he squirmed there on the ground, several hours after his memories had occurred. Nearly an entire day passed by, Theo and company having left him here to rot.

Beneath a decaying roof surrounded by four rotting walls of muddy wood. The desert floor was most unforgiving, and his body still ached somehow worse than before.

"No! No! No!" Frank spat in awfully distorted screams, punctuating every time Theo's heel came down upon Bernard DaSilva's face. "No! No! No!"

Frank's last scream drew out in a garbled sobbing and retching sound as his father died terribly before him.

"I'll see you in hell, Frankie," Theo had said, after his henchmen helped hoist Frank onto his knees. There he lolled back on his heels, teetering, half-alive as it were. His brain was a muddled mess and his body hurt both inside and out, in more ways than one. He wanted to say something, anything, but his thought process was crippled. He couldn't even spit in Theo's face, or on his nice black shoes, for his motor functions were shot to shit. And then Theo, towering over Frank with a Colt .45, uttered his last words before he became a ghost to the DaSilva nightmare. "Here's your handbasket."

Theo put a round low into Frank's left shoulder.

Logically, he would die overnight. Slowly, miserably, but certainly. And then Theo was gone, his henchmen in tow, a quiet zephyr carrying their essences into the prickly air.

Instead, Frank lives. Barely.

"Find you, find you, find you," Frank mutters through blood and saliva as he writhes around on the ground. The night air is thick and humid, and his vision is still crippled, all the more now because of it. But with his voice in check, somehow or another, he cannot help but continue howling his dreams of vengeance. It rips him up inside. "Find you, find you, I'll fucking *find you*!"

Though his bellows are loud and raspy enough, his hollowed-out hearing catches something else in the vicinity. Dry earth crunching, a low humming. No, a growling. All and both. And then a pair of white beams slash across the ground that Frank can see past the front doors, which hang ajar. Some of the sharp radiance filters into the abandoned barn, washing its light

up against the dilapidated wood surrounding him. The grinding and growling comes to a stop, but the lights remain affixed to the barn's entrance. Metal creaks, groans, but by now Frank's voice is worn out and his brain is playing games with him. His stomach lurches and his eyes ache loudly.

He groans under his breath and sluggishly rolls around on the ground.

Footfalls enter the barn, reluctant at first but after a moment accelerated. As cold skin touches his, to which he cannot discern smooth from rough or alive from dead, his dim light is hushed by sweeping shadows.

And Frank DaSilva, for all that he knows he is, sinks into the void.

The shower was needed, especially after dragging that man from his would-be grave and into the back of her El Camino. He hadn't been what she was looking for, but considering his condition and what had happened to her sister two days ago, maybe there *is* a connection.

Cleaning and bandaging his wounds, especially that nasty shot he'd taken to the shoulder, had been an even more dirtying experience. She wasn't foreign to getting messy, but this was something else altogether. And after her sister…

Cris Volkova didn't dwell on the memory.

It dwelled on her, instead, whenever it so pleased to torment her. As for this man…she looks at him from where she stands, a few paces from the bathroom. Thin clouds of steam roil out through the doorway. She had faith that he wouldn't wake up for another couple of hours, though by reason she couldn't be entirely certain. Nonetheless, she takes to things casually—she walks to the foot of her bed, where some clothes had been lain out. One white towel enrobed her body from her chest to her knees, while she uses a washcloth to dry what little hair she has.

Picking up the clothes, she returns to the bathroom to get dressed. The exhaust fan is still running, a low hum that makes her actions with the door shut suppressed from other ears

outside. Perhaps this is why, upon her leaving the bathroom once dressed and turning it off, she hadn't heard the man get up. Because now she stands three paces from the bathroom door, frozen still and staring forward at him by the foot of his bed. He's standing erect, more or less, with a slight slump to his left side and his right hand gripping the wounded shoulder. He's shirtless, but the gauze covers most of that shoulder, while a couple other bandages have taken to his cuts. Nothing major aside from the gunshot wound, except for of course an array of bruises.

Cris's eyes focus on something else, however.

A black SIG-Sauer P226 occupies his left hand, which appears larger than the pistol itself. He holds it stiffly, elbow at his hip, but his aim seems on point.

The man is at least 6'1" with over two-hundred pounds of fat and muscle. He isn't a bodybuilder, but at one time in his life it wouldn't surprise Cris. For his age, as she imagined he was in his low forties, he was in great shape. Broad shoulders, big arms. Wide neck, proportionate head. His hair was jet-black, long to the shoulders, and Cris had fastened a burgundy bandanna around the top of his head just under his bangs to keep hair from sticking to his face. It raised it up slightly, giving him a faintly younger look.

"Who are you?" he croaks. The voice is deeper and coarser than Cris imagined it might be. Yet as husky as the man sounded, and as full of spite as his gaze is, she has faith in his benevolence.

Pulling him out of that barn last night lent her a slew of answerless questions, too. Having seen two elderly corpses bound to rickety chairs, beat up and dead, somehow raised more questions and a few hints as to the answers.

But she wants more solidity than that.

"You're not gonna shoot me," Cris says, regretting that she'd left one of her guns out by the TV. What if some rude maid had barged in? Or…what if she was wrong about this man?

"The hell I won't," he growls, thumbing back the

hammer on the double-action semiautomatic pistol. He takes a lumbering step forward, and masks his pain surprisingly well. There is a deeper woe on his brow, and it isn't in regard to his physical trauma.

"I'm no threat to you. If anything…I'm a friend." Cris slowly raises her hands in a defenseless gesture. She swallows and breathes controllably. "My name is Cris Volkova…I found you last night, in an abandoned barn in the desert, about two miles from the main road. I was looking for…someone else. Some*thing* else, at least. But I heard you as I approached, and when I peered in you were unconscious. The other two bodies, though…they weren't so fortunate. I'm sorry."

The man's Adam Apple shifts as he swallows a lump of misery and his face slackens from a twisted realization. His whole body appears to relax just then, and he slumps again, knees going weak.

Cris takes a few steps forward, unsure of what to do, but noticing that the man had dropped his aim or at least loosened his fixation on her. And then he suddenly flings the pistol harmlessly to the bed, in the same motion that he drops to his knees by the trash can between the door and cabinet with the TV on it. He retches into the bin, mostly a dry sound that lends some wet smacking on the bag. After a few seconds of heaving he struggles to his feet, wiping his lips with the back of his hand, and looks up to see Cris still standing there…

Now with a gun in her hands.

It isn't the SIG-Sauer he'd had, though, but a stainless steel Smith & Wesson snub-nosed revolver. She doesn't cock the hammer, but she holds it with a firm stance and unwavering arm.

"Now, like I said," Cris's voice is steadfast, "I'm not here to hurt you. No damn reason to, after dragging you into my car from the desert last night, then going through the messy hassle of bandaging you up. So…you can either thank me and answer a couple of my questions, or fuck off."

Frank knows all degrees of hostility from being a bouncer until he was thirty and a bodyguard for the ensuing eleven years. He knows personal wrath, he knows indifferent spite, and he knows sheer rage without rhyme or reason. This is a shade of the foremost, and it doesn't concern him—but it could, only if he continues to show her disrespect.

Aside from the twisted memories thrown about his head, the pain in his gut and the severe migraine, Frank knows that he'd been saved from greater torment. A worse fate, the grandest of all that calls itself Death. Somewhere in that deep pit of darkness he would've found a solitude vacant of love and absolution. He wants to be with his parents again, apologize and love them for all that they were worth. They were old, but they still had time on this earth and their ends as it turned out couldn't be further from what they deserved.

This angers Frank to a boiling core.

He wants revenge, to settle a score he couldn't fade into the afterlife without doing.

"I'm sorry," Frank finally says, throwing up his hands in a defenseless gesture. He slowly trudges back to the bed, where he sits down in a heap and takes a long breath. His throat is dry, the exhalation gravelly as it is.

Cris, as she calls herself, sighs with a kind of relief. She relaxes where she stands, to an extent, and lowers her revolver. Frank imagines it is either a .38 or .357, whichever way he isn't about to take any risks.

As if he is in the shape to…

The woman, on the other hand, he isn't about to doubt her capabilities. She is lean, but fit, to the point where it doesn't shock him so much that she'd managed to handle him by her lonesome. Dragging him, like dead weight, to her car and then inside the room. He ponders how much of a burden he's been to her these past several hours, and if she's even slept since saving him from a would-be grave.

"And thank you," he says before she has a chance to respond. He doesn't look directly at her for longer than a few

seconds. She is certainly attractive, and her toned physique is an added appeal for Frank. She stands about 5'7" and 120 pounds, the muscle evident on her exposed abdomen. She's wearing a white sports bra under a black and white girls' varsity jacket, its sleeved rolled up to the elbows to expose tattooed forearms. She has the slightest hourglass figure, barely observable through the open-hanging unbuttoned varsity jacket that comes down to her navel at its lowest point. Snug black sweatpants hug her hips and extend down to bare feet. She has a tattoo of a patch of roses below her navel, a nickel-sized heart outline by her left eye, and an American eagle peeking around the right side of her neck. Her irises are a shade of green, featuring thin black eyeliner but aside from that no makeup. Excluding her tattoos, the first eye-catching feature is her black-haired ponytail mohawk; it seems to fit her perfectly.

"What else was I supposed to do?" Cris says, returning the revolver to her bag on the bed. "Besides, I was hoping you might be able to help me out."

"I don't mean to be rude, Cris, but I'd like to hear your story first."

Cris cocks an eyebrow. "*My* story? What makes you think that I have one?"

"C'mon. A woman like you, out here of all places, and you just so happen to stumble upon me out there? Besides…you said yourself, you were looking for *some*one, or *some*thing. Answers, at least. So…what's your story?"

Cris is clearly taken aback a little. At the man's coherency, at the impetus in his voice, and the insistence of his gaze. But through it all she reads honesty across his every breath, and a lingering curiosity not easily extinguished.

"Fine, stranger," she sighs gutturally, moving away from the bed but still standing.

"I'm Frank. Frank DaSilva, if it's any consolation."

"Better than 'mister nameless,'" Cris shakes her eyes. Another exhalation leads her voice down a road she clearly didn't want to go on, but went there nonetheless. "Me and my

sister were on a road trip two days ago, just to kind of escape our city lives for a week. Site-seeing, living free, that kind of shit."

"I'm sorry, but…how old are you? And your sister?"

"I'm thirty-four." Cris pauses upon seeing Frank's eyes widen. "What?"

"Nothing, I just…would've guessed younger. Upper twenties."

"Oh, well I'm flattered," Cris says sarcastically. "Anyway, my sister—Sasha—is twenty-six. Always a young spirit, naïve, but fun, looks and talks like me but shorter and…cuter…"

Cris starts to trail off when Frank clears his throat and she's thrown back on track.

"So, this was two days ago—we'd stopped at a motel a few miles from here, forgot what it's called. Sasha was grabbing something from the gas station next-door while I was returning to our room. Place was *dead* out there, ya know, really nobody else outside but us. This was, uh…I dunno, midmorning. So, I'm at our room's door when I hear all this hooting and an engine roaring down the road. I look over my shoulder as I enter the room, see this modified Jeep Wrangler pass on down the road. I see this man's face, sitting in the passenger seat, just *looking* around. He had this…I dunno, this *evil* in his eyes, this *ugliness* hanging from his bones. He was pale, I mean, not like me but lighter than you…anyway, I saw him and I think he saw me but they were on down the road anyway. I entered the room, shut the door, and I'd say…"

Cris sniffles, her eyes become wet and her voice shakes a little. Frank observes her body language change from storytelling to recalling something traumatic; she moves with every sentence, half-reenacting her actions that day and clearly relaying a similar mood.

"I'd say about ten minutes later, if that, I heard gunshots as loud as they could be somewhere outside." Cris continues, and Frank becomes unnerved where he sits. "I bolted outside, and instinctively made a mad dash for the gas station. I saw their

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Jeep haul ass on down the road, a whole mess of them packed in there howling like rabid animals. And then I skidded in through the doors, at the gas station, and there she was…Sasha, just lying there in her own blood, her face puffy and her lip busted. Less than ten fucking minutes, and those animals just…tore through the place. The clerk's whole chest was gone, and Sasha had a gunshot wound in the leg…"

Cris is half-standing and half-squatting now, holding her arms low as if she were cradling Sasha's body at the moment, tears staining her cheeks and smearing her eyeliner.

"Her clothes were torn, her shorts were off to the side, there was blood and…and…I just held her and screamed and cried and nobody came and nothing happened. And I couldn't save her, I tried, but her stomach…there was a knife wound in her side, and it curved around to meet her bellybutton, there was just too much blood and too much pain in her eyes."

Cris mumbles something else and then clears her throat, her sinuses, stands up and straightens herself out. She wipes away her tears and fixes her gaze. It becomes cold, hard, obstinate.

"She was my only family. So I drive her to the nearest hospital, a small place about fifteen miles from here. I leave her there, with her I.D. and the security tape from the gas station. But I swore I'd exact revenge, no matter how reckless or immature it sounds. I can't imagine how I'd feel knowing that such a monster, or pack of animals, is just allowed to run amok doing what they wish without consequence. Not now, not anymore."

Frank's visage has become most troubled.

His eyes gleam wetly now, too.

"Was this Jeep Wrangler," he says, "was it black with a blue stripe down the middle? Was it up on a raised suspension, with thick treaded off-road tires, and one in the back? No windows, low doors, padded roll-bar? With a front wench and brush guard?"

Cris impulsively reaches for her revolver again. Frank

immediately throws up his hands.

"Who is he!?" she snaps, two-handing the revolver and pointing it at him. "Tell me, motherfucker, *who is he*!?"

"The same man," Frank breathes huskily, "who kidnapped me and my parents the other day, brought us to an abandoned barn in the middle of fucking nowhere, and proceeded to torture them before brutally *killing* them while I was forced to *watch*. I *believe*…this is the same man you speak of, and his posse of degenerates."

Cris starts to hyperventilate. She remembers the old people in the barn. The look of this man suggests a shady past, but who is she to judge a stranger? Her stomach lurches with the recalled memory of Sasha in the gas station, and the face of that man in the Jeep, and somehow worse of all reminiscing times spent laughing with her sister.

She drops the gun on the bed and scrambles for the bathroom. Frank hears vomiting sounds from where he sits. He lowers his hands but doesn't stand up.

When Cris returns, after running some water from the sink, she looks more sober than Frank has ever seen someone be, no matter the situation at hand. Given, no situation even he has been in has ever been as grave as this one. And as twisted, as unreal, as downright absurd.

"Where are you going from here?" Cris asks solemnly.

"Down a road," Frank says simply and bleakly. "A dark, coarse road."

"What's…what's at the end of this road?"

"Death."

"For you?"

"Quite possibly. But first…for him."

Cris takes a few steps forward. This is the closest she's been to him since he awoke. They are almost within reach.

"Does this road have two lanes?" she asks, looking down at him.

"It does. But I cannot guarantee a cul-de-sac at the end. There might be no way of getting back to the World."

"What world?"

Frank nods, but doesn't lift his head back up. He just stares at his hands, beat up and scratched and callused. He still has a lot of fight left in him, but he also has fatigue and pain. How much more can he take, and how much more can he bear to dish out?

"Okay," he says at last, looking back up at her. He swallows, then asks: "Can I see your hand?"

She slowly agrees, and steps forward to dangle her left hand for him.

He takes it gently, looks at her palm. The creases, the few faded calluses present. Her skin is soft, but not without flaw. He rolls her fingers toward her palm to form a weak fist, then leans forward and gently kisses her knuckles.

"I'm putting my trust, faith, and sincerity into you." Frank wobbles to stand up. He looks down into her gaze. Her eyebrows are sharp, with the capability of ferocity. "Can I receive the same from you?"

Cris swallows. "Only after you tell me *your* story. In full, preferably."

Frank nods. "Okay, but…I'd like to take a shower right afterward. We should get moving, fast, the sooner the better."

"Right. You speak, I'll get the bathroom ready."

"Thank you."

"Yeah." Cris turns.

"No," Frank's voice alone turns her back around to face him. "I mean it—for everything. Thank you. If you hadn't, and you can call it a strange coincidence or fate if you believe in that kind of thing, well…I would've died there. I don't doubt that you might've gotten your revenge, and in turn mine too, but I would've still been lost down there. And I would've gone out…much more miserably."

Cris nods, absorbing Frank's veracity.

"You're welcome. And thank you…for not shooting me."

"That's not who I am."

"I believe you…but I'd like to hear the details. And I'm sorry, asking that of you—your parents, the memory, the nightmares. The pain. I don't have a family outside of Sasha, I won't go into it—but she's all I had. You have to understand that."

"I try to."

Cris nods, heads off into the bathroom. Frank follows her, keeping his voice loud so that she can hear him without having to invade the bathroom as well.

"My mother and father had informed me of my uncle's passing late last week, so I joined them to drive out to his wake. I flew in from out of state, but they were living here already. Well, around here…anyway, we had just returned from the wake and were at a motel for some respite. I was in the shower when they breached the door…and surged back into my life. Theodore Donato, mischievous son of mafia underboss Albert Donato. Except that Theo's father wasn't present, it was just him and his henchmen. His goons. His fucking scumbag cohorts. So, they together snagged the three of us and brought us out to that barn…they tortured my parents before killing them right before me, threw me more than one beating, shot me with the belief that I'd die cold and alone and miserably out there in the desert…"

Frank looks up from his hands to Cris, who's standing in the bathroom doorway.

"And I *would* have," he says dryly.

She swallows. "Who is this *Theo* to you? What is your relation to him?"

"More rather, to his father. Big Al. The bossman. He runs things up in the city, illegally of course. His legal front is as legit as can be, and his deal with the local PD helps keep things steady. For eight years I was Al's personal bodyguard, which had been a two-man job, but eventually Al favored me. I got benefits, and the pay was supreme. But…I couldn't stomach the shit they got away with after so long. Moreover, the shit his brother pulled here and there without so much as a slap on the wrist. Al would just cover it up, the blood and chaos wrought by

Theo's hands, and look the other way. And I…I just couldn't bear supporting that shit anymore. So I turned tail and ran. I could've killed Al on many occasions, and probably gotten away with whacking Theo too, but only if I disappeared afterward. I didn't want to risk my family. I didn't want to risk my own neck…I was a coward, and for that here I am."

Cris shakes her head. "No, I don't think it's right to put that weight on your shoulders. This…what we're setting out to do…is damn heavy enough."

"I'd like to believe you," Frank says thinly. "But every time I close my eyes—"

"I see Sasha in my arms, taste her pain in the air." Cris swallows. She stifles the tears from escaping her eyes. "And I remember when I saw his face, this Theodore I can only presume, in that Jeep…I could've, I should've, just dropped what I was doing and go to Sasha at the gas station. I was unarmed. But I could've *been* there, at least. I could've…"

Cris shrugs, trails off.

"Best we not let regret muddy our feet," Frank says, briefly cupping Cris's cheek with his right hand. He rubs his thumb on her skin and then withdraws. "I'll have time for that when I'm dead, but only if I fail. Otherwise…I'll be happy to hug my parents once again."

Cris swallows, nods. She backs up and returns to the bathroom. She runs some water in the sink briefly before exiting.

"It's all yours, towel and washcloth ready—soap and shampoo there, too," she says on her way past him. "You can use the blue toothbrush by the sink; it was Sasha's."

"Thank you," Frank says as she reaches her luggage bag.

"Oh, and Frank?"

"Yeah?" he says from the doorway.

"*We* won't fail."

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WATER CLEANSED HIS WOUNDS MORE THAN they already had been by Cris's meticulous hands. Frank wondered blankly if she was in the medical field, or had even been, or was aspiring to be. In fact, he even wondered in the back of his mind just what her life was like outside of this place that had become hell seemingly for the both of them. Although without his family and her sister, does a life even wait for either of them outside of these wastelands? Frank's aware of limited possibilities for him, especially if he actually carries out Theo's death sentence.

After the shower, which Frank very much needed, he got dressed. At first this was difficult because he had no clothes except for what he'd been wearing earlier—briefs, jeans, and socks. After a quick wash at the motel's laundry room, Cris resupplied him his clothes. He thanked her, was handed them through the ajar bathroom door, and then reemerged shirtless but clean. He let his wounds breathe, and expressed his sincerest gratefulness for her stitching work on his shoulder.

Cris's eyes couldn't help themselves as they traced every contour of Frank's robust torso, his defined chest and abdomen, although the latter wasn't exactly a pristine six-pack. His arms, shoulders, and upper back were in stellar shape, however. For his age, which Cris can still only guess, he was attractively built.

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His skin was tanned, scarred in places, and tattooed around both shoulders. The ink composed serpent dragons swimming through waves of what appeared to be red brick walls. A beast forced to make the best of its incongruous environment, was how Cris perceived it.

Her tattoos, for the most part, were far less symbolic.

"I, uh, this is all I have for you," Cris handed him a large black shirt. It had no artwork on it, but was clearly many sizes too big for Cris. "Before you ask, it was Sasha's. And no—she was a couple of sizes wider than me, but nothing close to that. She just liked to wear men's size shirts at night. Hopefully…it fits you. Might be kind of snug, though."

"That's the last thing you'd want it to be," Frank couldn't help but say as he pulled it over his head. It was snug, but not skintight. The sleeves, on the other hand, might as well have not been there.

Cris snickered and rolled her eyes.

"I was…just joking."

"No, no." Cris said as she shuffled through her bag and took out a pair of white ankle-high socks. She put them on then donned some sneakers. "I'll try to stare less, is all."

"I haven't felt a beautiful woman's eyes on me in over two years, so stare away if you'd like. Don't worry—I won't make anything of it. We have greater items on our calendar."

Cris doubted two years was the truth for Frank.

Frank didn't doubt that she was in silent disbelief regarding his two years of abstinence. But again, he didn't dwell on it. He set his focus elsewhere. And this was what eventually carried the two of them outside the room to finish their stay. They boarded Cris's black 1970 Chevrolet El Camino SS, which Frank had a good time admiring, and laid rubber to the asphalt.

Now they're tearing down the road with limited discourse between them. They remain focused, although more than ten minutes passes before Cris asks him where exactly he's leading her. When he speaks, he continues staring straight ahead; he'd rather be driving, but as is he's the passenger and

nonetheless keeps his gaze affixed to the road.

"If Theo's going around taking advantage of and killing people on a whim, half of it's his company's fault. If he were alone out here, or with just one cohort, his balls would shrink and his spine would dissipate. The true coward would shine through, and he'd be on the highway back to Daddy the instant he put a bullet in me. But *this* way…with so many of his 'boys' at his side…he's inclined to act a monster everywhere he is—play the game of invincibility."

"Which is *bull*shit," Cris sneers.

Frank nods. "And we're gonna prove that. But first…we need some hardware. No offense, but a lil' more than your SIG and six-shot."

"Okay, but so you know—I got the SIG-Sauer *after* Sasha at the gas station…I thought I needed more than the revolver."

"I never said it was a bad choice, in fact, I applaud your taste. The SIG is as reliable and powerful as semi-auto's get, especially a .40-cal. But against Theo and his posse, however imbecilic maniacs they are, they're still maniacs—and they still outnumber us."

"Right, I get your logic. So, we're heading for a gun shop? 'Cause I know where that is."

"I thought you might."

"You figured I bought the SIG?"

"It was brand new, I could tell when I picked it up earlier, and as soon as you drew that revolver I knew for sure."

"So," Cris presses, "*where* exactly are we headed?"

"On your way to the gun shop, did you happen to notice the brothel two miles before it, on your right?"

Cris raises an eyebrow and shakes her head.

"That's 'cause you're not meant to. It's disguised as a shitty Mexican restaurant, albeit one that's three fucking stories high."

"Oh, yeah…that…it had a rickety neon sombrero on the roof, but no sign."

TWO

Frank cracks a half-smirk. “Funny thing is, how I knew was on our way to my uncle’s wake I saw two women who looked like strippers from a mile away walk to their cars, one white and the other black. Clearly. Anyway, on our way *back* from the wake, I spotted a pair of guys walk in while one was being pushed out the door by a woman with breasts the size of Texas in a bra the size of Rhode Island.”

Cris laughs. “Okay, okay, I get it.”

Frank thinks distantly that he wishes she would smile more, although given the situation at hand there is really nothing to warrant it. Nonetheless…

“So, point is,” Frank continues, “we park and you go in, ask around if there’s been any unusual *group* trouble in the past two days. If they give you any flak, unless you feel otherwise state the facts regarding Sasha and I guarantee you they’ll drop their shields. If they *have* had any problems, get some details then come back out to me and…ah, there it is.”

Frank pauses as soon as they spot the rickety three-story building in the distance on the right side of the road. Its roof-mounted out-of-order neon sombrero sign is a dead giveaway, however a positive sign that can be.

“Anyway,” he sighs, “you come back outside and tell me what they’ve told you, then we go from there. I have a strong feeling that one of Theo’s boys, probably not him unfortunately, is still housed up in there. Probably paying more than the women are used to, so they’ll put up with his bullshit for another day before calling *their* men.”

Cris, eyebrow raised, nods and looks at him with an impressed expression.

“You seem to know your stuff.”

“I have a history of stalking bad men,” Frank says, “to get things straightened on the behalf of worse men.”

“Theo and…what was it, Al Donato?”

Frank nods once. “Yeah, those are the names.”

“So, you want *me* to go into this brothel…just me?”

“That’s the plan.”

"What're you trying to say?" Cris asks as they approach the place and she begins to turn in. "That it looks like I *belong* here?"

"Not in a thousand years," Frank replies without so much as a tic in his facial muscles. This time he turns to face her, and those dark eyes under his heavy brow penetrate her shield easily enough. "You're too strong a woman to be bound to a place like this. And too damn attractive."

Frank looks away as she parks the El Camino in one of many empty spaces out front. There aren't any other structures within sight for another mile.

"I know you meant well with that," she says, "but you don't know the things I've done. Where I've been."

"I'm well aware. But why should it matter?" Frank says, unhooking his seatbelt and looking back over at her. "The things you've *done* and where you've *been* have no bearing on the things you're *doing* and where you *are*."

Cris smiles briefly to herself, bowing her head for a moment. She kills the engine. Her mohawk leans to veil the right side of her face until she wafts it back and looks over at Frank.

"Your past certainly seems to matter none." Her words have teeth, and she doesn't sit longer to hear a comeback, instead bouncing to her feet outside the car and slamming the door shut.

Frank shakes his head and pops his door open to take a step outside. He rises, and his voice catches her before she reaches the surprisingly vivid-red painted double-doors to the alleged brothel.

"I wasn't saying you're an angel, Cris, or that you haven't been through some shit and it's not like it's sunk its claws into you since you left it behind." Frank sighs gutturally. "I just meant…that, clearly, you've become a better person in lieu of it. No, I don't know your secrets and no I don't have the key to your soul, but do I really need to? I don't have X-ray vision, Cris, but you're a good person. Give yourself that much, at least."

TWO

Cris is taken aback, and somewhat speechless.

This time it's Frank who cuts things short. He waits for less than a few seconds before saying "I'll be in the car, good luck" and ducks back into the El Camino. She doesn't say a word, and walks into the brothel. As Frank sits and waits, he notices that—to his surprise—she left the keys in the ignition.

"To trust in a stranger like me," he says under his breath. A smirk follows and he glances his reflection in the rearview mirror. At first he turns away; and then he looks back, and says: "Looks like you're doing *something* right, old man."

He cannot help but look around, however. Not to invade her privacy, but check out anything that might already be visible—even partially. Give him an excuse to scrutinize another layer's worth. Ultimately he decides to stay away from the glovebox, although he has a hunch that she probably expects him not to. Hell, she might even expect him to turn the whole car over and probe it inside-out. But, he won't. Instead, he opens neither the glovebox nor the center console, and doesn't feel under the seats. Last to grace his mind is checking the visors. His has a mirror, but nothing else. On the driver's side, however, protrudes two inches to a pair of sunglasses and that gives him all the excuse he'd need.

So Frank pulls the sunglasses from the visor, which comes down in the process. He slides the sunglasses onto his face, but they're too small to fit him, so he just rests them up on his forehead as if they'll be used later. And his eyes are drawn to the Polaroid paperclipped to the visor in the same instant.

He unclips it and palms the photograph before him.

In the blank space below the image are two names and a date written in thin Sharpie.

Cris & Sasha – May 9, 2011

The background behind them was a blue sky suspended over a cobalt ocean. It was taken by Cris, who clearly had a greater reach than the shorter Sasha, but even so—with a Polaroid camera—the shot was a bit uneven. Clear, nonetheless, and beautiful. The scene and the women.

Sasha had long dark brown hair, with a couple of random braided strands. She had full lips and full blue eyes, sheet-white skin in strong contrast to the black shirt she wore. Cris, on the other hand, wore a white tanktop and her hair was more relaxed. Frank doesn't spot the eagle tattoo curving around her neck, either. Regardless, both of the young women look beautiful in this two-year-old photograph that Frank now looked at with a pang for the loss Cris is suffering.

And the absence of life Sasha is.

He looks at it for a moment longer, then returns it to its paperclipped spot on the visor. He keeps the sunglasses on before a new thought crosses his mind—what if they belonged to Sasha? He gingerly returns them to the visor, too, and flips it back up.

About ten seconds longer and Cris leaves the brothel through the front doors in what Frank would call a hurry. She half-runs to the El Camino, but on Frank's side. He manually rolls the window down in a swift motion and she leans down so close that they could've kissed.

This matter is nowhere near either of their consciences at the moment. Especially Cris's, whose face wears a most solemn yet vaguely enthusiastic expression. When she speaks to Frank, that same looks transfers to his face.

"I spoke with the owner, Madame Vercelli—the only name she gave me—and without me saying much, she gave him up fast. Said he's been here for about a day, after a big group came in two days ago and stirred a lot of bad vibes. He stayed, was paying in big bills, so they put him in their furthest room with only high-tolerance girls available to him."

"Excellent," Frank says, and exits the car as soon as Cris backs up.

"One more thing," she says, going around to the driver's side to lean in. "After she told me this, she assumed I was a sibling or—and I cringed, mind you—an ex. I felt obliged to clear that shit up, so I told her the truth. After that, she *offered* me a piece."

Frank cannot help but smirk.

"Naturally, I declined her purse shooter and said I have my own. I also said I have someone with me whose family's been wronged by him and his asshole friends, and asked her a favor."

"What's that?"

"To force him out the back door in two minutes. I say we probably have a few seconds before that actually happens. Here."

She stands up from inside the El Camino and tosses him the SIG-Sauer P226. He catches it, slightly surprised, and gives her a similar look of incredulity.

"It's okay," she says, brandishing the snub-nosed revolver in her right hand. "I've used this thing persistently over the past three years. Mostly at the range, but still…this'll do until you go shopping at the gun place after this."

Frank nods thankfully. "I appreciate it, Cris. Oh, and about that—my record ain't exactly clear."

Cris grins. "Neither is mine. Look where we are, Macho Man, nobody gives a shit. But we'll cross that bridge in due time."

Frank shakes his head, and off goes his smile. Cris slams the door shut behind her, keys in a jacket pocket this time, and leads the way around the right side of the building. It's nothing but seemingly infinite desert all around them for several miles, probably hundreds of it in this state.

"Madame Vercelli said she and her girls won't mind any ruckus we make out back, so long as it's cleared up by ten minutes time."

"Excellent, except that we won't even need half that."

"What exactly do you intend on doing?"

They reach the corner and turn it to see nobody at all. They assume he hasn't been forced out yet. The walls are thick white brick and concrete—no sounds make their escape out here. So the two of them set up just outside the sole back door, on either side of it and away from the further-set windows. Backs to

the wall, heels aligned, they wait.

"You just hold your fire," Frank finally says, quietly.

"For how long?"

Frank thinks of something he should have asked a long time ago. Before voicing it, he racks the slide on the SIG to confirm that it's loaded.

"Did you watch the security tape before sending it Sasha's way at the hospital?"

"Of course. It hurt…but I did."

"Was Theo…the one, who, you know…?"

"No, he watched the one who did. The one who raped Sasha was the same one who shot the clerk. Theo killed her, though. He had…this serrated knife…"

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry, I just…I wanted to know."

Cris nods, swallows deep, tilts her head back.

"If you recognize that it's the guy—*the* guy—who got Sasha, let me know. Somehow, just let me know."

"Okay. But I can't promise that—"

The back door situated between them suddenly flies open, its wooden frame smacking the wall two feet to Cris's left hard and loud. A tall, lean, built Caucasian man marches out, wearing boots, jeans, a belt not yet fastened, and is shirtless. He's carrying a white button-down over his shoulder, and it doesn't look the least bit clean. Neither does he. His skin is the color of watered grease, and he has uniform cuts on his back. Nail marks, Cris guesses. His hair is short and blonde with brown streaks, as disheveled as the rest of him looks. He's grunting and cursing as he marches out into the desert, stopping only when he hears the backdoor slam shut twenty paces behind him.

Boots grind on the earth. He slowly turns, wearing a thousand-yard stare that Frank feels doesn't even go halfway. He's a somewhat handsome man if it weren't for the expression he wears and the busted nose. His past speaks for itself, all the same. This young man is nothing to be treated kindly.

Frank raises the black polymer Sig Sauer P226. Upon

recognizing Frank within a heartbeat, the man's face is greeted with a broad shit-eating grin. Frank imagines that he is hiding a swollen panic inside of him this instant, and if that's the case then he hides it well.

Frank knows his name is Andrew Belleview. He is one of the handful of bad seeds that cling to Theo like remoras, but unfortunately he has the infrequent gift of superficial appeal.

"Andy, you fucking cocksucker, you should've stayed put!" Frank yells.

"And you should've stayed *dead*, my friend."

"I ain't your fucking friend," Frank says under his breath, like a wolf's growl. He cocks the hammer on the SIG. "Now, you get down on your goddamn knees and tell me where—"

Frank and Cris were already approaching the stagnant Andy while the back-and-forth progressed. Except that something caught Cris's eye the second before it did Frank's, by which time she stopped dead in her tracks…

A silver pendant hangs from a thin chain on his neck. It is so short, especially on him, that it almost looks like a choker. It clearly isn't a man's necklace, and although there's the vaguest of chances that it belonged to a working girl inside, Frank doubts it.

And, clearly, Cris doubts it too—because she knows the previous owner. The rightful owner.

Frank discerns that the pendant is a silver ribbon, and recalls seeing something similar on Sasha in that Polaroid.

All of this storms through Frank's head too fast, and too damn slow. Cris squeezes the trigger and her revolver bucks firmly in her right hand. A round pops Andy in the left shoulder, spinning him like a top. He crumbles to the ground, landing on his knees and screaming like a schoolgirl. He's dropped his shirt, which is now stained with something other than dirt and sweat. His hand clutches the wound, blood seeping through his fingers.

As Cris resumes her gait, Frank rushes over to her.

"We *can't* kill him now," he says quietly.

Cris laughs out loud. "You think I want to kill him

already?" She doesn't bother quieting her voice.

Frank sighs and rolls his eyes. He backs away. He doesn't get between her and Andy again, he just circles off to the side and trains his gun on Andy to make sure he doesn't try anything reckless. Moreover, to make sure that he gets punished for trying something reckless.

"What the *fuck*, lady?" Andy yells.

Cris stops about eight feet from him, and stares down with a mug that no longer smiles or laughs. She wears the face of an executioner—hood and all, on skin. Her eyes are full of wrath, empty of compassion. Deep and piercing.

"Put your fucking hands up," she snarls, barely audible.

Andy slowly removes his hand from the wounded shoulder, cringing as he does so. His other hand reaches for the sky, but his elbows don't lock. It is a lazy sort of surrendering gesture, and despite his current predicament he doesn't look very fazed.

"Who's *this* bitch?" Andy grunts, looking over his shoulder and up at Frank.

Frank simply shakes his head, glaring at Andy.

Cris rips the necklace from Andy and stows the pendant in her pants pocket.

"Hey, asshole," she says, the sun peering over her head and right into Andy's face. He swivels back to look up at her, and squint against the pressing light. She cocks the hammer on the revolver without so much as shaking. Her composure is impeccable, especially with the gun one-handed still. Her left arm dangles at her side, hand balled up into a fist, nails dug into the skin of her palm. When she opens her mouth this time, her voice is louder—more assertive. "Count on your fingers for me, how many women you've raped in the past month."

Andy's brow furrows. "I'll write it in the dirt."

Cris's stare hardens. "I said your hands."

"But…I don't have enough fingers for that."

Cris doesn't even finish her current breath. She fires the revolver and a round blows off Andy's left ear. Blood splashes

that side of his face, his shoulder, the dirt. His scream fills the air, and it's miserably strident. She waits for it to begin to falter, and he leans forward on his knees drooling blood; he probably bit too hard on his tongue or cheek. Cris doesn't notice or feel Frank's stare at her left. All she notices and feels is the fury chewing away at her insides.

The pendant was one thing.

That security footage from the gas station had been fuzzy, but these guys were too hopped up on themselves to care about candid angles. Cris's memory has always been a photographic one, and this asshole's face might never leave it since she watched the tape that day.

She hopes to leave it somewhat intact for when the police eventually pull down the road. Assuming they ever will…

As for the rest of it, she could care less.

"Wrong answer, *pig*," Cris growls, and spits down at Andy's bowed head. She follows with a high shot that goes past his crown and nearly straight into the ground. First it hits him in the left heel, puncturing shoe and shattering bone. Andy howls louder than before, his throat scratching and the pain probably in tidal waves across his skin.

She cannot imagine it's a close fraction to what Sasha had to endure. The beating he threw upon her face, the forced penetration, followed by Theo's borderline evisceration. One thing is for sure—this isn't just Sasha that Cris is retaliating for. No, she has a mind full of unintentionally imagined rapes—and beatings, mutilations, murders—perpetrated by this man over his lifetime. Young as he might be, he isn't a kid and—the more she thinks about it—he really isn't a man, either.

She cocks the hammer and steps forward. Frank budges, and she throws him the stink-eye but doesn't say anything. He tilts his head and raises his eyebrow. It's a look of general warning. She nods once and returns to glare down at him.

"Look at me, you piece of shit," Cris says. He doesn't at first, just sits there groaning. She kicks him in the knee and he jumps, then looks up and screams briefly with no coherency.

Cris tries to maintain a calm. She lowers her gun to offer both Andy and Frank a dosage of reassurance. Then she speaks slowly and clearly. "Two days ago, you and some *friends* were at a gas station not far from here. What happened there? And don't you fucking lie to us…"

"We busted in, robbed the joint," Andy says without further coercion, albeit through a voice of pain, "killed the guy behind the counter, and I raped me a cunt."

Cris's eyes flare at the same time that they narrow and she steps forward, squeezing the trigger in the same instant. Frank yells something and manages to divert her aim in the last nanosecond. The gun goes off, grazing Andy's forearm to the hand that he held on his ear, and he screams overdramatically. Meanwhile, Frank got behind Cris to wrap his arms around her waist and hold her back. The revolver had been knocked to the ground but was out of Andy's immediate reach. Cris flails and screams to be let go, so that she can kill this guy every which way her brain can concoct. Frank keeps his mouth close to her right ear, however, and tries to convince her otherwise.

"We need him, we need him to tell us where the others are, we *need* him to find *Theo*, the man responsible for *murdering* your sister. We *need* this, goddammit, or we may never find them, Cris, do you hear me!? We need *it*!"

Frank releases her after the last bit that erupted from his lips, just shy of deafening her. She stumbles forward to catch her balance, and breath, then looks up at Frank. He's red in the face, his chest is heaving like a submarine bulkhead under too much pressure, and the look in his eyes tells her something else that goes without words.

Andy *will* die, and he won't go so easily.

Frank's parents were tortured and then killed by these men, and while she isn't knowledgeable of who did what exactly in his presence, she should know better than to distrust him so much. Afterall, without his advice she probably would've never found Andy in the first place.

"Please," Frank breathes.

Cris nods. She looks over at Andy, who is struggling through his blanket of pain to crawl for the revolver. She jogs over, scoops it up, and spins it so that she holds the barrel end. She whips him across the face with it, spits on him again, and walks back toward the brothel. She stops ten feet away, keeps her back to him—and Frank, for that matter—then crosses her arms. She fights quietly, motionlessly, to gather her bearings.

"Listen up, Andy," Frank says, squatting in front of him with the SIG in plain sight but wrapped around his trigger finger too tight for Andy to even think about it. "I need you to tell me where Theo and the boys are staying. Where they might be, at the very least. Do this, and I'll spare your life."

Andy laughs gravelly. "You think I'm a fucking idiot!?"

"Well, yeah. Kind of. But that's not my point. I give you my *word*, Andrew Belleview, that I won't kill you. I'm an honest man, as sad as that might be sometimes, and when it comes down to it the reason why I left Big Al in the first place was *because* I'm not some second-rate coldblooded killer."

Andy nods lazily, groggily, and sighs. When he does, blood and saliva sputter from his cracked lips.

"What about *her*?"

"I can only promise my end," Frank replies simply. "You raped and had her little sister killed. You deserve more than a simple shot to the temple, more than you've already suffered. But, you tell me what I fucking want to know, and I'll give you my word that it'll be quick."

Frank snaps his fingers.

Andy chuckles, coughs, and nods his whole upper body this time. He squints up at Frank and begins to open his mouth. Already Frank knows he isn't going to say something even halfway pleasant.

"Ya know, that whore's *little sister* gave me this?" Andy points at his busted nose.

Well, Frank was right and wrong. That is halfway decent news. But it still isn't good enough—one, it isn't what Frank wanted to hear, and two, he wishes that Sasha could've done

better. Given the circumstances, he thinks she did a damn fine job. Cris would be tenfold proud of her.

"Too bad she didn't give you more than that," Frank whispers. He stands to open his mouth and raises his voice to the point where someone on the main road could probably hear him. Cris turns on her heel as the enunciated words burn through his throat. "You sick *fuck*!"

Frank reaches down and grabs a handful of Andy's hair with his left hand. He brings his right knee up to slam it into Andy's face, square in the nose. Something already broken breaks some more under the force of Frank's kneecap, and it isn't on Frank's body. Andy reels back, hurting his heel even more and undoubtedly his shoulder too. Meanwhile, blood courses from his nose and lips.

As he squirms around on the ground, Frank circles him.

"Secondly," he says, "you didn't answer me. *Where* are they? C'mon, Andy, I can make this hell feel a whole lot worse than the abyss you're going to after I let her kill you…and you're not the honorably loyal type, so spit it the fuck out. Where are they!?"

Andy doesn't answer at first.

Frank shakes his head, hovers over Andy, and raises his foot to prepare for some stomping.

"Miller's Inn, Miller's Inn, they're staying at a place called Miller's Inn, small spot six miles on the other side of the Gallows Bridge!"

Andy sure did spit it out, all in one spiel of spit and blood and forlorn hope.

"I sure as hell hope you aren't *lying*, Andy, or I swear to God I'll descend to find you and—"

"I'm not lying, I'm not lying, I'm not lying!" Andy shrieks, like a panicked dolphin.

"Good," Frank says, catching his breath and collecting himself. He backs up, straightening his shirt and jeans, slowly turning away from Andy. "I'd like to trust you, here and now."

"You can trust me, you can trust me, you can…" Andy

goes on and on, over and over, rambling until he is completely out of breath. He starts wheezing.

"You're done?" Cris asks.

"Yeah," Frank exhales. He coughs once and leans in close to her. "His nose, all busted up—that was Sasha's doing, apparently. I just, uh…I just added to it."

Cris squeezes Frank's arm, both of which are rippled with raised veins and gleaming in sweat. Her eyes meet with his and they are both grateful and apologetic.

"You have two minutes. I'll meet you in the car."

Cris nods. "Thanks."

They go their separate ways, but before Frank gets too far Cris calls his name. He turns to look back and she lobs him something. He catches it with his free hand, and pops it open from two stud-buttons. It's a black leather wallet. There are hundreds of dollars inside, close to a thousand. Andy's driver's license isn't included; he assumes that Cris probably held onto it.

He pockets the money for now. He figures that he should pay Madame Vercelli something for her and the girls' troubles. As well as the help.

He'll keep the rest for use shopping later…

"After what you and your *friends* did to that man's parents," Cris, squatting next to Andy's head, says once Frank is out of earshot, "I'd consider yourself pretty damn lucky that he didn't do more to you."

"I got nothing more to say to you, you fucking…bitch." Andy says weakly. He lies on his back, turning to both sides but not resting on either one. He's like an overturned turtle trying to get up, but only half-motivated.

"You know what, you've got the right mindset." Cris stands up. "I think I've had my fill, too."

She lowers her aim and fires a shot off into Andy's right knee. Gore spatters the ground and Andy howls like usual. It has all become so mundane, in a sense, to Cris. And while she knows this isn't making her any better of a person, she can't help but simply not care enough to stop. So she redirects her aim and

puts a round two inches below Andy's loose belt buckle. This time Andy's scream is more genuine than before, more horrific, more enjoyable.

Now he does roll around on his sides, feeling even more pain as he does so, but the thunderous agony in his groin is enough to drive his motions.

She circles around him, aims down, and tries to target his other ear. She fires, and misses. Misses the ear, that is. Instead the bullet digs a trough down the side of his head, spilling more blood onto the desert floor. Andy's screams start sputtering more and more, wheezing and losing breath.

Cris takes a deep breath, feels her head start to spin.

"I'm tired," she says thinly. "And I've wasted enough of my time with you."

Cris aims down, starts to look away, but turns back to stare at the head of Andrew Belleview just as she squeezes the trigger.

Click.

Cris's heart hollows out. She mouths 'what' and then cocks the hammer, squeezes the trigger again. Another empty click. She ejects the cylinder and all six .38 casings spill out. This time she mouths 'fuck' and snaps the cylinder shut again. She has more rounds in the car, but doesn't want to make a double trip just to wipe this scumbag off the face of the Earth—

Andy starts laughing. It is a gurgling sound, but a low and distantly proud laugh all the same.

"No," Cris shakes her head, revolver slipping into a jacket pocket. "No…no…"

She brings down the heel of her sneakered right foot into Andy's forehead. Her thigh muscles tighten, flex, tighten. She repeats the motion. Andy's skull caved in on the first stomp, but she goes until her count hits five and then stops to stagger away. Blood and brain matter adhere skull fragments to the sole of her sneaker. She does her best to wipe it off on the ground as she scrambles back toward the brothel, toward her car, toward Frank.

She starts coughing and represses the tears.

Cris reaches the side of the building, stops abruptly, and vomits off to the side. She dry-heaves some more before leaning up against a wall to catch her breath. She wipes clean her mouth and straightens herself out.

Frank is leaning his back to the passenger's side door when Cris turns the corner. He can tell that she's shaken up for obvious reasons, and decides not to even bring up the retching sounds he heard.

"You ready to blow this joint?" he asks.

"Sounds right."

"You okay?"

"As much as I can be right now."

Frank nods. "How 'bout we hit the gun shop, then get some grub afterward. I think it'd be best if we just go straight down the road 'til we hit this alleged Miller's Inn. But we definitely need some energy in us first, sustenance-wise."

Cris follows him inside the El Camino. She keys on the engine, nodding all the while, but is practically hugging the wheel.

"Sounds like a plan, Frank. But, um…would you mind driving 'til we get food?"

"Sure, but…how 'bout we get food *now*?" Frank asks. "I mean, that'd probably be the better idea anyway—that is, not to leave a bunch of guns 'n' ammo in the car while we eat."

"The man with the plan," she says groggily.

"Alright, let's switch."

They switch places, and Cris leans back in her seat, belt secured. Frank starts to turn around when she asks him how much money they got from Andy.

"Eight-ninety," he says. "But I gave the Madame two flat for her troubles, and help."

Cris nods, leaned back, jacket open and windows down. She controls her breathing and closes her eyes to clear her mind. The best she can, under the conditions, at least.

"Good man," she says quietly. Her voice floats on the

breeze as Frank drives them down the road. They'll pass the gun shop to get some food and then double back.

Frank likes to believe her words.

"You too," he says after a moment. "Woman, I mean. After all of this, you're still a good woman. Don't let go of that."

"I won't if you don't," she says.

"Good, then we'll be set."

3

FRANK AND CRIS WROUGHT HAVOC AT A LOCAL diner on the food provided. They felt like it was some kind of chaotic morning, so breakfast was ultimately the most appropriate selection. Having parked the El Camino right outside the diner, they occupied a window booth out of the plethora of vacant spots, and commenced ordering. Two sizeable meals later—Frank eating like a starved pig—and they were ready to leave. The meal at their booth had been laden with silence. Not a peep from either of them, unless it was to pass a condiment. And then they visited the bathroom individually, before hitting the road yet again.

Flared tempers leveled out by food and beverage.

Sickness and unease placated by sated stomachs.

Low blood sugar and tremulous insides were no longer an issue. They functioned on par, tip-top, in spite of everything that had transpired as of late. The demolition of Andy to get answers isn't even the half of it; Frank and Cris have their individual tragedies to get past—but they also help fuel them, as terrible as it is. This doesn't go to say, of course, that Frank is blind to a cold hard fact—Cris has never killed someone before.

Frank believes this strongly.

She has clearly used a weapon before, though, that much somehow helps comfort Frank. Taking another's life isn't

necessarily a difficult task—in fact, it's pretty damn easy when they deserve every ounce of pain and breath knocked free from them. It's coping with the act afterward that tends to tear through most people, Frank has seen it time and again in his past. He is someone who is seldom affected so heavily by it, ostensibly speaking.

As human as he is, Frank's conscience is no different.

One reason why, as he'd honestly told Andy, he bailed on the Donato's in the first place.

"So you're telling me," Frank says as they buck a U-turn to head back toward the gun shop, "that they didn't do a background check on you?"

"That's right." Cris is behind the wheel now that she feels better, and her head's on straight.

"Well, then. I should've come here sooner."

Cris smirks. It fades quickly. "Back home, that is, before you came down here with your parents, how'd you get your guns? Or were they provided for you?"

"No, I bought most of them. Just, less legally."

"Not surprising."

"I figured it'd be pretty obvious. You say you don't have a necessarily respectable record either, so how'd you go about getting that Smith & Wesson?"

"Boyfriend."

Frank nods. "Ah, I see. Gift or stolen?"

"Well," Cris sighs. "He stole it, contrary to what he'd told me, and gave it to me as a gift. Through a bunch of other random shit that we went through, I kept it as a going-away present."

Frank looks over at Cris and she's just staring straight ahead, grinning toothlessly.

"You did the right thing, then, I suppose."

"I'd like to suppose so, too."

They arrive at the gun shop, which is titled just as insipidly, and surprisingly has some decent business at this hour. Next to the presumable owner's truck is a station wagon and a

few spaces down from that, a two-door POS.

"Was it this busy when you came by for the SIG?" Frank asks as she parks it.

"Nope. Just me and the owner. That's his truck."

"My guess."

"Yeah, he made some remark about my El Camino when I was leaving, 'cause he was taking a smoke break, then brought up his truck. Said he *coveted* my ride."

"That's…not usually something to take lightly in an area like this, from a gun shop owner to boot."

"I'd thought similarly, but the guy proved to be a decent human being if you can believe that."

"Not really," Frank says, shaking his head.

They get out of the car and Cris joins him in approach of the glass double-doors.

"Still working on that trust issue, hm?"

Frank notices that Cris has evidently lightened up, substantially, since they finished washing their hands after the meal. He is glad, but hopes that he can trust her not to dilapidate in resolve through this undertaking.

Recalling the Polaroid in her car, he immediately reprimands himself for even thinking that she might falter. Somehow he feels that this vendetta is more personal for her. Afterall, she and Sasha knew nothing of Theo and his company. They were strangers, completely unjustified encounters.

"Hey, Cris," Frank says, reaching out. He takes her arm without really grabbing it, keeping her from entering the shop. They stand inches from the door. She turns to look at him with a concerned expression. He withdraws his hand and thinks a moment before speaking. "Earlier, when we were at the brothel and I was waiting in the car while you talked to the Madame…I looked at the sunglasses in your visor. I saw you and Sasha's picture. Shades didn't fit me, so I put 'em back. Thought I'd tell ya."

Cris nods. "Thanks for telling me straight, albeit a lil' belated. Um…what'd you think?"

Frank shrugs. "Of what?"

"The picture."

"Beautiful. Both of you. Surprised, though…"

"What about?"

"It's a Polaroid. Didn't think anybody used those anymore, especially younger people. Ain't it all about cell phones and shit now?"

Cris smiles. "Sasha loved that thing. She always preferred old school type of stuff like that. She'd use it and buy everything needed but in excess, so that she was sure she could keep using it. Then late last year it just broke. Stopped working. She was going to get a new one this year, or whatever she could find. So, I fell in line using it with her. I admit, I definitely liked the simplicity and straightforwardness."

Frank smiles. "That's a rarity."

"So I've been told," she says in a flirtatious manner, and starts to enter the shop. A man with a rugged goatee and not even half the amount of hair on top exits through a door, nearly bumping into them. He gives Cris a nasty look, sees Frank, then cowers his way into his station wagon.

"Some people," Frank shakes his head. He holds the door open for Cris.

"Some people, indeed," she simpers, nodding in gratitude and entering.

Frank follows right after her. Within, the building is bigger than it looks from the outside, with six aisles of ammunition and accessories to choose from, be they sights or holsters to name a couple. As for the weapons themselves, there is a menagerie of selections up on the pegboard behind the counter and thus behind the clerk. He is stout, about 5'10" and ungainly. He has a thick light brown mustache and stubble elsewhere. A trucker's cap occupies his round head. Frank spots a wedding band on his left ring finger.

"You *sure* they don't do checks here?" Frank says, leaning in to talk to Cris quietly. "I mean, maybe he just gave you a break 'cause you're gorgeous."

THREE

Cris gives him a sort of 'enough, ass-kisser' look, stifling a smile herself.

"I'm *sure*," she finally says. "Just relax and buy. You want me to pick out anything in the accessories aisles?"

"How much money do you have on…holy shit, these prices are *nice*."

"Yes, sir, best in the state—I can guarantee you that much."

Frank looks over at the man behind the counter. His voice is deep and a little husky, but he has this impossibly kind smile on and a genuinely warm demeanor.

"Get me a double shoulder holster, X-harness, black," Frank says to Cris without looking over at her. "Thanks."

"Coming right up."

"Oh, and get yourself a hip holster."

"Will do."

Frank approaches the counter and looks at the man, whose attire could be called casual to say the least. A green T-shirt under an open denim vest, not to mention the off-brand trucker's cap. He leans forward, elbows on the class countertop, catching the clerk's attention all the more.

"And, um, how long do your background checks take?" Frank asks in a somewhat hushed tone.

The man behind the counter looks around, spotting only one other customer who's shopping several aisles down and doesn't appear very concerned about anything, before responding.

"Twenty bucks will make it no wait at all," he says quietly.

"Well, then. Color me interested." Frank leans back, straightening and reaching into his pocket. He pulls out forty, slides it across the counter, and says: "Here's enough to get on your good side, eh? As for *my* good side…let's see whatcha got here."

The man collects the money, smiles to himself, pockets it, and waits as Frank browses the selection up on the wall.

"Colt M1911, nothing fancy. One-tone black, up top."

The man gets the semiautomatic pistol down from its hooks and gingerly sets it on the countertop.

"Both of 'em," Frank says. "Please."

"Why, of course!" the man is eager to sell them.

"Excellent. Next…" Frank kneads his chin, browsing further down the selections. All of the automatic weapons, he knows, are semiautomatic by law, even in a place like this. Modifying them isn't a huge issue for Frank, not usually, but given the lack of supplies and time he would rather just cut to the chase. His eyes find a better choice just as Cris returns with two holsters—a hip one for her, and an X-harness for Frank. He thanks her as she sets them on the countertop next to the pair of M1911's. Then he turns to the clerk, and owner of the store according to Cris, to voice his selection. "Stoeger, over-under, Double Defense."

"Ah, yes, a wise choice indeed." The man retrieved the compact double-barrel shotgun. "You've used it before?"

"At the range, once, it was…provided for me…but I've never owned one."

"Regular is five-eighty, we sell it for four-hundred flat. Comes with Picatinny rails, and a box of 12-gauge buckshot."

"I'll take it, with an additional box of shells, please. It comes with a sling, too?"

"Yes, sir. Would that be all?"

Frank looks over at Cris. She nods.

"Yeah," Frank says. "That'll wrap it up."

"Alright, lemme total everything…" A few moments later, after the man had scanned every tag at his register, he stated the total. It wasn't surprising, considering the price of the M1911s—these days they commonly sold for a grand if not two, but the simpler ones around nine-hundred. Here they were seven a piece, in addition to the $400 Stoeger shotgun and the holsters. Altogether $1860 was out of their range. That was pocket change to Frank before he got snagged by his old enemies, so now it was like taking a mortgage.

THREE

"Let me, uh, confer with my colleague…" Frank says, and he withdraws from the counter to talk with Cris briefly in private.

"How much do we have altogether?"

"Well, how much do *you* have?" Frank asks.

"About three-hundred."

"And I have under nine." Frank kneads his chin. He curses under his breath and paces around. "Okay, okay, *okay*."

He returns to the counter and scraps one of two pistols from his 'cart.' Despite departing from it, he holds onto the double shoulder holster, but requests for twice the M1911 ammunition and half of the 12-gauge.

"Okay, that puts you at…"

Frank and Cris make the $1060-and-change work out. They combine their funds and are down to roughly two-hundred dollars between them, although Frank knows that without Cris's help in this matter he'd be SOL.

With their purchases made, they bid their farewell and good-lucks before departing.

"Happy?" Cris asks while returning to the El Camino.

"About as much as I can be," Frank sighs.

"Since we didn't get much," she says, looking at Frank as he stands by the bed, "why don't you just keep that up front?"

"Is there space?"

"Under the seat. No dividers, just an empty space."

"You have anything under there already that I should know about?"

Cris half-smirks. "When I said I don't exactly have a clean record, I wasn't insinuating anything *that* ominous."

"Right, right. Of course not."

They climb aboard the El Camino, in the spacious yet strictly three-seater cabin. Frank slides the Stoeger black case under the seat, where it fits with room to spare. Associated ammunition is in the case along with the shotgun, however the M1911 is in a smaller case with two empty magazines he will have to manually load for facilitation later. He proceeds to don

his X-harness double shoulder holster, which proves to be a hassle while inside the car.

"Would you suggest that I go ahead 'n' put mine on, too?"

Frank shrugs. "If you'd like."

"Might as well," she sighs, and steps out of the car to secure her single hip holster. After he finishes, she's left to groan and gripe about something.

"What is it?"

"Nothing, just…" Cris fastens it, appears uncomfortable, but leaves it and returns to the car nonetheless. "It'd feel much better if I had jeans on, or something less…relaxed."

Frank nods. "I understand. Do you wanna change real quick? I'm sure they got a bathroom in there you could use. I'll wait here."

"I'll be quick," Cris says without reluctance.

"Go for it. I'll keep my eye on the road."

"Thanks. Be right back." Cris gets out, retrieves her bag from the back of the El Camino, and tosses the empty holster into the driver's seat. She marches back into the gun shop, vanishing from Frank's gaze.

A little over five minutes later, Cris Volkova emerges from the glass double doors wearing the same white sports bra but no varsity jacket and a pair of fitted blue jeans instead of sweatpants. They are a faded blue, sitting low on her hips but not dangerously so, although there appears to be much more exposed skin now. Her shoulders and arms are bare, her chest and upper back, her entire midsection. The tattoo sleeves are colorful and intricate, denser on her left arm than her right. Her hair has been tied back into a raised ponytail, and with the duffel bag toted in one hand she appears more combat-ready now. Her abdomen is toned, her arms healthily fit, shoulders defined.

Frank doesn't let his mind meander too much, although it's difficult not to stare at the way her wide hips cut to the side when she walks, her legs clearly the most worked on and it shows even in jeans. His jaw clenches as she nears the car.

THREE

The duffel bag gets thrown into the bed in almost the same motion that she ducks back into the car. She doesn't speak a word to Frank, nor does he utter one, as she lifts her rear up from the seat to arch her back and more easily secure the holster around her waist. It slides down to fasten just above her hips in line with her jeans' belt, as if she really needs one.

"You ready?" Frank asks, staring straight ahead still.

Cris sits down and readjusts herself. She keys on the engine and starts backing out.

"Readier than ever, how 'bout you, Frank? You look kind of rigid."

Frank chuckles. "Just kind of…taken off-guard."

"Why's that?" She asks, veering right onto the main road—the only one within sight—and gassing it. The El Camino breathes like a barely tamed monster.

"I've known that you're one beautiful woman," Frank says, looking over at her now, "but goddamn…I was trying to push that to the back of my mind."

"Hey, I'm just glad that you're looking at my face right now," she says, driving with her eyes trained on the road. She hears him laugh under his breath, resituate in his seat, and return looking ahead. "But if my *beauty*, as you put it—and I'm flattered, so thank you—is distracting, I'll put the jacket back on."

Frank puts up his hands. "No, no, please. Feel free. Fight naked if you're most comfortable that way. Whatever makes you more effective."

Cris laughs. "Right, well, this is as far as I'll go. I'm not really a shorts- or skirt-kind of gal."

"You don't say? Why's that? I wouldn't have guessed."

"Not sure, to be honest." Cris seems to drift off for a moment as she drives. Her gaze pans left slightly, looking out into the distance of the expansive desert to that side of the highway. It seems to never end, and the afternoon sky above it is just as infinite. "Sasha used to always wear shorts, Daisy Nukes she'd call them. She had some tattoos on her calves, though. I

have some on my feet, but that's it."

Frank nods, unsure of what to say.

"Do you ever plan to?" he finally asks.

She snaps back to reality, and spins her head to the right, raking in his attention.

"Plan to what?" she says.

"Get your legs inked at all."

"Oh…um, I dunno. Probably something on my thighs, something to do with her."

Frank nods.

"You nod a lot, you know that?" Cris smiles askew.

"Yeah, I guess I do," Frank laughs under his breath. He shrugs. "Sometimes I just don't know what to say. The feelings are there, the reaction's inside, but words just…escape me, though not in the audible form."

Cris nods emphatically, smiling toothlessly. "I get it."

They drive on in a sort of tranquil silence.

Some five minutes later, Cris makes an inquiry regarding Frank's shoulder tattoos, to both slate her curiosity and take her mind off bad images plaguing her retention.

"The shoulders?" Frank asks.

"Yeah. You have others?" Cris raises an eyebrow.

Frank shakes off a smirk. "I have a cobra that wraps around my left thigh, and a crow's feather on my right shin."

"Oh, well then…" Cris is both impressed and curious. "I've not known many men with leg tattoos."

"Well, I got 'em when I was young."

"And the dragons?"

"Well, I worked on getting those finished for about two years…some five years ago." Frank paused for the sake of pensiveness. "Their meaning is pretty simple. How much did you see of 'em earlier?"

"Frank, I found you shirtless and tended to your wounds no different. I think I got a pretty good look at 'em."

"Well, then, do you have any ideas?"

"I'd like to hear it in your words."

THREE

"Ah, like I said…I'm not exactly a man of wise words."

"I'd disagree. There hasn't been much you've said to me lately that came without gravity."

"Well, then…" Frank takes a deep breath. "They represent a restless energy breaking out of its prison, seeking freedom from a place it isn't exactly at home with. Animal-in-a-cage idiom, more or less."

"My thoughts exactly."

"Oh?"

Cris shrugs. "More or less."

Frank smirks. "Well, I guess you're on point then. Care to try your brain at my others?"

"What, the cobra and feather?"

"Yep."

"Hmm…" Cris deliberates. "Let's see, the cobra symbolizes the desire to always be on the move—dancing, kind of, in your own way. Cunning, venomous, but still ever so elegant. And the feather…I have no idea."

"Aw, but you were doing so good!"

"I was right?"

"No, far from it, actually," Frank laughs. "I honestly got the cobra 'cause I thought it looked fucking awesome and got a good deal on it."

Cris titters. "Yeah, I have a few of those myself."

"I think we all do."

"And the feather, same thing?"

"Nah, the feather…the feather's a little different, but I still got it when I was young. Well, young*er*."

"Thirty?"

"Somewhere around there." Frank pivots his head to stare out the side window and out into the desert. They were getting closer to the Gallows Bridge, probably another four miles or so. He let his focus drift for a moment. "Crows aren't exactly your most venerable animal. They often portray death and decay, as they are by nature scavengers. All of this, I felt depicted who I was fighting to stay away from in my life at the

time. I guess you could say I still am…but, the feather aspect of it is simple—it's just a feather, just a segment of the entire animal, and it's light enough to float on the breeze. To drift away, be forgotten. So…I guess it's kind of a duality thing going on there."

Cris nods, doing well to grasp everything.

"That's deep, man," Cris says solemnly, but her eyes sparkle ever so softly. "Sounds like something I should have, too."

"Yeah…and your sleeves? There's gotta be meaning somewhere in there."

"Oh, there is. And, at the same time, there isn't. It's not worth getting into."

"Do you regret any of it?"

Cris firmly shakes her head. "No. Maybe the original meaning, or that I've changed since I got one, but I only go on to adapt a new meaning more appropriate to it and myself."

"Sounds wise."

"I'd like to think so." Cris starts going a little faster. She reaches to manually roll down her window when something catches her eye down the road. It had just breached the heat refraction less than a quarter mile out when she recognized it. Her voice shakes slightly. "Frank…Frank!"

"What?" Frank says with a lick of grogginess as he reels himself out of a mental daze.

"Up ahead, opposite lane. See it?"

Frank squints. "Shit."

"What do you want me to do?" Cris says, certain now that it's what she thought it was: Theo's custom Jeep Wrangler. It's black with a blue stripe down the center riding on a raised suspension and rugged tires. Its front wench and brush guard add to its peculiarity, however, its passengers also draw exclusive interest. Three men total, including the driver, which was half of their original force. Of course, with Andy gone they were down to five.

"How well can you drive this thing?" Frank asks, giving

her a vigorous look.

"Better than most might think," she says firmly.

"That'll do," Frank says. "Whip it around *after* you've driven an exact mile since they pass us." This is a straightaway for fifteen-some miles, with the most behind us, so he won't be going anywhere that we can't follow."

Cris nods. "Okay. I got it."

Frank keeps his gaze glued to the Jeep Wrangler as it nears them on the road. Eventually the two vehicles pass one another like everyday traffic goers, except that Theo's henchmen are treating their Jeep like the stage to a bad concert. They're awful depictions of kids with bad tempers and so many problems, their only outlet being barbarism.

"How many men did you see in that Jeep back at the gas station?"

"I don't remember, five or six. There was a guy or two in the way back, between the mounted tire and backseat. I do, however, remember there being five men in the station at the time—according to the security tape."

"Right, well, I seriously doubt they'd leave their Jeep out front without a wheelman." Frank thinks briefly; it doesn't take much. "Six men total. There were five when I was grabbed, plus the driver."

"Including Theo?"

"Oh yeah."

"So, with Andy gone, that'd be five left?"

"You got it." Frank stares at the El Camino's odometer until the mileage hits one, and he opens his mouth to tell her—but she's right on top of it. She yanks the emergency brake with her right hand, using her left to spin the wheel and veer the car into a 180° turn. It's a sloppy maneuver thanks only to the car's long rear and radial tires not ideal for gripping asphalt in such situations, but Cris makes the best of it. She hits the gas, hard, once facing the right direction—and the both of their backs slam into their seats. Cris maintains a straighter face than the bewildered Frank as the El Camino fishtails into a high-speed

beeline down the road.

"They've turned off…" Cris says, squinting slightly but still adhering her back to the seat.

"Where?"

"See the sombrero three stories up?" Cris says with a morsel of dark humor.

"Ah. I wonder if they'll check out back."

"You think they'd do anything to Madame or the girls?"

"As reckless and savage as these assholes are, without Theo there they're nothing but rats with loose change."

"How do you know Theo isn't with them?"

"I didn't see him in the Jeep when they passed us."

"Ah. I wasn't really paying attention to faces, 'cause I didn't want to risk us slamming them off the road."

"Good judgment call, Cris." Frank notices her slowing down. "No, keep your foot heavy. Pass them, don't even look."

It doesn't matter. By the time the El Camino reaches the brothel's place on the road, the Jeep's three occupants have already entered. Cris pushes her car forward nevertheless, down the road from whence they came and back into the desert's hazy past.

"Alright, we're clear, but not for long. Slow down, whip it around, and go to the gun shop."

"Why there?" Cris asks, decelerating before she pulls another wild U-turn in the middle of the road. A rare passerby in a pickup truck honks his horn as he's forced onto the shoulder, but continues regardless.

"Because," Frank says, turning to look at her resolutely, "that's where they're heading next."

4

CRIS PARKED THE EL CAMINO IN THE GUN shop's front parking lot, not looking as inconspicuous as she'd preferred. But she trusted Frank's strategy, however overt and risky it was, because she recognized this undying fire in his eyes. It burned as if fueled by raw oil, and would take a great deal to extinguish it. And even then, would it be permanent? Cris couldn't know, not now at least, so she decided to rekindle hers and join the party. She put her game face on, to say the least, and prepared for chaos. Afterall, it was in part who she's been all her life, subtly in the presence of Sasha and candidly when without. She hoped to ultimately escape from it, but she saw this as the only way to seal her vendetta with Theo Donato and his savage crew.

She occupies the car's cabin now, supine on the seats.

Similarly positioned is Frank, except in the El Camino's bed, holding his recently purchased double-barrel shotgun at port-arms. It has been fully loaded and prepped for combat. He had instructed Cris to ready herself as well, so her hip holster isn't lonely anymore. The SIG is reloaded, though she only has one magazine to deal with. Her backup is the Smith & Wesson. Frank's is the Colt M1911, ironically the same model sidearm that Theo used to put him on Death's Path.

Fortunately for Frank, Cris had other plans.

This time, Frank thinks, he'll be more concise with his executions.

For a measly two minutes they have been situated this way. Sheer silence between them, and nothing but the sound of a desert wind whistling by every so often. The air is humid and dry, an impossibly discomforting feeling way out here. The gun shop itself is satisfyingly slow right now, so far as business is concerned. Only the owner's truck is present, which Frank likes—the fewer the customers, the smoother this will be.

And it won't be smooth. It will be coarse, however, even heavy times can be made lighter with some outside help—or chance.

Literally lying in wait, this ambush scenario plays out well in Frank's mind but not so successfully in Cris's. She is strong in the hope department, even when reality gives her a run for her money. And right now reality spits the numbers in her face—three-v-two, not to mention their elevated advantage. The instant they roll into this parking lot in that raised Jeep, Frank will be spotted as clear as day in the El Camino's bed. His black T-shirt blends well, but his skin and blue jeans do not.

"I'm sorry, Sasha." The words bleed from Cris's lips, barely opening as she mutters them. "I won't give up. I will try. I will vie. But if I die in the process…I'm sorry. And if you want me to do otherwise, as I might have the feeling that you do, then I'm just as sorry…because I can't walk away from this. I won't. I love you…"

Frank doesn't know if Cris realizes she left the windows rolled down or not, or if she even thought her voice was audible. But in those few seconds Frank heard the words seeping from her mouth, from her heart, and he felt his own pulse for a cause greater than his own. His hunt for vengeance isn't inferior, but all of his previous selfish goals in life suddenly feel weightless compared to this.

He reassures himself that he's a good man.

He isn't a great man, but Frank can cope with that.

"Find you, find you, find you," he starts to chant under

his breath. His eyelids droop shut and serrated images of his parents being tortured then killed before him cut across the ensuing abyss. His mind's eye doesn't cower, it doesn't shrivel or look away this time. He faces them, takes them to heart, and intends to bleed them out of his system in the form of bullets.

"Kill you, kill you, kill you." Frank's hands tighten around the Stoeger shotgun. A deep and cragged engine comes humming down the road. Frank's eyelids flash open. The source vehicle enters the parking lot and its tires grind against the concrete as if threatening to make a gravel conversion. Within two quick seconds the black Jeep Wrangler pulls up to the right of the El Camino, favorable of that empty spot nearest the door; their parking is slanted, rushed.

The only reason Frank has a moment's advantage is because of their hasty carelessness.

The Jeep barely comes to a complete stop when Frank abruptly sits up and shoulders the shotgun. The Jeep's front two seats are occupied, and out of his direct sight, but the third sits directly behind the driver and is first to alert the others. He only has enough time to shout "he's alive" before the top half of his head splashes the roll-bar behind him.

Profanities form a thundercloud above the two up front, who frantically duck and reach for their pieces. Cringing from the recoil that his healing shoulder took from the shotgun, Frank is two seconds slower to readjust his aim. Within this time, Cris pops up in the same motion as Frank had—still sitting—with both elbows locked. Her hands grip the SIG-Sauer P226's and her trigger finger is relentless. Her first shot is off, but her second and third drag low to hit their mark. The driver gets both in his left bicep, red misting the Jeep's black interior. He screams as he practically falls over the center console—out of his enemies' sight—while the passenger's feet hit the concrete.

Nobody from the Jeep has had the chance to fire a single shot. Nor will they, if Frank has his way.

"I sure hope you're not texting Theo right now, buddy!" Frank says, his voice like an eighteen-wheeler redlining. He

slowly rises to his feet, shotgun shouldered. Although foreboding the recoil to his shoulder, he isn't going to hesitate if he gets a clean shot.

Hell, even a messy one might do at this rate—

"Matter of fact, that ain't a bad idea!" says one of the two men, Frank can't tell who. "Thanks, Frankie!"

Frank's knees lock. He is at eye level with the Jeep's top left roll-bar. He glances down the slightest to see the had-been driver now crawling across the console toward the open passenger door. There is a cell phone in his right hand, Beretta Inox in his left. Frank's finger goes for the trigger.

"You're welcome." Frank squeezes and the back of the bad guy's head opens up through his face, filling the leather passenger's seat. This sight somehow soothes the throbbing in his shoulder.

Unfortunately, he needs to reload the double-barrel shotgun and is currently in the open.

He snaps open the box-lock breech and the two spent shells eject. Gossamer trails of smoke follow them to the mat at his feet. He loads two fresh ones from his jeans pocket, all the while keeping his gaze trained on the front of the Jeep. He can hear the scuffling of feet on the other side of it, but his hearing is a little jarred from the shotgun's report.

Frank hasn't been in the game for two years.

He safely believes that he hasn't gone entirely rusty, though. Cris, on the other hand, has never actually been in the business of killing men.

Taking this under consideration, Frank is impressed.

She exits the El Camino on the driver's side without ever opening the door. She's lithe, healthy, and vigorous. She lets those traits, amplified by ire, drive her around the front of the El Camino with her knees bent and both hands on the SIG. She moves like a DEA agent going in for the bust.

She spots the survivor peer around the front bumper from the right side of the Jeep, his hairline receding and his courage right along with it. His eyes widen and he drops the cell phone

that had occupied his hand the instant he spots Cris. She starts going to town on the SIG's trigger, punching hole after hole into the Jeep's grille, closest to her withdrawing target. The Jeep's right headlamp shatters and after a total of six shots fired in a frenzy, Cris pauses.

Her ears are ringing and the stench of gunsmoke violates her nostrils. It's bitter on her lips, and hazes thinly in front of her.

"You good?" Frank asks. He has reloaded and is still standing in the bed of the El Camino, now with a foot up on its right railing to give him a few inches' boost.

"Peachy," Cris replies.

"Bitch shot me!" comes a weaselly voice taking cover behind the Jeep.

Cris is surprised, even. A bullet must have punctured the grille at just the right angle, or maybe even the headlamp, and passed through the other side. She supposes an arm or shoulder wound. Anything more serious would deserve some major praise on her part.

Even if it had been sheer luck.

"Good!" Frank barks. "Now lemme give you another scar, Zach! I'll make sure you can't stitch it up!"

"Fuck you, grandpa!"

Frank smirks evilly and nods to himself. This Zachary Devlin is going to regret every wrongdoing he's ever committed in his life in about twenty seconds.

He is a heartbeat away from vaulting out of the El Camino's bed when the double doors from the gun shop burst open. Cris and Frank and the wounded Zach all impulsively swing their attention that way. Zach, unfortunately, is at the receiving end of the owner's Bushmaster ACR. He has emerged from his shop shouldering the weapon, safety off and trigger-happy. Semiautomatic, the assault rifle's rate of fire is dependent on the operator's speed of squeezing the trigger.

In this case, very deft.

Zach's torso becomes a gruesome dish of Swiss cheese

by the time the gun shop owner is through with him, spending nearly half an entire magazine before he lets up. The gunshots echo for some time, even out in the open, but the man's face doesn't show that he's finished here. He pivots to throw a mean look at Cris and Frank, namely the latter.

"Easy, now," Frank says, slowly lowering his aim.

"Says the man who just used something he bought from *my store*," the owner yells the last two words, "to engage in *war* on my *fucking doorstep*!"

"Easy, now," Frank says no less calm than the first time he said it. He gingerly sets the shotgun at his feet. When he stands back up, his hands are above his head. "Cris, is your gun down?"

"In the holster."

"See, mister?" Frank says. "We don't mean you any harm. I'm sorry it came to this, on your property. But I assure you this—those boys were about to come here and buy, if not *steal*, a whole slew of guns to kill my friend and I."

"A-huh," the owner says, nodding dubiously. Even so, he gradually lowers his rifle. "And who's to say that you two don't deserve it?"

"They raped and killed my 26-year-old sister," Cris says out of the blue. Her hands aren't held above her head. Her voice is filled with disarray and exhaustion, the rage stippling every word. "Two days ago this happened, not far from here. And my new friend here, they tortured and killed his parents before leaving him to die in the desert. I'm not pelting anymore details at you; either you trust as strangers out of respect for the truth, or you'll have to shoot us in the backs 'cause there are still more of those vermin left."

Cris lets her spiel sink in for three seconds before turning around and approaching the driver's side of the El Camino.

"I'm sorry for your losses," the man finally says. "If all of what you say is true…seeing as how people usually don't tend to make that kind of shit up…I'll give y'all a hefty discount if you do me one favor."

FOUR

"What's that?" Frank asks, hands lowered now.

"Get this mess off my doorstep and I'll sell you a couple of heaters at a price that'll make ya wet."

"You're so charming," Cris says.

"You got a deal." Frank jumps down from the bed and reloads the Stoeger. He then slides it back under the front seat of the El Camino and circles the Jeep. He hoists the dead bullet-riddled corpse of Zachary Devlin up into the Jeep's passenger seat, slams the door shut behind him, and looks disgusted with the blood on his hands. He then gets behind the steering wheel, shoving the has-been driver's legs out of the way, and casually salutes Cris. "I'll be back in twenty."

"Careful," Cris says simply.

Frank nods, and speedily reverses the Jeep Wrangler. He spins the wheel, the Jeep turns to face the main road, and he beelines for it. He doesn't even take the driveway to the parking lot, just bounds over the curb which feels like nothing under the vehicle's tires. Its chassis bounces slightly on the off-road suspension, realigning by the time he's acquired purchase on the asphalt.

Behind him the afternoon sky sinks under an overcast.

Dusk is but a few hours away now.

It's been quite the day. Quite the day indeed.

Frank knows it isn't over, not yet. He gets about five miles away from the gun shop due west before veering off the right-hand shoulder and traversing a ditch. His rear leaves the seat briefly as the Jeep's suspension bounces and its tires chew for traction across the dirt. He rides the modified Jeep less than a quarter mile into the middle of a beige desert field before bringing it to a stop. He pops the glovebox to find a couple of loaded magazines for the boys' Berettas, and a wad of cash barely held together by its money-clip. Aside from that, the Jeep's registration and a can of handy wipes.

The usual.

After counting a sizeable two grand in the money clip, all in fifties, Frank pockets it and takes two wipes. He starts rubbing

down the Jeep, clearing his prints from the necessary places. He takes a couple more to clean his hands, but only once he's robbed all three corpses. His findings come to $640, in addition to the two large from the glovebox. He pockets everything, cleans his hands, and walks back to the road. Only now does he realize that he has no way of contacting Cris if or when they become separated.

He's glad when he sees her car on the horizon, driving down the road in his direction. She pops open the passenger's door for him as the El Camino's tires squeal to a stop.

Frank gets in, shuts the door behind him, and thanks Cris. She whips the car around and hastily returns to the gun shop.

"Didn't really think that you'd be walking back, did ya?" Cris says.

"No, not really. Sometimes I have a one-track mind, when it comes to getting shit done."

"Ah, I see."

"That's not to say I don't notice other things. I can be a very attentive man," Frank adds with a dramatic touch of his chest. They share a brief, awkward laugh.

"His name's Chester, by the way."

"The gun shop owner?"

"Yeah. He didn't give me a last name. He seems to trust us, but is still being a lil' paranoid."

"It's understandable."

They get within sight of the gun shop, and Cris starts to pull into the parking lot. The owner, this Chester, isn't visible.

"So I heard you call that one guy, which Chester killed, Zach. Did you not know the other two?"

Frank shakes his head. "Didn't recognize them, but Zachy boy I did. Street punk, nips at Theo's heels like a puppy with no sense of direction. Or morals."

"You don't say."

"Yeah, well, now nobody's gotta worry 'bout his sorry ass anymore." Frank doesn't mention that his mother is in the psyche ward, and used to be a junkie. He doesn't think it's

relevant, but all the same he isn't too sure how to relate these young corpses' families to the conversation of guilt and forgiveness. It isn't his place to judge, but by death he does so anyway, in the face of vengeance. Frank walks the path, but doesn't scrutinize the scenery. He's here just for the journey and the destination, however unsavory they might be.

"So you took care of things?" Cris asks, killing the engine.

"Yeah. Left 'em out there in the desert, wiped my prints clean. Took something for the road, and I figure a lil' extra to tie off Chester's paranoia of trust."

"How much?" Cris raises her eyebrow.

"A lil' over $2500. They had a clean clip of two large in the glovebox. I'd say they didn't come down here on Theo's word alone."

"What do you mean?" Cris asks, as the two of them exit.

"I mean, I already suspected that Big Al was behind Theo coming here to put me down, but…I imagine that if Theo ain't back home by now, Daddy might start getting antsy. Come down here himself."

"I assume that's not something you want."

"Not really. Theo, we can handle. It's dirty and it won't be a walk in the park, as it really hasn't, but it's manageable. Al Donato, though…he rolls deep, with serious hardware, and not *boys*."

"You should know, huh?"

"Yeah, seeing as how I used to be his top guy." Frank shakes his head. "Makes me fucking sick thinking about it now."

They join each other outside the double doors.

Cris pauses. "When do you think Al might show up?"

"Down here? Hell, I dunno, maybe never. But I figure if he does, it'd be for another day or two. He knows his son, as reckless and twisted as Theo is, so long as it's not in Al's city he doesn't really have to worry about it. He'll trust that Theo and his scumbag crew can take care of it, if it's not too heavy."

"I assume that he probably gave his Dad a call

after…you know, you and your parents at the barn."

"Oh, yeah. Most likely. So that settles that, between them, now Theo's just having too much damn fun of his own."

"Little does he know," Cris says, walking inside the shop, "Frank's *alive* and *kicking*."

"More like alive and shooting."

"I heard 'shooting.' How can I help you two crazy goddamn lovebirds?"

"Crazy?" Frank says, looking between him and Cris, then at Chester behind the counter, who appears a little agitated. "Yeah, crazy's right. Lovebirds? Nah, not quite."

Cris smirks to herself.

"What can I get for ya today?" Chester asks, slapping his palms on the glass counter.

"How 'bout that other Colt .45 now?" Frank says.

"The M1911? Coming right down."

"You carry any spare magazines for those?"

"Sure do."

"Throw in a few of those, too. I got enough ammo, though."

"You sure? After all that?"

"It was just the Stoeger, and her."

"Right, right. And you?" Chester turns to Cris.

"That," she says hungrily, pointing.

"Heckler & Koch MP5SD?" Chester says, taking the black polymer sub-machinegun from its hooks. He carefully sets it on the countertop. "Now, I know this place isn't exactly your ideal location for legality, *but* some restrictions still apply. As such, this is still a semiautomatic and chambered for .22 LR, not its standard 9mm Parabellum."

"I intend to aim for the head, so," Cris says, shrugging, "I'll manage. Thanks."

"She's a keeper," Chester says, rolling his eyes toward Frank. Cris smiles minutely and Frank shakes his loose. He observes the wall selections, namely the assault rifles.

"I think I'll stay small, too," he ultimately decides,

"considering the two .45s and double-barrel."

"SMG, then?"

"Yeah. Not much to choose from, since most are illegal, I know, and all semiauto…"

"Well," Chester grunts. "See that Uzi up top?"

"The one with the extended muzzle brake?"

"That'd be it."

"What about?"

"Full auto," Chester whispers.

"No shit. How much?"

"With two twenty-round 9mm mags? Eight-hundred."

"Nine-mil, too? Well, then. Sold."

Chester raises his eyebrow. "You got the money?"

"I do now."

"Hellfire, lemme ring that all up for ya."

"Lemme get two extra magazines for the SMG, please," Cris says.

"I only got one extra, so I'll give ya that and the extra ammunition."

"Thanks."

After ringing everything up, Cris was glad Frank robbed the bastards from the Jeep and even more glad that they were well-funded. Frank tipped Chester for his troubles and trust a sizeable two-hundred, leaving them with about as much in their pockets.

"And off to Miller's Inn, we go," Frank says, behind the wheel as per Cris's request. She occupies the passenger's seat, intent on loading her MP5SD magazines herself, and then volunteering to do Frank's.

Their ride is silent, and although it's still light out they feel like it oughtta be nighttime.

The day grows darkest inside each of them.

And the road is only going to get darker, they know.

5

DIRECTLY OPPOSITE MILLER'S INN IS A convenience store lacking enough business at the moment to provide an entirely empty parking lot. It is here that Cris's El Camino finds refuge, with Frank stirring from a brief nap upon their arrival. His healing shoulder is sore but his heart and conscience ache far more. He can only begin to imagine how distraught Cris is inside, and how furiously her fire for revenge burns.

They are close, this much they're sure of.

It's almost over…

"We're here," Frank mutters as he sits up and stretches in the confined space offered by the El Camino's cabin. He rolls his neck and flexes his hands. "Excellent. Thanks, Cris."

"Yep. Now what?"

"We wait."

"For?" Cris asks, not sounding very enthusiastic about it.

"Well, we can't exactly go busting down every door to all forty-eight rooms over there, now can we?"

"I mean, *theoretically*…"

Frank musters a smirk, but shakes his head until it has dispersed. He takes a deep breath and draws one of his two M1911 pistols from a shoulder holster. He racks the slide and returns it.

FIVE

"My preference is to survive this night, Cris," he says. "I think that, with everything we've been through, luck's on our side so far as staying alive through it all. Now, I'm not discarding *my* survival of that night in the barn to luck. That's all you. I can't explain how or why you came across me when you did, and everything else, shit happens and sometimes it's for the better. Now we've just gotta take every precaution to make sure that it does, in fact, all be *for the better*."

Cris nods slowly, closes her eyes, and seems to meditate for a moment. When she opens them, she turns her head to face Frank and is in pure accord.

"You're right. I'm okay with waiting."

"Good," Frank sighs. He peers through the windshield, across the two-lane road down a small hill from where they're parked, and to the lot in front of Miller's Inn. It is a small privately-owned motel with all forty-eight rooms facing the road. Twelve on ground level, twelve up top. The balcony looks spacious and features a black wrought-iron guardrail. "For our sake, let's hope they're on the bottom floor. It'll make for an easier attack."

"'Attack'?" Cris says. "Jeeze, what're you, military?"

"Not anymore," Frank mutters.

She raises an eyebrow but doesn't inquire.

"I suggest you get comfortable," he says, "but not *too* comfortable, just in case something comes up and we gotta roll out fast."

Cris resituates herself to the point where she thinks she is comfortable but not too comfortable, and considering the circumstances it isn't a difficult maneuver. She is already highly discomforted, despite her buoyancy earlier.

So, they wait. It is a textbook stakeout, with a lot lower level a risk than the improvisation they had pulled outside Chester's shop. That whole deal turned sour the instant the Jeep rolled up, but ultimately it progressed better than either Frank or Cris had feared. Given, this doesn't go to say that their current situation is without doubts.

What if Zach or the Jeep's driver had managed to call or text Theo as a warning? What if Theo and his other two goons aren't even at Miller's Inn anymore, and have called a taxi or hitched their way out of existence? What if they are in their room, and with a warning like that they're preparing an all-out defensive stand?

Or, what if Andy had been lying all along?

These doubts have doubts fused in each other, however, and Frank helps Cris stay positive throughout it all should she show signs of incredulity. Just the same, vice versa it occurred whenever Frank expressed a skeptical disposition.

"Movement, I've got movement!" Cris says excitedly, under her breath.

"Could be anyone." Frank's voice is monotonous. His gaze casually narrows on the door opening on the bottom floor. His muscles go taut and Cris is no different in tension. The person walks out, feebly, hair bushy and white. Frank relaxes. "Like I said."

"Way to kill my energy."

"Don't let it. Just calm your nerves."

"Easy for you to say, Mister Badass."

Frank scoffs. "Don't put yourself down. I'm sure you've got twice the amount of energy as me on a good day."

Meanwhile, the old woman ambles to her Mercury sedan sitting outside her room to get something from inside. She's nonchalant, lackadaisical; her room door hangs open behind her. Traffic on the main road is just as sluggish and uneventful. The windows in the El Camino are cracked, but there's really no sounds to be taken in except the seldom passing car.

"Unfortunately, this kind of energy isn't something to be proud of," Cris says dismally.

"What kind of energy?"

"The killing kind."

"So, you're a killer now?" Frank says with a morsel of black humor.

"Clearly," Cris replies, morose.

FIVE

"I don't mean physically, like what you've done," Frank says, adjusting his tone to be more sincere. He sits up straight and looks over at her. Cris is slouched in her seat and props her head up with her right hand, elbow on the windowsill. She's in between staring at the motel and zoning out, but with Frank's new voice her attention is grabbed. "I mean mentally, subconsciously. Me, I've had a killer's mentality for two decades, if not more. I always tried to justify it as righteous, those I killed deserved it, I'd only kill 'the bad guys'—that sort of shit. But the more and more I did it, the older I got, sometimes I'd have doubts. Is taking a life ever a good thing? And then I'd meet people who lived life without ever taking one, or doing another wrong. Innocent bystanders, they'd be called. Yeah, they've made mistakes. They've hurt without intention and been hurt back. But they'd keep on going, living and being happy. Stronger than I could ever be. I started reevaluating my life at one point, but that was before I witnessed someone *kill* one of those people, and after beating him to death with a brick I realized that sometimes it is just…I'm a necessary evil, that sort of thing."

Frank takes a deep breath, kneads his chin.

"Sorry, too preachy?" he chuckles uneasily. A rugged exhalation follows. "Most of the times I don't think about it much, I just do it. More often than not, it's a problem."

Cris doesn't say anything for several seconds.

"And when it's not?" she finally adds.

"Those are the times I live for."

Cris smiles weakly. There is strength beneath it, beauty that goes beyond the skin. Frank likes to believe that he sees it lucidly, grasps it even, without needing to use his finger.

And then another door opens, this one on the second floor of Miller's Inn. Their gazes lazily readjust to focus on it. A young lean man steps out, wearing jeans and a white tanktop. He's bald, has some jawline stubble, and slim black-framed glasses. The door shuts behind him. He leans against the guardrail, forearms on top, cigarette between his lips. He lights it

and takes a couple of drags while he stares out.

"You ready to roll?" Frank sounds all of a sudden rigid.

"Um, yeah…you recognize him?"

"Sure do. Orion Arcuri. Goes by Ori, acts like a sleek Gucci asshole when in reality he deserves to be in a trailer park poaching squirrels. He's a twisted mind, don't be fooled. Too many people back home have been."

"I usually have a pretty thick coat."

"I thought you might."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing at all," Frank says. He never takes his eyes off of Ori. "You ready?"

"When, *now*?"

"Just about. As soon…well, as soon as he turns around."

"Care to share the detail to your master plan?"

"Hardly the right label, but…sure." Frank diverts his attention from Ori to Cris just before he flicks his cigarette and returns to the room. "Shit! That was quick. Alright, how 'bout you just follow my lead?"

Cris curses under her breath. Frank kicks the car into gear, pulls out of the convenience store lot, and crosses the road. The El Camino bounces over a curb without causing too much ruckus, and they're glad the old lady has returned to her room by now or else Frank might've hit her. Cris can discern with ease the unadulterated vigor propelling him right now. It's an intoxication for him, probably not the healthiest one either.

He hits the brakes and grinds the El Camino to a stop in front of a space nearest the stairs.

"You're making quite a bit of noise, don't ya think?" Cris asks, just before he whips it around and backs in to prepare for a smoother getaway.

He waits until he has killed the engine and handed her the keys to respond.

"Nope," he says simply. "Now, are you ready? This is gonna be fast, crazy, but don't expect anything to correctly fall into place. I won't let anything happen to you, though, you have

my word. And I always keep my word."

Cris swallows, nods despite a storm of potential responses scrambling her conscience.

"Okay, good. Now, it's just about dusk so we don't really have much cover. Fortunately, peoples' curtains are shut and there aren't many cars out here, suggesting business-as-usual for these people—slow as hell. So carry your weapon as close to you as possible, walk stiff enough to conceal it, and keep your arm in mine. You'll be on my left, so hold your MP5 on your right, that way it'll be less visible."

"What about you?"

"I'm not bringing the shotgun. Too bulky. Just the Uzi, and it's small enough to improvise concealment."

"Alright," Cris says skeptically.

"Don't worry. Try not to."

They exit the car simultaneously, and meet up at the base of the stairs where they've parked. Frank interlaces his arm with Cris's, and she walks so close and in sync with him it is as if they are Siamese twins. Up the stairs they go, which proves awkward considering their proximity and the weapons they're carrying, but ultimately they make it without fault. Once they crest the staircase, they're that much closer to putting this mess behind them. But first they have to step foot into the storm, and make crazier this mess they're in.

Frank is on the right, nearest the guardrail on the balcony level they proceed down. The room of interest is the ninth one down. Frank stops just before it, off to the left where there is a small space of brick between the door and the previous room's window. He puts his back to it and has Cris face him, who is currently an ambivalence of paranoia and preparation, which comes off strangely enough.

"Gimme the MP5," he whispers after uncomfortably tucking the Uzi into the tail of his jeans. She does, and he holds it close to his side. "Now, knock on the door—they'll look through the peephole, 'cause by now I'm sure they're all doped up on their own formula of paranoia, and see you standing there.

Look appetizing; I know you don't have to do much, so just don't look pissed off or scared, and they'll buy it because you're beautiful and they're idiots. Just…droop your arms and hands down around your waist to hide your holster."

Cris looks at him for a second longer before nodding.

"Okay. And then what?" she says.

"I'll take care of it. As soon as he cracks the door, just step back and take your gun from me."

"Okay. Here goes…" Cris struts away from Frank and to the door, just within reach of where he's standing. She raps on the door twice, and steps back so that she's resting against the guardrail. This way she can more casually hide her hip holster and also give more space for when Frank decides to do…whatever it is he's planning to do. She can only imagine it's going to be tumultuous.

Frank hears some talking inside and walking around before a pause occurs. He looks over at Cris, who is half-standing and half-leaning against the guardrail, facing the door. Her hands cover the sides of her hip holster and her bare midriff is bent slightly forward, better showcasing her beautifully toned abdominals. Even her obliques are visible, just over the hem of her low-riding jeans.

Her face is as gorgeous as ever, with a touch of deviance.

Frank stays focused. When he starts hearing the bolts coming undone, and a chain lock sliding—but not latching free—he prepares himself. Fresh breaths and surges of adrenaline channel through the necessary conduits in his body.

The door slides open, but only ajar.

Frank catches the sound of Ori's voice through the crack. He doesn't discern words, he doesn't care to. Cris leans even further back against the rail, certain not to fall over. Frank spins into view, between her and the door and Orion. He hands off the MP5SD to Cris behind him in a swift and successful motion, concurrent to him drawing the Uzi from his jeans and lowering his shoulder into the door nearest the jamb. The sliding chain lock snaps and the door swings open, granting Frank access to

the room. Ori is knocked back, cursing and grunting, bleeding from the nose. He staggers uncontrollably into a chair, falling over it and a small table. There is other shouting and panicked profanity thrown about inside the room, including blurs of motion. The room is mostly dark, except for a light coming from the bathroom.

Frank glimpses Theo dive toward the space between a bed and wall just before he opens fire into the room. The Uzi hoses out 9mm bullets at a sputtering rate, muzzle flashes spewing from the many holes in its extended compensator. Frank is one-handing the Uzi, whose frame is about the same of his palm, and waving it around the room. Bullets climb up the torso of someone as he tries reaching for a pistol on the sink outside the bathroom, spitting blood up onto the mirror. Gunfire continues across the wall above where Theo dove, puncturing it and entering the bathroom. The Uzi's magazine dries up quicker than Frank would've liked, because he's only managed one kill out of the hopeful three.

He instinctively throws himself up against the left wall, behind a lamp that provides jack so far as physical cover, and reloads.

Ori lifts himself from the floor, tangled in a chair, but carrying a piece nonetheless. He fires one panic shot that smacks the wall several inches to Frank's right but is given no more cushion because Cris steps through the doorway firing. Her MP5SD spits a round every second at the rate she's squeezing the trigger, quieter than a whisper. The recoil from the semiautomatic .22 LR sub-machinegun is practically nonexistent, but not entirely; she handles it magnificently, and drops her aim from being too high to being just right. Orion Arcuri's forehead takes one round and then another between his lips, putting him down for good.

Cris pauses a few feet into the room, not sure what to do next. She sees the two corpses, knows she made one of them, and controls her bones.

Meanwhile, Frank emerges from behind the lamp with a

freshly reloaded Uzi. His mind is in shambles briefly as he adjusts his focus to Cris, looking over at her.

"You alright?" he asks.

"Yeah, you?"

"Peachy."

A sudden uproarious scream hails from the far bed, between it and the wall riddled with bullets. In the next heartbeat a hand flies up and a torrent of .380 bullets spill from the end of an unsuppressed MAC-11. The machine pistol is waved by the hand for a couple of seconds before the owner leaps up from between the bed and the wall, a narrow trench that had previously provided him ample shelter.

Now, he's panicking and going to his last resort.

In the sudden swarm of bullets, Frank wraps his arms around Cris and ducks the both of them down. They're as low as they can be without lying face-flat on the floor, while bullets volley into the window and wall behind them. Some even go right out the door. The noise is loud but not thunderous.

There is another scream and hiatus of gunfire punctuated by the sound of drywall giving way. Frank bolts his head up to see that the survivor—Theo—had actually thrown himself into the wall neighboring the adjacent room. The one on their left, eight doors down from the stairs. There is no commotion from that room, none other than Theo himself grunting and spitting drywall crumbs from his face as he gathers his bearings; it's safe to say that it's a vacancy.

Or was.

"Stay here, just in case he comes back," Frank murmurs to Cris. "And whatever you do, aim for the legs."

Cris cocks an eyebrow.

Frank simply nods once and stands up, Uzi poised. There is some shouting and crying from more distant rooms, including those directly below them. He imagines the police will show up in five to ten minutes, at the longest.

"Theodore Donato!" Frank roars. "I believe you've taken something of mine…and hers."

FIVE

"I don't know what you're talking about, Frank*lyn*. You've got the wrong guy. I'm a fucking *saint*."

Frank rolls his eyes. Enough of this, he says to himself. He runs into the next room, ducked low, sweeping his Uzi around to aim. He doesn't want to risk the off-chance that there actually are others in the room, and that he might shoot them by accident.

But upon entrance, he sees that isn't the case.

He also gets further confirmation on the cowardice that plagues the fibers of Theodore's very being. The man is spotted making a mad dash for the front door, slipping free before Frank can make a connection with his Uzi's gunfire. Bullets patter against the door frame as Theo scampers out onto the balcony, and begins running.

Frank runs to the door, tucks his Uzi back into his jeans, and steps out onto the balcony. He draws both of his M1911 pistols and locks his elbows. He ignores the faint throbbing in his left shoulder and starts squeezing both triggers. The Colt sidearms snap and fire, snap and fire. Frank's aim is low and within four total shots he has ruined Theo's previously healthy calves. Theo plummets into the concrete, bawling and crawling, trailing twin smears of blood across the balcony.

Cris finds Frank outside, holstering his pistols.

"You gotta pick up the casings!" she says frantically.

"What?"

"I didn't think about it sooner, hopefully Chester cleaned up the parking lot and Madame took care of the mess behind the brothel, but…our fingerprints!"

Frank curses at himself for missing it. She's right. They loaded all of their ammunition by hand, most of it at least, and thus every spent bullet casing has their fingerprints on them.

"Cops would have a field day there," Frank mumbles. "Alright, I'll take care of that real quick. I don't think your pockets are…capacious enough."

He looks her over once, and she shrugs with a lopsided 'it is what it is' smirk.

"Wait, what about *him*?" she asks, tugging on Frank's shirt as he turns to reenter the room.

"He's got at least one .45 caliber slug in both of his calves—he ain't going anywhere. Let him fucking crawl."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Be on the lookout."

"Right…"

Frank doesn't take long. Most of the shell casings are still hot, but they're really nothing to him. Once inside his pockets, they're no more than loose change. He hurries outside to join Cris, who is holding her MP5SD lazily at her side and staring down the balcony at Theo. He is still crawling, and has just reached the awning of the staircase.

"Best we not let him get too far, eh?" Frank says, his left hand on Cris's waist.

"What now, then? Really?" she looks up at him.

"We finish this. The way any one of Theo's victims would've wanted, whether they could admit it or not."

Cris nods. "I'm right behind you."

Frank shakes his head. "No, you're at my side. Let's go."

She walks on his left, and they march toward the crawling and bleeding Theo with far less covertness than before. They are full of haste and the urgency to take their time with him. But now isn't the place, that is obvious enough.

They reach Theo, who rolls onto his back with a compact Glock in his right hand, which had been tucked between his chest and the concrete. He fires it once, searing a bullet past Cris's left. Frank kicks it free from his hand and Cris follows up with a heel to his face—hard. Theo's head bounces on the concrete and his eyes roll up. His head lolls unconsciously to the side. Spittle and blood ooze from between his lips.

One of them is split and his nose is a mess all its own.

"Well, then," Frank looks over at Cris. "That will suffice."

"Your plan?"

"More or less," he shrugs. "Now we just gotta get him in

the car."

"But I don't have a tarp."

"At this rate," Frank looks around them, shocked at the lack of activity, "I don't think we'll have to worry about that. So long as we hit the road in the next two minutes."

"How's your shoulder?"

"Fine as rain." Frank stoops and scoops Theo up from under his arms, turns around, and starts dragging him down the stairs. Theo's limp feet plop down each step, and Frank takes it easy. "Go ahead and get the car ready. I got this."

Cris gets to it. She starts the El Camino and is now glad that Frank had parked it the way he did. Not only is it efficient for a quick getaway, but the bed is facing the stairs to facilitate this exact scenario. Once the car is running and good to go, Cris notices that the tank is borderline empty—probably another twenty miles at best. She takes mental note of this and hurries out of the car to pop the tailgate open. By then Frank has reached the bottom and she volunteers to help lift the unconscious Theo into the El Camino's bed.

"Do me a favor, Cris," Frank says, catching her before she shuts the tailgate. "Drive, and drive *fast*. I'll be in the back with him. I don't want him to wake up en route and try anything crazy. Because that's exactly what he is."

"But…who cares? He doesn't have a gun! Where could he go, or what could he do?"

"Punch through the rear window, startle us, somehow force us to crash. Probably kill himself, but sooner than I ever will, and potentially us as well."

Cris sighs in dissonance.

"Hey," he says, "great work."

"Yeah. Thanks. And you too."

"Don't sound too excited, now." Frank hears sirens in the distance. The far, far distance, but they definitely aren't moving away—that's for damn sure. "Sirens. We gotta *go*, now."

Frank hops into the bed and lays low, but works on keeping Theo's vile body away from him. He takes Cris's

MP5SD into the bed with him and is glad that he can finally dislodge the Uzi from his jeans comfortably.

"I don't hear anything," she says as she heads for the driver's side door.

"Your ears still ringing from that?" Frank asks, pointing upwards.

"Yeah, a little…"

"Mine aren't. Trust me, they're sirens—far off, but not for too long. We'll be in the clear if you floor it now and put ten miles between us."

"*Ten*?"

"At least eight, to be safe."

"Okay, I'm on it." Cris gets in, slams the door shut behind her, and keeps the window rolled down. "Hang on!"

Theodore Donato stirs awake twenty-one minutes later in the back of the black El Camino SS. An orange-tinted dusk sky extends above him. Two feet to his left sits Frank DaSilva, with his head leaned against the rear window on the passenger's side. Theo's eyes lazily readjust, eyes fluttering to clear his vision. He looks to his right, then left, and sees that Frank—although seemingly not paying any attention—has his left hand on a Colt M1911 in his lap, directed at Theo. The hammer is cocked, but Frank's finger rests just outside of the trigger guard.

"What…where the fuck am I?"

"Oh, hey, good morning Theo." Frank looks over and down at him. "What a pleasant surprise to see that you're still in town. Shame is, you should have left after you shot me out there in the desert. You know, after you killed my parents."

"Hey…look, man, that was all my father's doing. He *sent* me out here to whack you, and me—hey, man, what am I gonna do, say *no*!?"

"Sure, sure, yeah. Torturing my parents and having one helluva great time with it before killing them sure was tiring work against your will, wasn't it?"

"Hey, I just…I…" Theo trails off muttering, acting out

the pathetic role all too well. If it weren't for his strangely deep-set eyes and the despicable way he smiles, the man *might* be taken as comely. In this world, however, he isn't—and the actions conducted by him are no less depraved.

Frank raises his right arm and taps his knuckle on the rear window. Cris pivots her head and their gazes align through the glass. Frank simply nods, and she nods back.

The next sign of shelter out here in the desert will suffice for the carrying out of their plan.

"You *really* should've just left," Frank says, looking back down at him. He fingers the trigger guard of his pistol.

He hears the El Camino downshift. He looks around, while keeping the pistol trained on Theo, and spots a gas station less than a quarter mile out. They're upon it in no time, and as Cris decelerates to pull out into the desert field on the right, he realizes that it's boarded-up.

Perfect.

The El Camino bounces a bit as it rides over the shoulder and across uneven desert steppe. It slows to a stop directly behind the gas station, its left side less than ten feet from the building's rear façade. Cris parks it, kills the engine, and steps out.

"You don't look so hot, Frankie," Theo says.

"This, coming from a guy in your current state." Frank shakes his head, takes a fistful of Theo's shirt, and head-butts him. Theo's head bounces and rolls back, a spot above his eyes already bruised. His brow's swollen and his eyes start fluttering again. Frank spits in his face and stands up, lifting Theo by the hair. Theo screams, his voice dryer than Frank's, but not louder.

"Need any help?" Cris asks from ground level.

"Nah. Just bring the Polaroid."

"What're you planning?" Cris cocks an eyebrow.

"Just…bring it."

"I already am," she says, patting her back pocket.

"Well, then…we'll see."

"Hey, hey!" Theo shouts.

Frank jerks his hand, yanking Theo's head around and losing some of his hair. Before he loses it all, he brings him to the right side of the El Camino's bed and tosses him out. Theo lands in a rolling heap, groaning as he comes to a stop. Cris circumvents the backend of the El Camino and tries to help Frank debark. His boots grind in the dirt and his hand's in Cris's as he alights.

"You've got your SIG?" Frank asks.

"Yep."

"Okay, good." Frank draws the M1911 from his left holster with his right hand. Together, they approach Theo, who is trying to get to his knees at the very least. Frank fires off a shot that hits the ground by his left leg.

"You missed!" Theo chortles miserably.

"Your turn," Frank says, looking over at Cris.

She gets a running start from ten feet away and takes a low swing at the left side of his face with her right hand. Knuckles collide with cheek and something cracks inside of his mouth. Theo's head swings to the right and something small hits the dirt.

"Teething?" Cris mutters, and knees him in the chin. Her own momentum carries her a few feet past him, so she gets to evade his regurgitation of blood.

"Theo, I'd like you to meet Cris Volkova," Frank says. "I believe you already met her little sister, Sasha."

"Say her name. I want to hear you say it." Cris is towering over the barely-stable kneeling Theo. She snarls through her teeth and flaring nostrils. "Say it."

"I don't know…who the fuck you're talking about." Theo looks up at her as he speaks, bloodied saliva bubbling at his lips. Tears have already streaked his cheeks.

"On the contrary," Frank says, standing a few feet behind him with his right hand holding the pistol at his side. His left hand has balled into a sweating fist. Beads of perspiration dot his brow, his cheeks, his biceps.

Cris is hardly any different.

FIVE

"I saw your face, motherfucker," Cris says. "And as much as I'd like to forget it, I'd know you from a mile away after what I saw…"

Tears run down her cheeks. Frank realizes only now that she has drawn her pistol, and her fingers tighten around its grip greatly.

"You," Theo breathes, wheezing. He tilts his head back so that he can look up at her stably. "You're that whore I saw outside of the motel a couple—"

Cris pistol whips him across the face.

Theo spits blood into the dirt before looking back up at her and grinning with blood-framed teeth.

"What was it, two days ago?" Theo says. He clears his throat without budging. "And the girl from the gas station—yours?" Theo laughs; they can tell that it hurts him, but he doesn't care. He has to know that he's dead. Now he just wants it to be over faster. "I wonder how similar you two are…here, come closer—lemme get a taste."

Cris is about to hit him when Frank comes in from behind and smacks the base of his M1911 into the back of his head. Theo falls forward, groaning, right at Cris's feet.

"Get up, you piece of shit," Cris says, and Theo actually lifts himself from the ground to lean back onto his heels. This looks familiar to Cris—she flashbacks to Andy behind that brothel. She tells herself to maintain control. Looking down at this particularly despicable Theo, she realizes that she might not be able to. A deep breath later and she demands it again: "I want you to say her name. Sasha Volkova. Say it, Theodore. Say it."

Theo just lolls there. He starts humming some unknown tune that worms its way beneath her skin.

Flashes of Sasha's face come searing across her mind's eye, images of when she was healthy and smiling and laughing to when she was lying there in Cris's arms in pain on the verge of death.

"Say it!" Cris screams, and her voice pierces the air so sharply that it startles Theo and makes Frank's skin crawl.

"Sasha…Sasha Vo—" Theo starts, but Cris shoots him in the right shoulder at point blank range. The .40-caliber round leaves a nasty exit wound. Theo spins like a faltering top and rolls across the dirt. He's crying and groaning in pain while Frank stands idly by and Cris just shakes her head. "No, you don't deserve to say her name."

"Fuck!" Theo drawls, his voice high-pitched and grating.

"Get up," Frank says, doubling over him. He digs two fingers from his left hand into the exit wound on his shoulder, forcing a third in there to form a makeshift hook. He curls his fingers inward and hears Theo's scream shatter his eardrum. He curls his bicep and slowly stands. "Get *up*!"

Theo is half-standing, half-floating.

Frank's left shoulder bellows in its own pain. He feels the connection join and break them at the same time.

"I'll see you in hell, Theo," Frank growls by his right ear. "You get no handbasket. I hope you feel every rock on your way down."

Theo starts to say something—does he?—but Frank has lost every ounce of patience ever accumulated in his lifetime. He shoots Theo in the right side, closest to his stomach. The bullet bursts out the other side, shattering a rib and exacerbating the pain thundering inside of him. Theo screams for all that he can anymore, while blood spurts from between his lips.

Frank yanks his fingers out and relaxes his arm. Theo crumbles, knees slamming into the dry ground before he slumps forward.

Cris is standing eight feet in front of Theo, with not so much as a twitch in her composure. The SIG-Sauer in her right hand dangles by her side, finger curled around the trigger. She reaches behind her, and Frank moves to Theo's left; he brings the man up so that he leans back against his weak feet. Cris withdraws the Polaroid from her back pocket, pinching it at the base so that her finger covers her own name, but not Sasha's. She walks up to Theo and holds it six inches from his face.

"This is the life you helped violate, and maul," Cris says,

seething. Fresh tears welled up in her eyes, glassing her world. "This…is the life you *took*…for your own fucking pleasure."

Her teeth are nearly chattering, her composure more or less still solid.

Frank lifts his gun and hovers the muzzle two inches from Theo's right temple. Cris swallows, noticeably relaxes, and holsters her pistol. Frank looks over at her, sees a soft smile tragically grace her distraught face. She's still holding the photo, essentially forcing him to look at it.

"And this is the last beautiful life," she says, her voice in tune with her faint smile, "you'll ever threaten to crush."

Frank applies pressure to the trigger, as if itching a scratch. Theo opens his mouth and, still looking at Cris, Frank sees her smile begin to fade. He tightens his finger and the M1911 fires. The slide snaps back and forward in the same instant that Theo's temples rupture. His eyes go dead, along with his entire body, and he falls to the ground at his left.

Frank withdraws his hand, toggles the safety, and holsters the gun. In that time, Cris has walked up until the toes of her shoes nudge Theo's corpse and—with her left hand gripping the Polaroid at her side—withdrawn the SIG from its holster. When Frank looks up after putting away his, Cris has lowered the pistol and begun firing it. Twelve rounds bury their way into Theo's chest in a matter of seconds, and Cris stops only after the first two clicks of the empty pistol. Her ajar-mouthed stare is pitted at her feet and she's all alone until Frank's arms wrap around her. He pulls her close, squeezes her to him, and finds that they just might be melting into one.

He wants to say something, whisper that he's gone, that's it, it's over, everything's through…but he doesn't. He isn't sure why he doesn't. He believes in it, some of it at least, but whatever story unfolds for them after this makes him want to just go into hibernation.

Ultimately they fall into a strange sort of vocal hiatus restricted to actions only.

They gather their spent casings, each one giftwrapped

with an unseen anguish. Frank groups them all with those already in his pocket, out into his and Cris's hands. With the help of some handy wipes from her car they banish any possible fingerprints, and leave them out on the ground by Theo. Let the police run circles around that mystery, the likes of which will surely garner a horde of tacit gratitude.

Back in the El Camino, Cris returns the miraculously unsullied Polaroid back to her visor.

All of their weapons go under the seat, including holsters and any leftover magazines. With Frank behind the wheel, Cris relaxes in the passenger's seat and they set off down the road.

There is no destination.

Not even talk of one. Just driving, with their eyes set forward and their hearts emptied of a pressing weight.

Except that Frank's still lingers.

He doesn't want to voice his concerns to Cris, doesn't want to bring it up. At the very least he longs for one full night's sleep, six to eight hours of generous relaxation and healing. An overnight, subconscious meditation.

The affordable vacation.

6

SEPARATE BEDS ARE FOR STRANGERS, OR SO Cris Volkova insists when they check into a room at a Super 8 just outside the nearest town. An actual settlement, civilization to put it nicely. A place with crowded gas stations and legal gun shops, legitimate restaurants and classy escort services. But this place, this place isn't for Frank and Cris—not yet, at least. They take their room at the Super 8, which makes their previous one look like a homeless shelter. It isn't luxury, but considering everything they've been through this past day it's damn close enough.

In their one-bed room they unwind for the evening.

Individual showers are taken. Tears are shed in the watery solitude with no judgment passed between them. It is like a snake shedding its skin—moving on, evolving, but not forgetting its prior experiences so as to get lost in the naïveté. Instead, they both take bounding steps forward. They still feel like they have descended, because they have both lost family in torturous ways, and then been left to die.

There is only so much Frank can say to thank Cris.

And he has tried to utter every last word.

After their showers, they got cleaned up and ordered pizza from the town over. It was a long delivery time, but Frank tipped heftily. They enjoyed their pizza while flipping between

talk shows and sitcoms on the small TV provided. Roughly an hour later they washed their hands and brushed their teeth.

Nighttime has since fallen upon them.

Their bedside clock digitally reads 9:04 and they are both equally tired beyond reason. The only light on in the room is a walled lamp above the clock. The bed is sizeable enough to fit both of them and then some, but at the moment it is just Frank lying down. He is on top of the covers, legs extended and ankles crossed. His feet are mere inches from the end of the bed. Between the pillow and the back of his head are his hands, cupped together so that his elbows point out.

He is most comfortable now than he has been for a long time, and feels at ease.

When Cris stops washing her hands and face, she approaches the bed from around the side of the hidden bathroom. Her mohawk ponytail cascades down her back, casual and relaxed. Just as similar is her attire—gray loose-fitting sweatpants and a white tanktop. She isn't wearing anything beneath, but the shirt isn't sheer. She stops at the foot of the bed, akimbo.

The most distant of calm smiles lights up her face.

"Did I ever thank you, Cris?" Frank says with a small toothy smirk.

Cris laughs. "Oh, yes. Many times. And like I said earlier, enough is enough. You don't owe me anything…you've already given so much."

"Have I? Well…I'm not exactly referring to you saving me from that godforsaken barn."

"Oh…then what're you thanking me for this time?"

"Not turning tail."

"Huh?"

"Most people, most girls as pretty and smart as you are, would've hightailed outta that motel room after I woke up. This mug, it ain't much at my age, and I know I can come off as quite the hard-ass. So…thank you for sticking with me."

Cris climbs onto the bed, like a prowling puma, hair dark

as a panther's. She crawls right over Frank's legs, then up to his torso, hands planted in the bed at either side of his chest. She hovers her face several inches above his.

"Thank *you*, Frank DaSilva, for treating me like a *woman* ought to be."

She leans down and kisses him on the lips.

"You're most welcome," he mumbles through the kiss, and she chuckles. He pulls his hands out from under his head and puts one to the side of her face, guiding it comfortably to his. Another hand goes to the small of her back, where he applies the slightest bit of pressure to insist that she lie down. She folds without reluctance, tilting so that her left side is on the bed and her right is on him. Her right leg entwines with his while her hand traces the muscles from his forearm to his shoulder, chest, and stops at his stomach.

They kiss and caress for a few more minutes.

In the end Frank pulls back and rests his head on the pillow. Cris smiles and chooses Frank's chest over her pillow. It heaves with every breath he takes, but doesn't hinder her from catching some Z's.

An indescribable amount of time passes before they do, in fact, drift off into a much-needed and satisfyingly heavy sleep.

Part of them both are in hopes that they never wake.

When morning does come, their curtains peel back and they lift themselves from the bed. Not in unison, however, because Frank wakes up first. He sees that Cris is still lying down, except curled the other way, nonetheless on top of the covers. Frank removes his shirt and drapes it over her, a kind of makeshift blanket. He remembers that the shirt previously belonged to Sasha. In a way it certainly still does.

He moves into the bathroom to use the toilet and wash his face. The visage he stares at in the mirror, dripping water off of every niche, wears forty-two years and a dirty laundry list of experiences most mid-lifers will never endure.

Nor should they, he thinks.

Frank dries his hands and turns to see his parents standing there between him and the door. He isn't startled. His blood flows calmly, smooth like a creek over a bed of rocks. And for once in a long time, just as clean.

"Mom?" Frank's lips barely move. "Dad?"

They have their arms around each other in a compassionate gesture, and smile back at Frank.

"We love you, Franklyn," Eleanor says.

Frank responds without uttering a word. It doesn't go unfelt. His eyes don't tear up, but the feeling is there nonetheless. His spine tingles.

"Stay strong, son," Bernard says.

"I will," Frank says, his voice quiet but full. He nods once. "I love you, too."

Frank closes his eyes, takes a breath, and when he opens them he sees the doorknob move. He opens it and Cris is standing there, looking groggy but more awake than most people might be after such a slumber.

"Thanks for the lil' blanket," she says.

"You're welcome," Frank smiles, and leans in to kiss her forehead. He lets her in, then walks past her and closes the door behind him.

He throws the black shirt over his shoulder and, still wearing his jeans, leaves the room barefoot. He looks both ways, yawns, and approaches the El Camino which they parked directly outside the door. He peers in through the windows, glad to see that all of the weapons were properly concealed under the seat before they got the room, and both windows are securely up. The locks are in place and the bed is empty.

The morning isn't very early. It's almost eleven.

Frank looks around again, comforted by the amount of other cars visible. He sees someone else exit their room, a man wearing a tanktop, scratching his beard and walking down the concrete path toward the front office. Frank returns to the room, shuts the door behind him, and hears Cris talking to herself. He

approaches the bathroom door, stops, then turns around and takes a seat on the bed. He flicks on the television and smiles minutely to himself. A tranquil breath passes between his lips.

A few minutes later and Cris leaves the bathroom, wearing some eyeliner and sporting a tied-up ponytail for her mohawk. Clothing wise, she's prepared to go out—black fitted jeans, black belt, snug white shirt with low shoulders, and a black bra.

"How do I look?" she asks, spinning.

"Severely beautiful," he says, acting taken aback.

"Well, then," Cris grins. "You look…just as pleasant."

Frank realizes that he's still shirtless, except that it's slung over his left shoulder.

"How's that shoulder?" she asks, approaching him.

"Better. Healing. The showers and the sleep definitely help. And the compassion, of course."

"I emanate pretty good compassion."

"Tell me about it," Frank says, and Cris stops to stand directly in front of him. He puts his hands on her waist, then drops down to her hips. She smiles and clicks her tongue, stoops to kiss him. When she withdraws, she slips from his hands and walks for the door.

"I'm going to go get us a lil' map from the front office," she says. "Then we get some gas before heading into town, find you some actual clothes."

They don't discuss in any further detail the nature of what lies ahead of them. They just go with the wind, per se, the path they've taken thus far.

"I thought I looked 'pleasant' enough?" Frank says lightheartedly, his deep and rugged voice alone making Cris giggle.

She leaves and shuts the door behind her.

Frank puts the shirt on and gets up to start making the bed. It is barely muddled, considering how they slept on top of the covers last night.

Roughly seven minutes pass before Cris returns, and

when she does she shuts the door behind her in an incredibly rushed motion. Frank looks up and feels his heart sink.

"What the fuck!?" he exclaims under his breath, rushing to meet her midway across the room.

Cris's face is flushed and she's holding the MP5SD at port arms. Against her white shirt it is about the furthest thing from being furtive.

"Take it," she insists, practically pushing it into Frank's clutches.

"Are you gonna *explain*?"

"I went to the front office, and while I was looking for the maps I noticed a black Crown Vic parked outside. Windows were tinted, I couldn't see inside. There was a big man with a fucking fedora and Nixon nose walking inside. I got my map and he started talking to the clerk, asking him if a certain *Franklyn DaSilva* had checked in here anytime lately. Flashed a badge."

Frank's eyes shadow over.

"Clerk said no, besides, my name's on our room. Then he provided a picture, Frank, a goddamn *photo* of *you*. By then my back was turned, I was out the door. I could *feel* his eyes on me. I went straight to the car, made sure I wasn't in anyone's line of sight, got the only silenced gun we have, and…"

"Fucking hell, this is too soon." Frank shakes his head. "I didn't think he'd be here for another couple of days, at least."

"He who?" Cris asks, then backs up a step. Her face turns dark. "Al Donato."

Frank nods. "This soon, that's who Zach must've been alerting. Either that or Theo sent some sort of emergency message when he was hiding—"

"Don't even say his *name*," Cris shakes her head sternly.

Frank swallows. "Alright. Alright. Did you see anyone else with him?"

Cris shakes her head.

"Well, Crown Vic is to give his bullshit cop pretense more credibility. Fits three more, but that's under the assumption that he wasn't ushered here by a thicker crew in like an Escalade

or something. See any of those out there?"

She shakes her head.

"Alright. Here's what—" Frank is interrupted by a knocking sound on the door. No response for three seconds is followed by a louder banging.

"Answer the door," Frank whispers. "Use the chain. Don't stand too close to it, more like off to the left."

Cris swallows, nods. "Where will you be?"

"Bathroom," he says as he backpedals. "Don't worry, Cris. Don't worry, please."

Cris takes a deep breath and heads for the door. She waits until Frank is in the bathroom, though the door stays open, until she unlatches the deadbolt. She then slides the chain lock but doesn't take it off. The door opens ajar. She stands off to the left, getting a fuller look at the man although exposing more of her as well. This way at least, as was Frank's intent she imagines, if they decide to kick in the door she won't have to worry about getting hit by it…

The man on the other side is Al, she presumes. Tall, built, but heavier than Frank. A little older, too. Large, bulbous nose. Severely acne-scarred cheeks. Black hair, visible when he lifts his fedora as if gesturing politely. His voice is scratchy and bolstered by a hint of malice.

"Hi there, ma'am, my name is Frederick Boscono, FBI," he says, flashing a badge quicker than any paranoid civilian would appreciate. "I have reason to believe that there is a fugitive in your company. His name is Franklyn DaSilva, he's a murderer and a rapist, and has ties to the mafia. It'd be best if you let me inside so that I could speak with him."

"No," Cris sneers. She swallows her every fear.

"Excuse me?" Al says, his nose crinkling up like a provoked wolf, or having just detected a horrific smell.

"I think you have the wrong man," she says. "The wrong name, really."

"Ma'am, you need to watch your tone."

Cris readjusts where she stands and spots another man

behind Al. This one is leaner, but more built. He is a proper bodyguard, and could even give Frank some problems. His face exhibits nothing but malevolent intent.

"I suggest you get your facts straight, mister," Cris snaps. "The only name that I can think of that fits your description is Theodore Donato." Cris enjoys the look that warps Al's face just then. She takes a small step back, preparing her body and waving behind her—hoping that Frank is watching.

Meanwhile, Frank peers out the bathroom door and sees Cris waving haphazardly behind her back. It's like half come-here and half go-away, but all this-might-be-bad. And as he hears her words cut into Al, she prepares for the worst.

"Goddamn, woman, please don't get shot," he mutters.

"And I'm pretty sure Donato Junior won't be saying anything for *quite* some time. Unless…unless *you too* have a ticket for hell?"

Al steps forward, practically pressing his face between the door and jamb.

"You will open this goddamn door right now you fucking bitch or I'll cut your *fucking* head off!"

"Wrong answer," Cris says smugly.

"Do it!" Al barks.

"Get fucked," Cris scorns.

Al steps back. "Kick this piece of shit down."

Al's bodyguard steps forward, his blonde hair slicked back and his high cheek bones shadowed by brooding eyes.

Cris steps back the second before the man puts the sole of his boot into the door, nearest the knob. It buckles and the chain snaps in the blink of an eye. Cris stumbles back, catching herself on a chair but turning to flee and tripping. She falls forward and rolls onto her left side, stopping directly in front of the intruders' path. The bodyguard enters, Al behind him, who blindly shuts the door and reaches into his black long coat for his piece.

The bodyguard's boots are but inches from Cris's feet when he draws his pistol. It's an all-black Desert Eagle, fitting

for his size and matching the overkill in his gaze. He angles it down at Cris, who doesn't cower anymore but instead glares back up at him. She bares her teeth, and that undying fire in her eyes sparks an ember.

Frank spins out from the bathroom door and plants one square between the bodyguard's eyes. The shot is never heard and the bullet casing goes directly into his hand. He pockets it before the bodyguard's body crumples to the ground, nearly toppling into Al himself, whose face is now a wet shade of red.

"You just had to hold a grudge," Frank says, shaking his head. He is shouldering the suppressed MP5 and looking down the iron sight. He gestures for Cris to get up and move to the bed, while keeping his eye trained on Al. "I see your hand there, you twisted fuck. Why don't you just keep it there for me."

"Something's wrong here, Frank, something terribly fucking wrong." Al shakes his head austerely. "I don't know this woman, or what's happened here. Frankly, I don't care. I just came in to find Theo and bring 'em here."

"No. No, you came here to finish what your incompetent son couldn't even round out. First, you have him kill my parents. And then…well, look at that. Big Al's expression doesn't change, not a goddamn bit. Must mean that you did in fact make that call. And here I was, thinking that your cold heart wouldn't dare go that far."

"Like father like son," Cris says from the bed.

"Listen, whore, you don't even *know* who you're speaking to. I believe you're in line to show me some fucking respect."

Frank laughs. "That line, coming from you. Really?"

"Hey!" Al jabs his finger at Frank, his other hand still lazily inside his coat. "You *abandoned* me, Frank. *Us*. Like a dog without a leash, off you went. Loyalty down the drain."

"A dog?" Frank smirks, his hands tightening around the gun. "Are you *trying* to make me shoot you?"

"Listen to yourself," Al scowls. "Like you didn't *act* as one all those years you were with me! Getting paid dirty money,

taking out the *garbage*, being fed *scraps*. So, I figure, you run away—I'll have you put down like a filthy fucking animal. Just like your—"

Frank squeezes the trigger. A small plume of gore emerges from the back of Albert Donato's head, spraying the door. His hefty body collapses in a sloppy heap, half on top of his failed bodyguard's.

Frank lowers the MP5SD and looks over at Cris. She sits up from the bed and joins him. He drops the gun and hugs her. They stand there idly in this embrace for nearly a solid minute.

"What if there are others?" she finally asks, looking up at him with less insecurity in her face than she had yielded yesterday.

"There won't be," Frank says. "Not so long as I'm still alive and kicking."

"What now, then?"

"I say…I say we bail this place, hop in the El Camino, and ride 'er into town. I need some new threads, anyway."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Good. Best we hurry, too. I'll wipe these fingerprints and leave it. We'll get rid of the Uzi later, and find some suppressors for our pistols…just in case."

"Don't forget your picture."

"What picture?"

"The one Al brought with him."

"Oh yeah." Frank polices Al's corpse for the photograph, which he finds and rips up before putting it in his back pocket. "I'll burn it properly later."

"You don't want to keep it?"

"No. It's not who I am anymore." He takes Cris's hand and they proceed to leave the room. They're leaving the corpses, too, and they're leaving the scars of their pasts to decay without them. They hang on only to the treasures of their pasts, finding new hope in each other's futures.