

DELAYED PENALTY

The Dartmouth Cobras

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Chapter One

Late December

The icy wind drew tears to her eyes on the long trek through the snow to her car, parked at the far end of the almost empty superstore parking lot. Akira Hayashi gritted her teeth as she tightened her grip on the bags, the plastic handles having cut off all circulation from her fingers. Her toes were numb in her boots already and her arms were going to fall off. She shouldn't have gotten so much at once—no, she shouldn't have come alone.

I shouldn't have had to. But what choice did I have?

Maybe Sir was right. Maybe she was a little *too* nice.

But Jami hates grocery shopping. And Sabara's working on a new routine. We needed food.

Her roommates were perfectly happy ordering out every night, but it irked Akira to waste money like that. So she did the shopping, and the cooking, and recycled the takeout pamphlets before the other girls could get ahold of them. Her schedule made the times she could restock a little sporadic, but she managed just fine on her own. And she'd been lucky enough to make it to the store before it closed for the evening.

"You're spoiling them, Akira." Akira shivered as she recalled Dominik Mason, her mentor, the Dartmouth Cobras' captain—or as she most often called him, "Sir"—giving her one of his hard looks, his tone deep with disapproval. *"You teach people how to treat you. And I don't like what you're teaching those girls."*

Damn it, she hated when Sir was unhappy with her. But at the same time, she had to stop looking to him for direction. They'd both known what they were getting into when he'd agreed to train her. He'd taken on two new subs recently after a *long* discussion. She'd insisted she'd be fine.

And I will be. She'd prove it by making decisions like this all on her own. If she wanted to do a little bit extra for her two closest friends, he had nothing to say about it.

She blew a long strand of sleek, brown-black hair away from her face as the wind slashed at her, adjusted the three heavy bags, and winced as a handle chafed her wrist above her thin gloves. Almost there. She huffed out white air, dropping the bags behind her car to fish her car keys out of her purse.

Something tugged at her purse strap. She gaped as a man loomed over her, trapping her against the trunk. A ski mask covered most of his face. A savage smile bared rotted teeth.

“Don’t be stupid,” he said with a growl.

Twisting away from him, she let out a shrill cry. His hand slapped over her mouth. Her knees locked and she automatically swung a fist at his face.

A sharp pain went up her arm as her fist connected with his mouth. He reared back, spitting as he swore at her. “Fucking bitch!” He yanked at her purse. “Let it go, or I’ll—”

Just let it go! Akira released her purse and jabbed her elbow into his stomach. She dropped to her knees as he lunged for her. Scrambled out of reach, slipping in the snow, not getting far. He took a step toward her. Stopped as though just realizing he had her purse.

Then he turned and ran.

“No!” Akira sat hard on the pavement. She hardly noticed the snow melting into her jeans. Losing her wallet, her phone, her day planner and her Kindle—her throat tightened. She hated all that, but not as much as she hated the old feelings resurfacing. He’d been so much stronger than her. He could have done anything . . .

He didn’t. Pull it together, Akira.

She managed to haul in some cold air. But she couldn’t make herself stand. Her whole body was shaking. She could taste the dried sweat and dirt on her lips from his hand. Her stomach heaved. She lowered her head between her knees.

The man dragged her into the office down the hall from her father’s. Covered her mouth with his hand, his palm slick with sweat. “You were waiting for us, weren’t you, slut?” He hissed in her ear as his partner closed and locked the door. “If you scream, I’ll go get your daddy. I’ll bring him in here and make him watch.”

Tears burned like acid in her eyes, blinding her as a hand settled on her shoulder. They were back. They’d found her. She cowered, one arm shielding her face. She should fight, should run, but there was no point in trying to get away.

She’d never get away.

“Hey. Shh . . .”

Look at him. You have to be able to describe him if . . . if he lets you live. Lowering her arm, she stared up at him, staying perfectly still, needing to show him she wouldn’t struggle. That she was small and defenseless.

God, he was *huge*. All the training she’d gotten, all too recently, was useless. One swing with those big hands would be no different than a grizzly bear lashing out with a giant paw.

If she didn’t move, didn’t breathe, maybe he wouldn’t attack.

Only he didn’t look ready to attack. He asked her something, but she couldn’t make out the words. She couldn’t hear anything beyond the pounding of her heart. Couldn’t tear her gaze away from his

eyes, eyes the color of her favorite stuffed frog, dull green with age. His eyes shouldn't remind her of the cuddly toy that had soaked up her tears for weeks after the rape.

But even his frown was somehow comforting. He moved his hand when she didn't answer. "Did you fall? Are you hurt?"

Muscles strained against the beaten leather of his dark brown jacket. His face was rough, like a much lighter version of his jacket. His thighs, in faded black jeans, were about the size of her waist.

He could hurt her without even trying. Literally snap her in two.

But he'd stopped touching her without her asking. He wasn't trying to drag her away somewhere—or take her right here since no one was around to stop him.

She managed to breathe. To shake her head. Then, finally, speak. "No. I'm not hurt." She ignored the hand he held out, sliding up the car for support as she stood. "Someone stole my purse. I just—"

"Someone *what?*" He straightened, hands fisted at his sides, the expression on his face so fierce she mentally advised the asshole who'd robbed her to get far, far away. She gulped when the big man returned his hard gaze to her. It softened so quickly the air rushed back into her lungs as she inhaled. His brow furrowed. "Did he do anything else? You don't gotta tell me, but I can bring you to the hospital or—"

"N-no. Nothing else. He just scared me." She let out a nervous laugh. "Not hard to do. I'm fine."

Her laugh only seemed to concern him more. His gaze went over her quickly. He shook his head. "You must be freezing. And in shock. Were your keys in the purse?"

"No, they're . . ." She glanced toward her trunk. The keys weren't there. She hadn't gotten them out. They were gone too. Her bottom lip trembled. Scott Demyan, another Cobra and her closest male friend, had gotten her the car as a late birthday present—secondhand because he'd come to know her well enough to guess that she wouldn't accept something expensive and new. And now the keys were gone. And she didn't have a spare set. And she had no idea how much getting new ones would cost.

Sniffing, she turned away from him, brushing away the single tear that trailed down her cheek. The man didn't need to see how pathetic she could be. Her stupid panic attack was done. He'd been kind enough to stop to make sure she was all right. She had to let him know she was so he could go on with his evening.

"Thank you so much for stopping, but I really am fine. I'll just call one of my friends to come pick me up and—"

"And I'll stay with you until they show up." He pulled his phone out of his pocket, his lips quirking slightly as he handed it to her. "I hope you remember some phone numbers. I couldn't even tell you my own, to be honest. Only had it for a week."

Akira grinned at the way he ducked his head, like he was embarrassed. "I've always been good with numbers, but it takes a while for most people." She dialed Jami's number. Voice mail. Tried Sahara's

. . . voice mail again. Her smile slipped. She *really* didn't want to call Sir. He'd be so worried, and she hated worrying him. She nibbled at her bottom lip as she dialed Scott's number. "Why the new number? If you don't mind my asking?"

The man shrugged. "Moved back here recently."

"Ah . . ." She exhaled as Scott picked up. Tried to keep her tone light. "Hey, you busy?"

"Not really, but . . ." Scott paused. Chuckled. "Casey, your mom's gonna freak if she sees you playing with that. Grandma's crystal animals aren't really toys. One sec, Akira." The line went quiet. Scott sounded a bit more serious as he came back on. "Bit of glue and she won't even notice. Just . . . no more touching, okay? Sorry, Akira." His attention returned to her. "What's up?"

"I was wondering if you were nearby."

"Gaspe is a few hours away, sweetie. Why?"

Ugh. She'd thought he'd be back from Christmas vacation with the Bower family. The Cobras were lucky to have almost a week off around Christmas, but they had a game New Year's Eve. In two days. Her Ice Girls had practice tomorrow, but the Cobras' might be optional.

The point was, he wasn't close enough to help her. And she didn't want him all anxious over nothing. So she let out a dismissive laugh. "No reason. Just had some car trouble."

"Are you stuck? Call Mason—or Carter. Do you have his number?"

"I do, but I don't want to bother anyone else." Or anyone at all. The concern in Scott's tone was more than enough. Her close friends always worried when she went out alone. And she hated to do that to them. "I'll take a cab home. The car's in a parking lot, so it will be okay here for a bit."

The man, who'd stood silently beside her during the conversation, cleared his throat. "Or I could give you a lift."

"Who is that?" Scott's tone sharpened. "Akira, don't lie to me. If you're in trouble, you have to tell me."

So I can ruin your holiday? No thanks. Akira frowned at the man, hoping he'd be quiet so she could calm Scott down. "I'm not in trouble. Give Casey and Amia a hug for me."

"Akira, at least give me the man's name so I can hunt him down if anything happens to you!"

"Tell him my name is Cort. Full name, Cortland Nash." The man leaned his elbow on the top of her car, his tone dry. "And let him know you're safer with me than alone out here. Kinda stupid for your boyfriend to let you come out here by yourself this late."

"Did he say Cortland Nash?" Scott laughed. "I've heard good things about him. He knows cars. Tell him to fix whatever's wrong with it, and I'll pay him when I get back."

Akira scowled. If the men were standing side by side, she'd smack them both. Did they really think she couldn't take care of herself? "I can pay for my own repairs, Scott." She turned her scowl to the big man. "And he's not my boyfriend. I don't need a bodyguard to go shopping."

Cort's brow lifted as though he thought otherwise, but he didn't comment.

Smart man.

Scott sighed. "Got it. You're a big girl. Let Cort take you home though, okay? It *is* getting late. If it makes you feel better, you can *borrow* the money for repairs or whatever. I know you won't touch your prize money."

"No. I won't." She didn't make much as an Ice Girl, but she could live off her salary and let the one hundred thousand dollars she'd won by becoming captain gain interest in the bank until she needed it to start her figure skating school. One good thing had come from the phone call, though. If Cort had Scott's stamp of approval, she could accept his offer and not waste money on a cab. Or embarrass herself by telling the cabbie she could only pay him once she got home.

Yes, because that's the priority. Not being embarrassed.

The cold from her wet clothes seeped into her bones. She trembled but kept her tone steady as she ended the call with Scott, promising she'd call him later to let him know that she'd gotten home okay. She hung up and went to put the phone in her purse. Then dropped back against her car when she remembered that her purse was gone. And this wasn't her phone.

"He knew my name?" Cort asked, making no move to take his phone back. Such a little thing, but it made her a bit more comfortable with him.

Aside from the anger when he'd learned that she'd been robbed, he'd been pretty cool about everything. Not pushy, just there. She nodded slowly. "Yes. He said you can fix my car." She rolled her eyes. "Not that he knows the only thing that needs to be fixed is new keys."

"The locks have to be changed." Cort rolled his shoulders. He gave her an unreadable look, then took a step back. "I can do that. Pay for the parts and we can both feel good about ourselves." His cheek creased slightly as he smiled. "Did your . . . friend say it was okay for me to give you a lift?"

"He did. I don't live far." She shifted her feet, eyeing her bags. Technically, she could walk, but it was cold. Getting colder by the second. And there was no way she could manage the bags all the way. "I'd appreciate it."

Cort nodded, then grabbed her bags before she could touch them. He stashed them in the trunk of his car—a classic something-or-another. Long, sleek, and black. She liked it. She bit her lip when he opened the passenger's side door for her, anxiety squeezing deep in her guts. Whatever Scott said, Cort was a stranger. Getting in the car with him could lead to . . .

"Hey, Tiny, you don't got nothin' to worry about. My intentions are . . ." His lips slanted. "Decent. I won't jump you, but I may ask you to come out for a drink with me if you don't look like you're gonna bolt." He winked. "I'll work up the courage on the drive."

Oh, she liked him. Which was weird, because she didn't "like" many men. And *never* those who would ask her out for a drink. She wrinkled her nose, slipping into the seat with her brow arched at him. "I hope you word it better when you do ask."

"I got a block or two to work on it."

“More like ten.” She felt a flush rise on her cheeks. This was good. She was talking to a man without freaking out. After being mugged, she was surprised she didn’t feel like going straight to the club to let Sir hold her. Remind her that she wasn’t weak. That bad things happened, but she’d be okay. She *was* okay.

“Plenty of time then.” Cort’s lips thinned as she shivered. He reached into the backseat and brought out a threadbare, plaid thermal blanket. His knuckles brushed the side of her neck as he tried to spread the blanket over her. He let it go the second she flinched. Straightened and backed away. “It’s clean. And it’ll keep you warm.”

“Thank you.” Akira spoke so quietly, she wasn’t sure he’d heard her. His brief touch had made her feel . . . she couldn’t explain it, but she wasn’t so cold anymore. She kept her eyes down and did up her seat belt, covering herself with the blanket as Cort closed the door. He went around the car to get in behind the wheel. She bit her lip and glanced over at him. “I’m glad you showed up when you did.”

“So am I.” The steering wheel creaked as Cort tightened his grip on it. “As much as I wish I could’ve gotten my hands on that guy, I’m glad he was already gone. That all he wanted was your purse.”

Akira shivered, not from the cold this time. “Yeah. It could have been worse.”

Much, much worse.

* * * *

The small woman hurried ahead of Cort, trembling as she opened the door to the apartment lobby. She hesitated by the buzzer, then tested the second glass door. It opened readily.

Real safe.

He carried the bags she’d tried to take from him up the stairs, hardly noticing their weight but wondering how she’d carried them as far as she had. One bag had either barbells or about five dozen apples in it. Another had twenty pounds of potatoes. A swing and she could have taken out the fucker who mugged her, but her arms had probably been sore. Either way, it didn’t matter. She hadn’t gotten hurt.

But how close she’d come pissed him off more than it should.

As they climbed up to the top floor, he took the opportunity to really look her over, if only from behind. Hell, he wasn’t blind. She was a looker. Five foot nothing, if that. Long hair he ached to bury his hands in, pure black fucking silk with a sheen of dark chocolate in the light. Her army green eyes had captured him from her first glance, but he couldn’t help but stare at her tiny butt, swaying a few steps above him, soaked blue jeans plastered to the nice, round cheeks. His baser urges and plain logic were at war. He’d never dated—or *fucked*—a woman as small as . . . damn, he didn’t even know her name.

And, hell, he didn’t want to fuck her anyway. He rarely hung around one place long enough to offer a woman more, so he knew how to get down to the basics, but this little sweetheart didn’t need that

from him. She needed to know he was here just to help her out. End game. He hadn't missed the fear in her eyes when he'd first approached her. That didn't come from being mugged. That fear was bone-fucking-deep.

Smart chick though, getting the okay from a friend before accepting a ride. He wasn't sure who she'd talked to—he knew a lot of people—but if the guy had given her the green light, he wasn't one of the lowlifes Cort usually dealt with. Someone who would have told her to run just in case Cort decided she'd make good collateral.

Not that he'd ever used a woman to get a man to pay up. Yeah, he'd threatened to, but his reputation was usually enough to get a man to find the money he owed before Cort had to live up to it. He wasn't proud of the things he'd done in his old job, but he'd never had to bury anyone.

Only one man that had ever crossed him had ended up in the ground.

Above him, the small woman, who he'd dubbed "Tiny," twisted a doorknob, hesitating before pushing as though she wasn't sure it was locked. The door swung open and she groaned, clearly not happy.

She shook her head, glancing back at him. "You'd think, growing up in New York, she'd know better."

He grunted, following her inside. Apparently, she didn't live alone. Two points for her, and minus about twenty for her roommate. What kind of New Yorker didn't lock up?

"Sahara?" The woman strode ahead of him, letting out a sharp sound of distress at a *Crash!* She disappeared into a room down the hall. He dropped the bags and followed her.

"I'm fine, hon, just drank a bit too much." In the room, sprawled out on the bed, a slender blonde shook her head, her cheeks wet with tears. A broken lamp lay on the floor by the bed. "I shouldn't have gone to the club."

"No, you shouldn't have." His Tiny stroked the blond woman's hair. "He was playing with someone else?"

"Of course! And he wouldn't even look at me!" Blondie sobbed, curling into a ball and holding her stomach like it hurt. "I was . . . bad. Dominik spanked me, then held me, then told me to go home. I thought he'd tell me not to come back."

The man spanked you? And you wanted to go back? Cort backed away from the door, sure the women didn't want him hearing this. Still, he couldn't help but bristle at the way Blondie talked like she'd deserved it. *What the fuck did I walk in on?*

Even from the kitchen, he could hear them clearly. Blondie wasn't exactly soft-spoken. She exploded when Tiny asked if Dominik had agreed to train her.

"No! I'm stuck with Shawn and Chicklet. And I don't want to submit to them—there's only one man I want—"

"How much did you drink, Sahara?"

“I don’t know. How much was left in the bottle of whiskey?”

“Aw, sweetie. You can’t keep doing this to yourself.” Tiny paused. “We have practice tomorrow.”

“I took some vitamins. Drank some Gatorade.” Blondie laughed. “With a sleeping pill.”

“You’re not supposed to drink with those.”

No kidding. Cort scowled as he lifted up a grocery bag. He spotted a tub of ice cream at the top—decided to put it away. Then went to work placing everything else from the bags.

“My *ex* said the same thing. He didn’t care that I slept just fine before him.” Blondie sobbed. “I’m so tired, babe. Why can’t anyone good want me?”

“They will.”

“I don’t know. Maybe. One day. You’re so lucky. I would do anything to have a man like Dominik.”

“He’s not mine, sweetie. That’s one of the reasons I *didn’t* go to the club. I’m not used to seeing him with the other girls yet.”

What an asshole. Cort pulverized a banana in his fist. What kind of jerk would make such a sweet chick deal with his other women? The situation was getting scary familiar. A life he’d gotten out of a long time ago, but one he’d grown up in. His mom had dealt with his asshole of a father’s floozies without a word of complaint. Cort had promised her as a little boy that he’d always love only her. When he’d grown up enough to know that wasn’t realistic, he’d amended his promise to her always holding a special place in his life. And if he ever got married, his woman would never doubt he was committed to her.

The girls’ chatter softened so he couldn’t hear them anymore. He cleaned his hands, finished putting everything away, then eyed the door, wondering if he should just go. Maybe leave Tiny a note with his number. Just in case . . . whatever.

He found a pen in a little magnetic holder on the fridge, along with a to-do list pad of paper. He’d just started jotting down his message when he heard a soft throat clearing behind him.

“Going somewhere?” Tiny stepped into the kitchen, fingering one of the empty bags he’d left on the countertop. Without meeting his eyes, she handed him his cell. “What about that drink?”

“Figured you’d want to take care of your girl.” Cort stuffed his phone in his pocket and waited for the sound of Blondie puking. He had a feeling Tiny would forget all about him if she did.

Which made it hard not to smile. Nothing he respected more than a loyal friend.

Tiny sighed, nodding slowly. “I won’t feel comfortable leaving her like this, but she’s sleeping. This will be an issue in the morning. Sorry you had to hear that.”

Shrugging, he replaced the pen. “Didn’t hear nothin’.”

“Liar.”

“Kay, I’ll pretend like I didn’t.” He grinned when she laughed. Damn, that sound was the sweetest thing he’d ever heard. He pressed back against the counter, resisting the sudden urge to go to her. To touch her. That wouldn’t go over well. But the drink invite . . . “So, if you’re not going out...?”

Her lips curved slightly. “Then you’re staying in? We have a fully-stocked liquor cabinet. And beer. What’s your poison?”

Tempting little woman? Fuck, he’d never wanted to smile at a chick this much unless she was stripping for him. Tiny needed to strip, but mostly because her jeans were soaked. He didn’t like that she’d gone to take care of her friend but hadn’t taken care of herself.

“A beer would be nice if you’ll have one with me.” One brow arched, he looked her over pointedly. “Once you’re out of those wet clothes.”

“Umm . . . yeah, I should get changed.” She chewed at her bottom lip in a way that made it very hard for him to stay put. Kissing was something he usually did so a woman didn’t feel used, but with Tiny, he just wanted one little taste of those soft lips.

Not that he’d be satisfied with one. He bit back a grin as she scurried down the hall and ducked into another room. Guess he’d get their beers.

Moments later, she joined him on the weird, patchwork sofa, wearing black jogging pants and a big, faded Hello Kitty sweatshirt, thanking him as he uncapped her beer for her. She turned the TV on, flipping the channel from a replay of a Dartmouth Cobras game. She went through a dozen channels, not showing any interest in the late night chick flicks or sitcoms. He liked her more already.

She stopped on figure skating. Better than “Serendipity”. Kinda. His lips quirked as he sat back, taking a swig of beer. Tiny looked like the type who’d be into this stuff. He might be able to get somewhere offering to take her to see a show, but pretending to like something to get in a chick’s pants wasn’t his style. Since what was on TV was damn boring, he turned all his attention to the much more appealing sight before him. Long lashes, big, almond-shaped eyes, pink shading her soft cheeks. She was biting her bottom lip again, glancing from him to the screen as though she couldn’t quite meet his eyes.

“So, you said you moved back here?” she asked as though she needed to break the silence. “Were you born in the area?”

“No. I was born in Detroit. Moved here when I was a teen.” He made a face and scratched the side of his neck. “Had this crazy idea that I wanted to be a fisherman.”

She blinked, shifting to sit sideways, facing him. “A fisherman? Really?”

“Yeah. Watched too much extreme fishing as a kid. The real thing wasn’t all that exciting.”

“But being out on the ocean, working with your hands . . .” She cocked her head, looking him over. “Yep, I can see you liking that. Maybe you should have joined the Marines instead?”

“Not really an option.” He wouldn’t lie to her about why, but it was a little soon to start bringing up the unsavory parts of his past. If they ever went on a real date, he’d make sure she knew the basics.

Besides, he wanted to know more about her. Starting with her age—be weird to just come out and ask, though. So he tried to find a tactful way to find out if she was at least over eighteen. Likely, since she was living on her own, but he never assumed shit like that. “What about you? Got any plans for when you graduate?”

“Graduate? What, college?” She wrinkled her nose. “I never went. My mom homeschooled me since training took too much time for a regular schedule. I graduated at sixteen, then spent the next few years doing that.” She nodded toward the TV. “I was good—just not good enough. I think I could teach it, though. I plan to open my own school.”

“That’s cool,” he said, meaning it. She wasn’t all down on herself for not reaching her first dream. Instead, she’d found another one. Part of him wondered, even if she wasn’t too young for him, maybe she was too *good* for him. Not like he was shit under anyone’s shoe, but there was a purity to her he’d ruin if he got too close. But being around her felt *too* good for him to think of leaving just yet. “I don’t get the appeal of dancing around half-naked on a pair of blades, but I can tell it takes some skill. Tough competition out there. Sucks that you stopped fighting for gold, but helping someone else get there would be pretty awesome.”

“Exactly.” She pursed her lips, studied him for a moment, then patted his arm and pointed at the TV. “Have you ever really *watched* figure skating? I know it’s not all *manly*, but appreciating beauty doesn’t make you any less of a man.”

Damn. He wished he’d taken off his jacket. All his muscles had tensed the second she’d touched him, as though they could absorb the brief contact. He took a deep breath, set his beer on the table, then shrugged off his jacket. “You make me want to give it a chance.”

“Good.” She smiled with clear approval, leaning against the sofa, just a few inches away from him. “Look at the way he lifts her up, the way she extends her body as he spins, trusting him not to drop her because she knows his strength.”

He looked. Really looked for the first time. The passion in Tiny’s tone was infectious. As the couple on-screen danced, pulling off impressive leaps, spinning around in time to the classical music, he had to admit it wasn’t as lame as he’d thought. When the next couple came on and the music changed, he found himself actually enjoying the show.

“You see?” This time, Tiny touched his bare forearm. And left her hand there, her eyes on his face. Heat pulsed through his veins as his gaze met hers. Her cheeks were even pinker. She’d stopped breathing.

“I see.” He brought his hand up to her cheek. Moved in until his lips brushed hers. So fucking soft. He smiled at the quiet, nervous giggle she let out as he kissed her. Added a bit of pressure as her breath caught. He tasted her lips, eased past them with his tongue when they parted. Her hands flattened against his chest as she rose up on her knees. She kissed him hard, desperation in the way her fingers bunched up in his shirt.

Then made a frustrated sound in her throat when he gently wrapped his hands around her arms and eased her back. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, Tiny. Just slow down a little.” He kept her in place as she tried to flounce off him, tightening his grip just a bit. Then he curved his hand under her jaw. “Hope you don’t think I need a show of gratitude or anything. You’re cute, but I would’ve done the same for any lady who looked like she was in trouble.”

“This isn’t gratitude, it’s . . .” She groaned, pressing her eyes shut as she shook her head. “Please let me go.”

He released her, not sure what to make of the way she scooted back to the corner of the couch, arms wrapped around her knees. He’d seen chicks get emotional before—usually his cue to leave—but he didn’t like seeing *her* upset. What did he have to do to get her smiling again?

“Tiny, did I—?”

She frowned at him. “Why do you keep calling me that?”

“Because you’re . . . tiny.” He grinned at her huff. “And you never told me your name.”

“It’s A—Ace.” She was blushing again. *Cute little liar*. But “Ace” suited her well enough.

And would probably annoy her less than “Tiny.” He inclined his head. “All right, Ace. Just had to clear things up. I said ‘slow down,’ not stop. Get back over here.”

* * * *

Akira’s eyes widened. She giggled and crawled back across the sofa, gasping as Cort pulled her into his lap. Something purely magnetic about him made it impossible not to give in to the pull. He wasn’t handsome in a conventional way, but his smile made him absolutely gorgeous. Her lips hovered over his as she slipped her arms around his neck. Being near him felt so natural. So right.

Why though? What makes him so different from the other guys that hit on you?

Good question. One she couldn’t answer. All she knew was she was drawn to him in a way she didn’t want to fight. She’d told the truth; she wasn’t doing this out of gratitude, but, in a way, he’d been her hero. Not just because he’d saved her, but because he’d been exactly what she’d needed out there, alone in the cold. And he was exactly what she needed right here, right now. A man who was interested in her, physically, mentally, and not through mutual pain. She loved Sir for all he’d done for her, but he’d never be hers.

Maybe . . . maybe Cort could be.

You can’t know that. Not yet.

No. But she had him in this moment. And for the first time ever, she didn’t want to be slow and careful.

She wanted to dive in and see what happened.

Cort placed one hand on her hip and ran his thumb across the waistband of her jogging pants as he teased her lips with his. His other hand moved up her side, his palm skimming the curve of her breast. Her nipples drew into sensitive little points, begging to be touched.

“Mmm.” She pressed against him as he cupped her breast in his hand, stroking her tight, throbbing nipple through her sweatshirt. He shifted his lips to her throat and his hand to her waist. Slowly slipped his hand under her sweatshirt. Grazed her with his fingertips.

He slid his hand over her breast. “Fuck, you’re gorgeous.”

“Cort . . .” Akira tipped her head back as he lifted her sweatshirt to expose her breasts, closing his mouth around her nipple. The jolts of pleasure had her writhing against him. Her fingers delved into his hair, tugging slightly even as she held him in place.

He sucked hard, barring one arm behind her back to steady her as he undid the tie string of her jogging pants. He worked his hand down until his fingers touched her moist heat.

“Baby, you’re so wet.” He rubbed gently over her clit, then slipped the tip of his finger inside her. Her whole body quivered as his thick, callused finger sank into her all the way. She whimpered as he brought his mouth to her other breast. Cried out as he began to thrust his finger and flick his tongue over her nipple while holding it between his teeth. She became pure, sizzling liquid as he held her gaze, gradually easing two fingers inside her. He smiled as her lips parted. Moved his free hand to the back of her neck to pull her close and whisper in her ear, “Ride my fingers, sweetie. I want a visual of how you’ll look when you’re riding me.”

“When.” *Oh God, yes!* Shifting without displacing his fingers, Akira straddled his thighs. She gasped as he added yet another finger, then lifted up slightly, until only the tips of his fingers were inside her. She lowered, then rose, finding a nice rhythm, lost in the naughty pleasure. She shouldn’t be doing this. Not with a stranger, no matter how easy it was to take everything he gave her. No matter how good it felt to—

“Ah!” Her pace faltered and she gripped his shoulders as her pussy clung to his fingers, clenching as she teetered right on the edge. “May I . . . oh God! I need to come, please!”

He wrapped her hair around his fist and bit her throat as he fucked his fingers up into her. Then he pressed his fingers in as deep as they could go. “Do it, baby. I want to feel you coming hard all over my fingers.”

She convulsed around his fingers, letting out a ragged sound as white heat erupted in her core. The flames spread, reaching beyond the depths, swallowing her whole. Her throat felt raw from the noises she’d made. She shuddered as he slid his fingers from her, burrowing her face against the side of his neck.

“That was . . . that’s not something I usually do. I’m not a slut.”

He hugged her tight. “I know you’re not. You had a rough night. You used me to make it better. I’m good with that.”

Letting out an incredulous snort, she sat up, catching his face between her hands to kiss him. Damn, this felt good. Everything he said, everything he did, made taking this chance with him seem less reckless. And more like an opportunity to have something wonderful. Her lips curled slightly. “I don’t believe in using people.”

“Oh, yeah?” He gave her a hooded look as she reached between them to unzip his jeans.

“Yes.” She slipped off his lap and knelt between his thighs. His hot flesh filled her hand, and she couldn’t get a good grip on him. All the past girl-talk about how size *does* matter came back to her. *Size isn’t supposed to be scary!* Her tongue flicked over her bottom lip. “You’re . . . very big.”

He chuckled, petting her hair as she wrapped her hands around him. “So I’ve been told. Not trying to be cocky, but I’ve had to learn how to deal with being such a big man. I promise I’ll be careful with you, little one.”

Little one. She smiled, loving how casually the endearment slipped out. For some reason, she didn’t think he was a Dom. And yet . . . he could easily fit into that role.

But does he want to?

She would find out. Eventually. But for now . . . “I believe you.” She pressed a soft kiss to the tip of his dick, then swallowed as she gently stroked him. “Just . . . don’t move. I’m not sure how much of you I can take.”

“Keep your hands just like that. Fuck, you touching me feels amazing.” He slid his hand over hers, encouraging her to tighten her grip. “Your pretty lips don’t need to go any farther than your hands.”

“It’s enough?” She peered up at him as her tongue swirled around the head of his cock.

He traced her bottom lip with his thumb. “More than enough.”

* * * *

Preening as though Cort’s words pleased her, she took him in her mouth, sliding down slowly until her lips met her top hand. There was something about her expression, the way her lashes lowered, the way her wet lips tightened as they glided up, then down, that made it seem like she enjoyed doing this as much as he enjoyed having it done. Innocent and wanton all at once, not going too fast or too slow. Not trying to get him off as quickly as possible.

He let out a low groan of approval as her tongue fluttered over the sensitive underside of his cock. A flush spread across her cheeks, and she pressed her tongue on that spot as she bobbed her head. He fisted his hands by his hips, resisting the urge to grab the back of her head and thrust in as his pulse thrummed harder, right between her lips. He wanted to last longer, but his girl was determined.

Her gaze on his face as she moved did him in. Pleasure rocked up from his balls, shuddering through his muscles like the goddamn earth was coming apart under him. He tipped his head back, cursing at the fucking mind-blowing sensation of her swallowing around him. She licked the last glistening white trail from the slit of his dick, then sat back on her heels with a satisfied smile on her lips.

The woman had killed him. But as good as she looked down there, he wanted her closer. Which was weird, because he wasn’t the snuggling type.

Fuck it. He crooked his finger at her. “Up here, you little brat.” He did up his jeans, then threw his arm over her shoulders as she curled up beside him. “Not sure I want to know how you got so good at that.”

“With one man, Cort. Only one.” She took a deep breath. “I’m still . . . involved with him, in a way. We should probably discuss—”

“There’s a few things we should probably discuss. But not tonight. Let’s watch the rest of the show.” He kissed the top of her head. “Save the ex-talk—or not-quite-ex-talk—for our first dinner and a movie stint. I can’t stay much longer. I came to help out a friend, and I want to check in since I’m crashing at his place for a bit.”

“I can live with that.” She let out a happy sigh. “This was . . . nice.”

“Nice?” He wasn’t sure if he should be insulted. “Nice” wasn’t high on his list of compliments. “Remind me to work that ‘nice’ up to an *unbelievable* next time. Because that’s what you did for me.”

“Aww.” She rubbed her cheek against his arm like an affectionate kitten. “I wouldn’t have taken you for a sweet guy.”

He snorted, not quite sure what had come over him. He *wasn’t* a sweet guy. “Believe me, anyone who knows me would be shocked.”

“Maybe they don’t know you all that well.”

“Baby, you don’t know me at all.” He gave her a one-armed hug when he noticed the show was over. He wanted to stay, wanted to take what he could from tonight because who knew if she’d *want* to get to know him once she learned a little more. He stood, scratched his chin, then went to the kitchen. Jotted his name and—after checking his phone—his number on the fridge pad. He went still when he heard her come in behind him. For some reason, it bothered him that his next move might end things between them before they’d even begun, but she needed to have her eyes wide open if she was going to get involved with him. “You’ve got my name. A quick Google search will tell you plenty. Call me if it doesn’t scare you off.”

She folded her arms over her chest and shook her head. “Or you can just tell me. You said dinner and a movie, right?” She tore off the slip of paper with his number, then wrote her number on another. “I’m free Wednesday and Thursday. I actually *like* action movies—just so you don’t feel stuck watching a chick flick. Let me know what you want to see. And what restaurant you want to bring me to. I’m not a big fan of Chinese food or anything too spicy, so choose carefully.”

He grinned, folding the paper she handed him and stuffing it in his pocket. “Steak and potatoes?”

“Mmm. Yes to both. I also love buffalo wings and beer during hockey games.”

The girl’s a hockey fan. He’d dated a few gushy ones who didn’t watch the game. They just creamed over the players. And had meltdowns when “their men” got a few bumps. He didn’t see his girl doing that, but he could be wrong. “You don’t cry when players get hit, do you?”

Cocking her head, she frowned at him. “Why would I? Unless they don’t get up after a hit, it’s all part of the game.”

“What about football?”

“Love it.”

Could she be any more perfect? He gathered her in his arms, kissing her until she was gasping and pressing against him in a way that got his dead dick twitching with new life. *Down, boy.* “If I don’t scare you away, there’s a few things I want to do with you.”

Her teeth dented her bottom lip. Her brow furrowed. “Say that again after our talk. I might be the one who scares *you* away.”

It was cute that she thought that. He tapped her tiny nose. “Not happening, Ace.”

“We’ll see.”

He inclined his head. “Yeah, we will. Wednesday. I can’t wait longer than that to see you again.”

Out in the hall, after making sure she locked the door behind him, Cort leaned against the wall, shaking his head, not quite sure what had come over him. He was acting like a fucking chump. Going soft. Over a woman he hardly knew.

Didn’t matter. He could be that for her. Find a way to keep her away from the rougher parts of his life. Hopefully.

He’d know once Ford told him what kind of trouble he was in. Much as he wanted to get to know his little Ace better, his best friend came first.

Chapter Two

Cort called Ford’s phone again, wondering if Ford had changed his number. He made his way up the metal steps in the alley leading to the man’s apartment, right above the bar, which looked like it had been closed for a while. The darkened windows were streaked with dirt, and Cort knew Ford kept his bar fucking spotless. If he didn’t have the money to hire someone to do the cleaning, he’d do it himself. He was too proud to leave the place looking this bad.

Ford calling him was enough of a clue to let Cort know something was wrong, but this had him really worried. He stopped in front of Ford’s door and pounded on it, ready to give the kid shit if he was inside acting like a goddamn pussy ‘cause he had a cold or . . .

The curtain that usually covered the small window in the heavy oak door was gone. Cort shielded his eyes and squinted to see inside. The place was trashed.

“Fuck.” Cort pulled his small tension wrench and pick from his wallet. Within seconds he had the door open. Picking locks was a trick he’d learned as a kid after his stepdad, Sutter, started locking him out when he missed curfew. Rather than yell at Cort, Sutter had offered him a job. Trained him

to do tougher work over the years. And that training would come in handy if anything had happened to Ford.

Droplets of dried blood on the floor made Cort's gut clench. He searched for a number on his phone even as he strode through the apartment, silently praying Ford wasn't still here.

Living room wrecked. TV smashed. Leather sofa cut up.

More blood.

Bathroom in order. Kitchen covered in broken glass. Bedroom . . .

Empty. More blood on the sheets and the black-and-white-striped area rug.

"Cort?" The voice on the phone sounded nervous. Ford's bartender, Reggie, knew something was up.

"Where. Is. He. Reggie?" Cort ground his teeth at the pothead's long silence. If he was too strung out to answer, Cort would hunt him down and make sure he'd never be able to light another spliff.

"Talk to me, punk. I have zero patience for you spacing out right now."

"He's at . . . uh . . ." Reggie mumbled something. Probably to himself. The loser's brain couldn't retain his own name half the time. He finally spoke, all excited, like he'd come up with the answer in a Final Jeopardy round. "The General. One of the waitresses called him an ambulance when she found him."

Jesus, Ford! What the fuck happened to you? He pressed his fist against Ford's padded, leather-covered headboard. "How is he?"

"How is he? Don't know, man. Didn't see him. Angel gone brung him flowers and a card though, so I'm thinking he's not dead."

Cort hung up, heading straight out. He managed not to break anything else before shutting the door behind him, even though he was tempted. Losing it wouldn't help Ford. Getting to him, finding out the names—or at least the descriptions of whoever had messed him up would.

Me being back won't hurt either. He'd taken off because he didn't want to spend any more time "inside." A few years for shit he hadn't even done had taught him to take the . . . well, not high road. More like *any* road.

But Ford was on this one, and he'd crashed and burned. If he made it out of whatever this was alive, Cort planned to be riding by his side. From this fucking point on.

* * * *

A soft, cold hand on Ford's chest jolted him awake. His eyes shot open. He chuckled as his pretty little redheaded nurse leaned over him. He cringed at the sharp pain in his side, taking deep breaths as he shifted his position without giving in to the urge to wrap his arms around his guts and never fucking move again.

"Sorry, sweetie." The nurse made a soft, crooning sound. "I didn't mean to wake you."

“It’s all right.” Damn, she probably thought he was pathetic. The painkillers kept him out of the fetal position, but she’d seen him curled up and trying not to shout when the doctor had checked him out. Time to redeem himself. He toughed out a weak grin for Nurse Aggie. “I like waking up to such a beautiful face.”

She blushed and ducked her head. “Oh, you are a smooth talker. You have a visitor. I told him to wait until you woke up. He’s been here for hours.”

A visitor? Ford swallowed hard. The men who’d come after him hadn’t wanted him dead—that he was still breathing proved it—but they might want to make sure he’d gotten the message. They weren’t his “dad’s” regulars, so they’d been a little . . . *overenthusiastic* about the job.

Kingsley hadn’t bothered to warn him personally. Since his mother’s death, the man he’d believed to be his father his whole life, the one who’d raised him, hadn’t spoken to him at all. Ford’s eyes burned as he recalled his mother’s last words. “Take care of each other.” Her stroke had come so suddenly he’d made it just in time to take her hand and watch her slip away.

The look Kingsley had given him then should have been warning enough. His *father* had held back for *her*. He had no reason to anymore.

“His name’s Cort. Is he a friend?” Aggie straightened, frowning. “I can call Security if he’s—”

“He’s my *best* friend.” Ford rested back on his pillow with a sigh of relief. “If he’s around, I won’t need security.”

Aggie inclined her head, her features tense with doubt. Then she spun on her heels and walked out.

The beeping on Ford’s heart monitor sped up a bit as Cort appeared in the doorway. Seeing the brutal, tough bastard made Ford want to sit up and do something stupid like ask for a hug. Damn it, he’d missed the man. He’d *needed* him. Cort had been like a big brother to him since he was sixteen. Gotten him out of all kinds of trouble in the almost ten years since. Watched his back even after Ford was big enough to watch his own.

Cort didn’t look like he was in the mood for a hug, though. He looked like he wanted to kill someone.

Ford chanced a smile, hoping it would get the man to relax a bit. “Hey, pal. Nice to see you.”

“You stupid bastard.” Cort shook his head and stormed across the room so quickly Ford shut his eyes and braced himself for the shaking he knew he deserved, but wasn’t sure he’d survive. Instead, Cort shocked him by squeezing his shoulder. Carefully. “You fucking scared me, kid. You knew something was gonna go down, but you were all cool on the phone last week. I get nothing but a ‘Might need your help, buddy?’”

“Mom died over a month ago. He didn’t say nothin’.” Ford couldn’t meet Cort’s eyes. But he could feel his friend’s level gaze on the side of his face. “I thought I could handle it.”

“Like I said. Stupid.” Cort shook his head, moving away to pull a chair up to the side of the bed. “You knew he was fucking ripping about you selling your shares of the team. And the goddamn

Forum. Who'd he send after you? And what did they ask for?" Cort's brow furrowed. "You've got nothing left."

"But my sister does. Her and her man own forty-nine percent of the team between them. Kingsley could use that."

"What *exactly* did they ask you to do?"

"See what I can get out of my sister. My dad thinks she'll give me her shares—and she might if I pushed. Tell her she can't handle it. I'd have considered it just to get him to back off, but . . . Silver's fragile. She's getting stronger, but who knows what the wrong trigger would do to her." Ford scraped his bottom lip with his teeth, staring at the ceiling. He hadn't seen his little sister much lately. His half sister, who'd once hated him and now invited him over for family dinners. To her daughter's baptism. For the first time, he'd felt like he had a real family. But he'd had to push her away after the first call from Kingsley's men. "I gotta say, he gave me more chances than most, even if he didn't give me a heads up. I got three . . . *messages*. Two over the phone. The third at the club . . ."

Bile filled his throat. His waitress, Angel, had been raped in the alley. She'd begged him not to call the police, but he'd called Laura, the cop he'd met at the BDSM club he'd started going to months ago. Laura had convinced Angel to go to the hospital. Managed to convince his waitress that she'd be safe.

"You better tell me everything, kid." Cort sat back, perfectly still as Ford gave him all the details of what had happened over the last few weeks. His eyes narrowed as Ford trailed off at explaining how the thugs had shown up at his door and forced their way inside. "Go on."

"What else is there to tell? They put me here." Ford held out his arms to indicate the hospital— instantly regretting it. Sharp pain rose over the cushion of drugs, causing his stomach to clench, which made him hunch over, gasping for air. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Too fucking bad. If they . . ." Cort's chair toppled over as he stood. He raked his fingers through his short, brown hair. "Damn it, Ford, I know how this works. I wanna kill them for what I can see. I'll kill 'em slow if they—"

"They didn't. They threatened to. Copped a feel while they did." Ford shuddered as his balls shrank at the recollection. A big body on him. Hands all over. He wanted to skin the men who'd done so much worse to Angel. "Kingsley would have been real specific about that shit. I might not be his *real* son, but that's how everyone sees me. It would look bad on him if someone made me their bitch."

"But they hurt your girl. She was under *your* protection, Ford."

"I know that."

"Do you? You've got no one to back you. This *can't* happen under your watch." Cort paced, shaking his head. "Your girls deserve better. And it makes you look weak."

"I'm out, Cort. I don't want to deal with Kingsley and his 'connections' anymore." Ford frowned, wincing at the tug on broken flesh held together with string. He had enough stitches in his face for

the scars to rival almost any of the hockey players on the team Kingsley wanted to control. He took a deep breath and met Cort's eyes. "I thought you wanted out too?"

Cort nodded slowly. "Yeah, I do. Did when I got free, but you still needed me."

Fuck. Ford thought about when Cort had gone to jail for two years. Not because of his job as an enforcer, but covering for Ford's brief stint as a car thief. Ford had wanted to turn himself in after Cort got caught cleaning up his mess, but Cort pulled the "you owe me" card. Of all the bullshit he'd had on Ford, he'd brought up the time they'd liked the same woman. Shared her. She'd chosen Ford, and he hadn't even been that into her. He was a stupid seventeen-year-old, and she'd been closer to Cort's twenty-six. Cort had stepped aside after warning Ford that she'd move on to the next "made man" who could get her out of her stripping gig. Said he'd let Ford make his own mistakes this time, but next time Ford would "fucking do what he was told."

At nineteen, Ford had still been dumb enough to think he could repay Cort by going straight—well, as straight as someone like him could be. He'd talked to Cort once a week when he'd gone to visit him in jail, taking all Cort's advice. He'd gotten his college degree in business. Shown Kingsley he'd be ready to take the reins when the old man stepped down, handle the legit shit *and* the family business. Drug smuggling and gambling just scratched the surface. What Kingsley was into made Ford's dealing pot and jacking cars nothing but child's play. But his father didn't trust him while he was playing at being a petty criminal.

While Cort was in jail, Ford had become the perfect son. He'd gotten along real well with Kingsley. Things were calm for a while. Cort got an early parole and had a stable job as Ford's bodyguard and bouncer at Ford's bar. Everything had been fine until Ford found out he wasn't Kingsley's son.

Ford dropped his gaze to the rumpled sheets covering his legs. His chest tightened. He mumbled his next words so low he wasn't sure Cort would be able to hear what he said. "I still owe you."

Cort barked out a laugh. "Fuck that! Kid, I *am* out. But that's because of you. You think I didn't know how much you looked up to me? A little punk still hanging on to his mom's apron strings while trying to be all badass. If you'd done time, you'd be dead. Or worse. Ruined. My older brother tried to go legit to show me better, but he couldn't. I came a lot closer. To show you."

"Yeah, I really fucked that up." Damn, he was tired. And fed up. Kingsley managed to destroy anything good he tried to do. Everything Cort had tried to accomplish. With Kingsley out of the picture, Ford could have his bar, his real family, and the girl he . . .

No point in thinking about her. She fucking hates you, man.

True, but Cort could have his garage. They could both have good lives.

But Kingsley wouldn't let that happen.

"Kid, you did something I never would have done. You brought the cops in for that girl. You're on your way to the straight and narrow. Legit." Cort turned his chair, straddling it, a big grin on his face. "Just what I wanted for you."

Great. So I get to walk away free and clear? Again? Ford stifled a cough with his hand, shaking his head. “What about you?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” Cort shrugged, his gaze slipping from Ford’s for the first time. “Might have a reason to stay clean anyway. And she’s a lot less trouble than you are.”

A woman? That Cort’s serious about? Ford smiled, biting back the pain that tore at his stitched-up cheeks. “What are you doing here then? Go get her!”

“You really are a fucking idiot. You think any woman can keep me from checking on you?” Cort stood again, shoving his hands into his jean pockets. “I broke into your place. Saw the blood and . . .” Cort tipped his head back, eyes shut. “Don’t ever do that to me again. I thought you were done for. Reggie wasn’t much help. He was ‘thinking you weren’t dead.’ And I’m thinking of beating him sober.”

Reggie. Ford laughed and it hurt. Bad. Reggie was a good bartender. A pothead, yeah, but they’d been friends when Ford was dealing, and Reggie was the only person who had stuck around when Ford wanted clear of that shit. He wasn’t sure Cort would get that. Or that he could explain how much the few friends he had left mattered. His eyelids were dragging. “Don’t. People love him. He always comes in fine. Never fucks with the cash like some of the girls. I think he went off the deep end when he found out I was messed up. I cleared some of his debts because he’s solid.”

“Not solid enough to keep things going while you’re laid out.”

“That’s why you’re here. I called you because I was gonna lay low for a bit.” Ford pressed his eyes shut tight, trying to push past the weight of the drugs urging him to let go. “I’m still a manager with the Cobras. Handle the paperwork Silver doesn’t have time for anymore, go to meetings, stuff like that. And I’ve got my bar. I need you to take over for me. I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Shut up.” Cort patted his arm. “Ford, I’ve got you. Get some rest, and I’ll handle anything you need me to. But get better quick. If I have to wear a suit for more than a month, I’ll lose it.”

“You won’t. Give me a week and I’ll be—”

“A week?” Aggie slipped into the room quietly, giving Cort an assessing look. “I apologize, but I couldn’t help overhearing that. There’s no way you’re getting out of here for at least two. There were complications in your surgery. That drip I keep refilling isn’t for show. Honey, your kidneys need time to heal. The infection alone almost did you in. From what I heard, you were lying on that floor for hours before—”

“Please give us a moment.” Cort growled, all the color leaving his face as he stared down at Ford. He waited for the nurse to step out before continuing. “You stay. You stay until you’re better. *I* deal with everything else. Got me?”

“Cort—”

“Say ‘Yes, Cort.’” Cort bent over him, a hard glint in his eyes, his voice a harsh whisper. “Say it, and I won’t kill anyone until you’re on your feet. I have a feeling you’ll want to lay those fuckers low yourself. I’ll sharpen the knife for you. They dared touch you? They *will* pay.”

“What about your girl, Cort?” Ford didn’t want to kill anyone. Not even the guys who had wanted to rip open his asshole. They were pathetic douchebags on a payroll. On the payroll of the man he’d called “Daddy” for most of his life. But he knew Cort wouldn’t let this go for him. For him, he’d dig them a grave near the ocean. Hopefully this chick meant enough for Cort to use his brain. “She the ‘conjugal visit’ type?”

“No. But I’ll steer clear of her if I have to.”

“You don’t have to.”

“We’ll see.” Cort sat back in the chair, like he was settling in for a while. “Get some sleep. I’m pretty sure you haven’t been doing so good knowing ‘Daddy’ might send some flowers. Or another fist to the gut.”

He hadn’t been, but he didn’t want Cort to feel like he had to stay. “That’s not how he works, Cort. He sent his message. I got it. And I’ve got time before he’ll expect an answer.”

“Yeah, I’ve got his answer.” Cort shocked Ford by grabbing his hand, squeezing hard before releasing it. That same hand had steadied Ford when he was young and got drunk, keeping him from walking into traffic. Or any kind of danger Ford couldn’t see coming. “He can go fuck himself. I know how you feel about your sister. When you wake up, we’ll talk some more about keeping someone at your door. And finding someone to keep an eye on Silver. Until then . . .” Cort dropped his boot on the table by the bed. “I’m staying.”

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