



JAMILA MIKHAIL

*Her name was revenge, and she would  
carry it out at all costs....*

# THE DISTANT FACTORY

# The Distant Factory

Copyright © 2011-2017 Jamila Mikhail

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

[www.jamilamikhail.com](http://www.jamilamikhail.com)

Visit my official website for more free stories you can download, links to all of my social media and online-only content as well as information, discount codes and special offers for my paid books. You can also sign up to receive email notifications of new released and other book news by following the link below. It's free and there's no obligation!

<https://books2read.com/r/B-A-UZCF-XIUP>

Although this file is free to download and enjoy I ask that it not be edited, altered or redistributed without permission. If you enjoyed this free ebook I kindly ask you to support my writing by buying one of my paid books.

# Chapter One

Morning sun rose just like it did every other day. Woke up in someone else's bed just like I did every other day. That morning it just happened to be in Ritchie's bed. Actually, it was Eddie's bed, but Ricardo was in it. I passed my fingers quickly through my hair, and then touched my face. It was still there, just like I remembered it. I had lived through yet another cold night without Jeff's warm body to snuggle against. I didn't remember Ricardo's snoring waking me up and irritating the life out of me. I must not have slept for long since nobody had woken me up. My head was not pounding either, surprisingly. I breathed in the cold morning air as my senses slowly became awake.

"Morning Drifter," Eddie's voice said from behind me.

"Morning Eddie," I replied in an absent-minded tone of voice as I sat up on the bed.

I had known Eddie DeSalvo most of my life, my street life at least. Since I was eleven years old, he had always been there in the shadows. He was quiet, reserved and always kept to himself behind those brown eyes and those 145 pounds of muscle. A twenty-two-year-old drifter from Buffalo, he was a lot like me. Except *I* was *the* Drifter. He was so different from me at the same time. He was a 5'10" merciless kill-for-hire hitman of Italian descent living in Yonkers, yet he was one of the nicest people I had ever known. I was nothing but Jeff's little sister, 5'3" and 89 pounds. Blue eyes just like him with formerly the same blonde hair until I dyed it black. I didn't want to think about him, *Jeffrey*.

Eddie had short dark hair under a forest green beanie. He rarely ever took it off, even when the weather was hot. He looked much older than he actually was with lines appearing on his dark skin and those bags under his eyes. He looked a thousand years old! I was beginning to look older too, it wasn't just Eddie. Things become quite different when you don't know whether or not you are going eat on any given day or find a decent place to sleep at night. Thankfully though, I wasn't on my own. At least most days they didn't let me be *alone*.

"Slept well?" Eddie asked me, yawning with his mouth wide open and tongue sticking out like a cat would.

"Not as well as him," I looked over at Ricardo.

"Sleeps all day and is up all night, that's just Ritchie," he added, chuckling.

Nobody ever called him Ritchie apart from me. He never let anyone call him Ritchie apart from me. Nobody apart from little Anastasia Sims. Even Jeff had to call him Richard since he didn't like Ricardo and couldn't stand Ritchie. He was another drifter but he wasn't like Eddie. There wasn't that kindness and warmth to him. I always asked myself why he didn't just stay in California. Maybe he wouldn't have been in the mess he was in if he had just stayed where he came from. I didn't like him very much, and I wasn't shy to let him know, but he was an essential part to the gang despite that I absolutely couldn't stand him. I understood that we needed him and most of all, that he needed us too.

I sighed and rubbed my tired, bloodshot eyes. I tried to carefully move over Ricardo so I wouldn't wake him because I knew he would be angry and get off the makeshift bed without making a sound but my effort miserably failed. I came crashing down onto Eddie's wooden floor, landing flat on my face and waking up the Californian beast. Eddie laughed uncontrollably, irritating me completely.

"*Qué?*" Ricardo asked, half-awake.

"Maybe if you moved your ass outta bed this wouldn't have happen!" I angrily snapped back.

"Excuse me, *Drifter* but this is a *single* bed. It's your own fault that you got in after me." he replied with his signature grin.

I looked over at Eddie.

"You actually brought her in," Eddie told him, "she was sound asleep in your arms."

"Well, if it isn't for lucky little Miss Sims to be escorted to bed!" Ricardo teased.

"You could've just left me there, I'm not your responsibility!" I snapped back at him in irritation.

I was old enough to take care of myself. I had just turned sixteen a little over a month ago on June 22nd. I didn't need anyone to watch over me anymore. I had been on my own since Jeff died almost three years ago anyway. Yeah, maybe Lennie took me in and the boys took care of me but I was still *by myself*. My mother and my brother dead, my father in federal prison, it was just *me* and no one else.

There would never be anybody else. Not ever. I was alone yet never alone. Surrounded yet so isolated. In truth, I loved to be alone but there came times when the loneliness just wouldn't leave me alone. Maybe it was just something in my blood that made me that way.

Through the small dusty window over the mattress sitting on top of industrial crates, the sun was rising. I knew the sun rose just before six every July morning but I never bothered to look at the old clock Eddie had on the wall. It's not like it even worked in the first place anyway. Time was just another inconvenient of life in my opinion. The orange light was starting to illuminate parts of the room. Eddie never cleaned his room. It wasn't exactly dirty but it wasn't particularly clean either. Old clothes were scattered all over the floor along with dust accumulating everywhere. His room without any lights, apart from the natural sunlight, was barely the size of a one-man jail cell. An old wooden desk sat lonely at the end of the room, with the bed on a stack of old boxes and various tools used in break-ins and robberies hanging on the opposite wall.

Nobody bothered us in there. The three story building once belonged to a wealthy family in the late 1800s but the neighborhood had since decayed and consisted of mostly abandoned buildings since then, slowly crumbling apart from the inside out. Eddie's *room* was formerly some sort of closet, but it was the only livable room in the entire building. The ceiling didn't leak, and the floor boards weren't missing. Yeah there were other buildings, but it was as good as we could get. Welcome to the street life, in one of the apparent best countries in the world, one in which the government turns a blind eye to you and all your needs. At least that's what it was like for me. And what are you supposed to do about it? At least I had Eddie to count on.

With his short brown hair and no distinguishable facial features, Eddie could be anybody else after a robbery. It was still hard to believe even after five years that a young man with such perfect white teeth could be one of the lead criminals in the whole gang. I didn't know much about him, nobody did, but I was still closer to him than any of the other guys. Eddie didn't present himself as a criminal, and avoided going on crime sprees when I was around. But I had learned the hard way that a life like the one we were all living on the street was a tough one when I witnessed Jeff and Nick's first murder, nearly five years ago.

Cobalt was a village of a few hundred people tucked away in an isolated area behind Dobbs Ferry. It wasn't even on the map, because nobody had developed the area after the great depression. Everything closed down and nobody bothered to reopen anything. Things were always quiet up there, with most people only owning cottages or seasonal properties on the side of the river, far away from any civilization that once existed there. Cobalt-On-The-Lake was a different story though. Nobody lived there but most of the land was owned by wine companies. Fields of all sorts of grapes stretched as far as the eye could see. The boys and I would often sneak into the fields and devour the Chardonnay grapes, they were my favorite.

On the outskirts of Cobalt stood an old factory of some sort. It was obviously abandoned because in the five years that I had been hanging around in the yard, there had never been any sort of activity at the plant. The road to it was blocked decades ago when it closed down, and no one ventured there. Except us of course. I only been inside once, and I swore I never, ever, wanted to return. The property was huge back at the factory. Securely hidden behind a conservation area of forest, the industrial land stretched almost as far as the eye could see, kinda like the vineyards. The ground only consisted of sand and gravel, with some rocks between the rails for the trains that once passed through. The railroad tracks were everywhere in the yard, they all led to the hangars and garages behind the factory. Storage containers lied here and there, old and rusty like the factory itself. A small metal building, similar to a shed but much bigger, was where the gang hung out.

Neither one of us was ever able to break open the large steel doors on the left side. Nobody knew what was inside. Nobody cared. We only hung out there because we could be in the shade during periods of scorching heat in the afternoon while not having to be stuck indoors. And we loved to sit on the steel boxes, crates and containers on the side of the building. We could watch every sunset from there, at the same time we could tilt our heads back and rest them against the hard and uneven steel rusted away by years of oxidation. That was as comfortable as we could get. We could sit and watch the waters nearby, or turn around and look at the sun illuminate the various shades of rust on the old factory. It was all the way back there in the distance, quite a ways to walk from where we hung out, but it always loomed over there with its multiple structures and three huge towers that once polluted the air with toxic black smoke and dumped the rest of the waste into the river.

The sun illuminated my colorless face. My skin was nothing but white. White like a dead person's skin. Colorless, emotionless, lifeless. Only I wasn't dead, I wasn't like Jeff. I looked at my skinny white fingers. Only skin and bones. If my skin had been darker, I might have looked like Ricardo. He was 6'2" and only 146 pounds. He was just skin and bones too. We also had the same shoulder-length black hair. His was real, but mine was dyed. Mine was cut in a bob while his was just outrageously messy. His wide jaw and small dark brown eyes made him very handsome despite being so thin. My favorite thing about the twenty-four-year-old drifter from San Francisco was by far his narrow cheekbones and dark Hispanic skin. Devilishly handsome, if only his personality was the same.

I suddenly thought of Jeffrey. His personality matched his looks. I immediately shrugged off the thought of my brother. I didn't want to think about him. I sighed again and rubbed my cheek, where it had just kissed the floor. Ricardo got up after me and stretched his long skinny legs before he walked out of the room with Eddie and I. We passed through the narrow hallway, being very, very careful not to fall through the missing floor boards, and slowly made our way down the cheap metal staircase spiraling down to the main floor. I imagined that once upon a time the place had been beautiful, fancy and expensive, but that beauty had long since faded away. Ricardo pushed open the hefty steel door since it was too heavy for me, and Eddie trailed too far behind us. Ricardo just couldn't wait for him, he plowed through the doorway and landed all of us outside on the sidewalk.

The chilly early morning air was fresh and pure. It wasn't polluted, not yet. I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the most fresh air they could possibly hold. I felt better almost instantly. Most of my life was spent outside, and the air in confined spaces made me sick. Especially with Ritchie around. He probably washed once a month or once every few weeks because he didn't smell like flowers. The stench of sweat and filth was evident as soon as you passed near him and his breath was no better. With every breath he took, disgust swept over me. The streets of eastern Yonkers were quiet, it was just passed six in the morning. There would soon be crowded though, so we hopped into the little red Acura Ricardo had stolen a few days prior. We needed to get down to Dobbs Ferry and meet the others before we ran into more trouble.

"Did Byron tell us to pick him up?" Ricardo asked speeding down the street, "I don't remember if he did or not."

"Yeah he did," I replied, still half-sleeping in the passenger's seat, looking at the buildings fly by.

I was able to relax and go into an almost dream-like state. I closed my eyes, still conscious of the speeding car I was riding in, and thought back to when times weren't so miserable. Back to when New York wasn't in a recession. Times were so grim and the evidence was present on everyone's faces. My eyes only opened when the vehicle came to a screeching halt. I peered out the window and saw Byron waiting on the side of the street. He just stood there with his army green satchel swung over his shoulder. He wore the same old jean jacket that was too small for him with a plain white shirt sticking out under it. He always wore a beautiful smile on his face no matter the situation. And he always tried to look good despite the situation. Out of us all, only Byron looked completely normal, and deep inside I knew he was. He hopped into the backseat with Eddie and I and Ricardo soon sped away towards Dobbs Ferry. Things were becoming more and more hectic in the streets as the city slowly started to wake up.

"Anybody else?" Ricardo asked, tired.

"Nope," I replied, not wanting to hear his voice.

Eddie and Byron conversed a little bit in the backseat while I returned to my dream-like state as Ricardo kept on speeding down the streets. Standing at only 5'9" Byron wasn't much taller than I was. I didn't have to break my neck when I looked into his deep green eyes. His black hair was combed back out of his face, revealing his bushy eyebrows. I especially liked it when he held me in his arms compared to any of the other guys in the gang. He somewhat reminded me of my brother. At 150 pounds, Byron weighted the most and every time I wrapped my arms around him in a hug, I realized how much I really missed being held by Jeff. I missed taking someone into an embrace and actually feeling something in between the bones and the skin.

Byron and I were never really close but he was so easy to get along with. We both shared a special, unbreakable bond with each other. His presence was always warm and friendly, his smile always kind and his dark green eyes always loving. He had just turned eighteen but didn't look a day older than fifteen. His face still bore the same features it did when I first saw him and brought him to Lennie's apartment with the rest of the gang. His chubby cheeks and little lips made him look like a teddy bear



you could just squeeze and never let go of. His features remained innocent despite the corruption and the violence. Even after all those years, I still felt so attached to him, yet I couldn't bring myself to be *close* to him. The bittersweet memories always got in the way.

# Chapter Two

I held on to Jeffrey's hand as hard as I could out of paranoia that if I didn't he'd lose his grip and let me go. I knew he wouldn't let anything happen to me but I was still fearful. My mother had always told me to stay out of dark alleys behind buildings before she died, and that was exactly where Jeff was taking me. I was still so devastated by mom's death and so was Jeffrey but he carried on. I hadn't seen my brother Jeff in over nine years, prior to a few months ago when he picked me up from the airport. I was two when dad took him to live in Harlem. I didn't remember much about neither one of them. I did remember my mother saying that my father was a bad person though. She fought hard to keep Jeff but custody was awarded to my so-called daddy. While on her death bed, my mother begged Jeffrey to take good care of me, and to never let anything happen to me no matter what. He vowed to give his life for me if it ever got to that. I never doubted his words because he became my hero as soon as I moved in with him.

The alleys were all pitch black. No matter where I looked, there was only darkness, and more darkness. There were no streetlights, and the clouds obstructed the moon. Jeffrey begged me to stay quiet even if I was scared. I wanted to cry but I had promised him that I wouldn't make a sound. Ricardo and Nick took the lead while Eddie, Robby and Fred were just a few steps behind us. I knew all of them pretty well after three months of living in Harlem and constantly being under one of them's supervision. Jeffrey had told me that they did bad things because they had no choice, and to never end up like them no matter what. He also promised me that no matter what happened, they would always take care of me. In exchange I promised him to always be good and to finish school and to make a good life for myself.

"Why did you make me bring my sister?" Jeff asked, with an unusual sharp edge in his voice.

"There's nobody to babysit her!" Nick snapped back, "this one isn't as simple as the rest of them. And you can't leave her in Eddie's shit hole all by herself!"

I had no idea what they were talking about but in that instant I remembered my mother telling me that only bad things happened in dark back alleys. As my nails started digging into Jeff's skin, he picked me

up and held me in his arms the rest of the way. I pressed my face onto his chest and tightly wrapped my arms around his shoulders. *Jeff will protect me*, I thought to myself. I knew he would, he had to.

"It's here!" Eddie called out from behind.

"Okay, Jeff, you watch out for jackass punks going around and Rob you survey the street for any vehicles." Nick ordered, "let's do this!"

Jeffrey put me down on a dumpster and told me not to worry. I pleaded for him not to go too far. He reassured me that he'd only survey two small alleys perpendicular to this one and he would always be within my reach if I needed him. His soft smile reassured me. I loved him, my brother Jeff. His blue eyes were just like mine and so was his blond hair hanging over his forehead on one side. Standing at 6'1" and 164 pounds, he was a giant for me. A friendly giant that I loved so much. I practically worshipped him. He was my hero. My provider. My protector. My big brother.

I sat on the dumpster all by myself, my hands huddled under my shirt for warmth. The breeze was cold and so was the metal from the dumpster. My eyes slowly got accustomed to the darkness and I could see a big building made out of large red bricks in front of me. Some of the boys entered through a back window but I couldn't see everything clearly. I was so scared, but as the minutes passed, I became more relaxed. I assumed whatever the boys were doing inside was going well because there no sound apart from the humming of car engines in the distances and Jeffrey's soft footsteps pacing back and forth. I began feeling calmer, and more at ease with the surrounding darkness. I no longer feared it, despite that I couldn't see much. The streetlights were far away and none of the nearby buildings were lit up. The garbage smelled bad but the smell didn't bother me. I was beginning to enjoy the cool evening air.

I had just started sixth grade in Harlem and didn't know much about the nightlife. Jeffrey never let the gang members talk about their illicit activities near me. And instead of participating, Jeff stayed with me. If he couldn't stay, he made Eddie watch me until he returned. He always made sure I was safe and in good hands. I trusted him and the other boys completely. One of them brought me to school every morning and brought me back to Jeff every night. I always had lunch money and clean clothes to wear. Wherever they took me, I never doubted them or their intentions. It was probably in part because I couldn't possibly have imagined what they were doing while I wasn't looking. To me they were

soldiers. They protected me with their lives and provided for me, be it in ways that I couldn't comprehend.

"Crap!" Nick came out of the building screaming just as shots were fired. "Let's get outta here!"

Nicholas had his hand placed over the lower part of his stomach in an awkward way, as if applying pressure to an open wound. Jeffrey didn't even have time to come get me, I was already running for my life. Multiple running footsteps trailed right behind me but I just wanted to *get out of there alive* despite that deep down I knew the soldiers wouldn't let anything bad happen to me. I then understood what Nick meant when he said that *this one wasn't as simple*. It wasn't as simple and it hadn't gone well either. And the thing was that I was just another headache on top of everything else that dark and frightening night.

"The kids got out!" Ricardo shouted from somewhere behind me, "I saw them running around here somewhere!"

And the footsteps ran in another direction. I kept on running but Jeffrey's strong hands grabbed me and scooped me up into his arms. He ran as fast as he could to catch up with the other boys who had surrounded their target. He abruptly came to a halt and placed me down near a concrete brick wall, away from all the commotion. Despite the overwhelming fright that took over my body, I leaned over and peered at what the boys were doing on the other side of the old building. Ricardo was shining a flashlight into the faces of two young boys who were just a little older than I was. The alley was at a dead end apart from a ladder that lead up the roof of a building. I didn't want to look at what was happening but I couldn't take my eyes off the pistol Ricardo had in his hand. The silver handgun was pointed straight at the two boys. I could see Jeffrey and Robby shouting something at them but their voices were barely audible in my moment of terror. All of the noise and the screaming was just a dissonant hum in the back of my mind. It was almost like a movie was playing in my mind except that a freight train was running through my thoughts and about to come crashing down off the tracks.

The tallest boy suddenly jumped up onto the ladder and started climbing. His light green shirt was draped in sweat as he climbed frantically for his life. I saw Ricardo's finger squeeze the trigger of the

handgun at the same time Eddie ran towards me, taking off his jacket to cover my eyes. But he was too late. I screamed and ran towards the boys just as the gun fired, killing the boy who tried getting away by climbing up the ladder. His limp body crashed to the ground and blood splattered everywhere. His green shirt turned to crimson in the deep of the night. The gunshot was so loud that in the moment I thought the whole world was crashing down around me.

"Don't kill him!" I screamed in a pleading voice, "please don't hurt him!"

"Goddamn kid!" Ricardo grunted.

"Please don't hurt him!" I kept pleading, crying.

The surviving boy placed his hands meekly on my shoulder and begged for his life as tears started coming down his cheeks too. His face and shirt were covered in the other boy's blood. I pleaded until Jeffrey and Rob came over to the boy and I. I kept on pleading the gang not to kill the boy while Jeffrey took me in his arms and carried me away. Rob tied up the boy and put his shirt over his face so he couldn't see anything and so his cries for help would be distorted. The gang made fun of him because he wet himself during the whole ordeal and was shaking uncontrollably as he asked for his mother. Jeffrey held me in his arms while Eddie restrained the other boy in the backseat during the ride back to Lennie's loft in Dobbs Ferry. The ride didn't take long but it felt like an eternity for an eleven-year-old girl who had just witnessed a murder. I held onto the boy's arm the whole time, still pleading for him to live. Jeff kept trying to reassure me that he would live but for the first time, I didn't believe him. I had found out what his gang was up to when they were out. I really felt as if my whole world had just crumbled from under my feet.

*Please don't kill him.*

Inside Lennie's dirty little loft near the water, the boy was untied. He didn't have anywhere to run even if he tried. His white shirt was stained red and his cheeks glittered with fresh tears. I ran over to him and hugged him. I held him as tightly as I could before Lennie's old rusty voice interrupted the commotion going on.

"What the heck have you guys done?" He asked, obviously moved by the display.

"Well—" Nick began.

"Let me explain," Jeff cut him off, "we were conducting a break-in on this family whom we knew had money in the neighborhood. Nobody was supposed to be home but the wife, the kid and that one were there too," he said pointing to the boy, "she put up one hell of a fight for a little lady and wounded Nick before Richard shot her but the punks saw everything and got away."

"And I shot the little snot but the kid ran to the other boy before I could execute him," Ricardo added.

"Shouldn't've brought the kid," Nick whispered to himself.

"Please don't kill him," I whispered pleadingly.

Lennie opened the light to his dirty loft apartment and made us sit down on old wooden chairs around a table missing a leg. I had been to Lennie's old loft many times before but it never seemed to be so dirty and broken. There was barely any plaster left on the walls and many of the floorboards were missing. He was basically tearing the place down from the inside out. That didn't really bother me because the place was wide, open, and the bedrooms were big. I liked it and Lennie's food was good. Most of all there was electricity and running water, unlike Eddie's place. Leonard Crunch was a fifty-eight-year-old Dobbs Ferry native who lived alone in his loft slowly falling apart. He was 5'7" and 134 pounds with long brown hair despite his old age and big round brown eyes. He was a like father to the whole gang, supplying us all with most of the money and other necessities. I thought it was funny that his last name was Crunch and so I always called him Cap'n Crunch, much to his amusement as well as mine.

Cap'n Crunch was the definition of a hippie with his bushy beard that was beginning to turn grey. His clothes were disheveled just like his appearance was and basically his house too. He lived off the land, with a garden in his backyard and some solar panels around the property, he almost lived there for free. All he paid for was the rent. I didn't know how he got all his money but he did, and he took care of us. To me that's what mattered the most.

"What's your name kid?" Lennie asked the boy in a friendly voice.

"Byron Davis-Harris," he replied blankly.

"Oh! You're the preacher's son up in SoHo!" Lennie exclaimed.

"You know him?!" Robby asked in disbelief.

"My daughter went to school with his uncle," Lennie added nonchalantly.

"The parish is now in Bronx, we had to move," Byron added quietly.

Byron openly discussed anything we asked him without hesitation. After question period was over, Lennie let him use the shower and gave him some new clothes. I never let him out of my sight. I was afraid Richard or Nick would kill him if I did. It was hard to believe that big bad Nick Fleming would get stabbed by a little woman. The 5'11" and 147 pound second in command to Richard from Houston, Texas would have been able to put up a much bigger fight if Ricardo hadn't intervened. His piercing blue eyes and short dark brown hair gave an eerie chill to him, the one of a murderer. His small round face and his snow white skin made his big eyes stand out. His thin lips nearly disappeared in his face once those eyes got a hold of your stare. He always gave me the creeps, and frankly I think he gave everyone who encountered him the creeps. You didn't mess with the guy, you just didn't.

That night I begged to sleep with Byron and Jeff. I always slept with Jeff and occasionally I slept with Ricardo unless both of them were out I stayed with Eddie or Lennie. I could sleep in a large bed at Lennie's, unlike at the other places I had to stay. That night I had my face pressed to Jeffrey's back as it always was and had Byron safely against the wall behind me. Not Richard nor Nick could get to him there. Jeff seemed to be exceptionally warm that night, or maybe it was just because I was scared, but I couldn't let him go. Byron held me the same way in complete horror. He cried most of the night fearing what I was fearing, but nobody laid a hand on him. I'm sure they thought of him as a liability for a long time, but nobody ever touched him to harm him.

The following day, the soldiers brought Byron up to the factory and Ricardo taught both of us how to shoot a gun. I had only been to the factory once before and I found the big building to be eerie somehow. Lennie came with us and had a word with the gang and I before any decisions were made to decide where we would go from that point on. Lennie put gang life on the streets of New York into a whole new perspective for the guys since they had Byron and I involved. The boys agreed to no longer keep me in the dark about what was going on but also agreed that I was too young to participate. But I protested until they agreed to bring me along to every other robbery and break-in. The look on Jeff's face indicated profound disapproval but Nick reminded him what I had already witnessed a murder and that I was mature enough to understand the things going on around me. They all made sure to

explain to me that they had no choice to do what they did. They were on their own, and they somehow had to survive. Being so young, I believed them. I simply thought that that's just how it was and everybody else was just like us. Plain and simple.

Back at the factory shooting a gun wasn't hard at all. We shot at an old container on the factory's lot. My brother watched us from a distance, but nobody was around our shooting range. It was the perfect opportunity for me to talk to Byron alone.

"Hold on are you Byron?" I asked him as I reloaded my gun.

"I'm thirteen," he replied, "and you?"

"Eleven."

"You're so young! And you're part of this gang?"

"My brother Jeff is, and I am too now I guess."

I looked at him for a moment and he showed me his beautiful smile for the first time. In that precise moment I knew an unbreakable bond had formed between us. I was left in awe at the angel looking back at me. We were both so young, but already had lived through some life-changing experiences that would alter our destiny forever.

"And by the way," he continued, "thank you for saving my life. I never got to properly thank you for that, but I will somehow."

"You don't need to Byron," I replied in a sympathetic voice, "you don't deserve to die. You didn't do anything wrong."

He looked down and sighed.

"I couldn't live with myself if I had let them shoot you like they did to your friend." I continued in a soft whisper.

"That wasn't your fault."

"But it is my fault that you're here."



Byron could never go home, but at least he was out of harm's way as long as he stuck with the gang. I had practically given him a death sentence by letting him live, but I couldn't've lived with myself if I had let him die like he was originally supposed to. Part of me knew he wanted desperately to return to his family but another part of me knew he would be just fine living the street life with the rest of us.

## Chapter Three

I had since learned otherwise. You *always* have a choice, but are you willing to pursue it? Are you willing to die trying? Or do you want to spend the rest of your life wondering what if? But it was too late. Too late to contemplate otherwise, too late to try to make things right because some things simply cannot be made right. There might be a time for everything but sometimes it's the timing that isn't right. And in times of need what do you do? You do what you can and screw the rest. Welcome to the story of my life.

"Whadaya say Drift?" Eddie asked me, "Are you up to robbing a corner store with me today? We need some cash."

"Sure," I blandly replied, "whatever man."

*And what happened to people giving you exorbitant amounts of money so you can "take care" of things?*

Nobody spoke a word after that. Nobody could speak a word. Nothing new for us. Eddie, in his constant pine green coveralls sat silently looking outside the window while I held on to Byron's arm, just like I did the first time I laid eyes on him, the frightened thirteen-year-old boy from the alley. My mind had never really left that place, not even after all these years of sharing my existence with Byron. When it came to him our guilt-ridden consciences all fell silent. I had given an innocent boy a death sentence by letting him live, and I had given myself one even worse by living the life. What is the justice in trying to be just? Sometimes I found myself wondering if it simply would have been easier if I had let him be killed and lived with regret for my whole life. I couldn't understand the full scope of the politics of justice in my life, but I imagined that you just get lucky sometimes.

I laid my head on Byron's shoulder as he stared out the window just like Eddie did. Byron's parents had no body to bury, no son to mourn. They didn't even know if he was alive or dead. I knew Jeff was with God, out of this miserable life, but Byron's parents didn't have that sense of comfort. I could see Ricardo's eyes as deep as black holes staring right at me in the rearview mirror. Still wearing his torn jeans and his favorite Kenny Rogers shirt, he drove right through the city, still remaining silent but

always peering back in my direction. He knew too well that I blamed him. Sometimes I caught myself wondering if that guy could feel guilt, or if I could even feel it myself or if making myself believe that I had a guilty conscience made me feel better about everything. Moot point anyway, nothing changes anything.

Ricardo pulled into Dobbs without incident and drove to Lennie's. Once there, he hid the car in the nearby bush as we made the rest of the way to the factory on foot. As usual. Ricardo's presence was again uneasy. Nothing was easy for me. Not anymore. Not a single minute went by that I didn't want to scream and shout and rip apart my entire being from the inside out. Go back to where I came from. Dust to dust. I sighed and walked awkwardly with my head down all the way to the factory a few miles away. Byron walked faithfully by my side while Ricardo took the lead and Eddie trailed behind us as usual. Always as usual.

Surprisingly Robby was there waiting for us. Rob. Robin. Soon-to-be Mr. and Mrs. Remington. Soon-to-be something fancy. Soon-to-be somebody. The twenty-six-year-old from Madison, Wisconsin came to Brooklyn to study and get a university degree in God knows what a few years back. At 5'10" and 141 pounds he was the perfect candidate to *break* the law. Oval brown eyes and short brown hair, fluent French speaker, lady charmer. I didn't even know his fiancé's name. If she had one at all. Rob and Ricardo were a lot alike apart from their skin color. Not much was known about Rob, but he had money, and he had brains. He didn't look like a criminal. He didn't look like us. And unlike us, he could get away with robberies in broad daylight. Sweet little Robby. If there was something about life that I couldn't understand, it was guys like him. When you have money, power and brains, why do you even bother to straddle the line of the criminal life? But then again life was never fair, and there were only a few people that I hated more than Robin Remington. Jerk.

He was just standing there, leaning against the metal building. It was a little hard not to stare. Only true crooks wear fancy suits. Dark brown *suit*ed him well. Sitting next to him on a crate, little Shany who was just a little taller than I was. Standing at only 5'5" and 123 pounds, long blond hair, blue eyes, nineteen years old, she could've been my sister. Her skin didn't wear the scars and her soul didn't carry the burden, though. Shannon Poirier was my favorite little French girl. I addressed her in broken street French, but she wasn't interested. Instead she just shot a look at Robby and greeted the rest of us. Rob

didn't dare open his mouth. Such smalltalk didn't do with him. Egoist and always on top of his game, you needed more than that to have a conversation with the bear. It wasn't like I was stupid. Yes, I had dropped out of school in the ninth grade, but I fluently spoke two languages and managed to survive on my own despite that. I had adjusted to the street life well, for a lack of anything better to say.

"I can't stay for long," Rob finally spoke, "only until noon."

"Don't worry about it Rob," Ricardo replied, "it's only just passed six so we have plenty of time."

"I need to get my butt back in gear if I want to graduate. Things aren't going to well with my classes."

"Can't you just, take them online or something?"

Rob pondered the idea without speaking. Egoist. Yeah, maybe I did like him. I liked Rob. But I didn't like Rob's personality. I never really liked Shannon either. Another one from Brooklyn fumbling down into a pit of darkness called street life. No matter how many times I wanted to shake her and scream to her face telling to smarten the hell up and to get a higher education for herself, I never had the courage to do it. Because I still had the chance too. I had the chance but did I have the choice? Did I maybe *want* to rot in hell for the rest of my life? Maybe there was once upon a time a hope for my, a faint *chance* for me out there, but I made the *choice* to rob a corner store that day instead of getting down on my knees and lifting my arms up towards heaven.

And so I sat down on some industrial metal vat and let my head pound against the metal building behind. Good old metal building. I wish I knew what was inside of you. What if I was someone else? What if I was anybody else? I closed my eyes and sighed loudly, making sure everyone on the lot heard it. Who was I to take the blame? Byron sat next to me as usual and Ricardo awkwardly sat on the opposite side next to me as well, like he usually did after Jeffrey died. After Jeffrey was, murdered. Sun was rising, shined on my face. I tilted my head and it warm my skin. Sun heads west and comes from east. It never goes north, it never comes to me. It had never occurred to me that I could have gotten myself a better life, because anything more than the current moment sounded so surreal, so superficial. So far away, somewhere never to be attained. Search for the answers I knew all along, I was never going to get out alive.

He was different, Ricardo, since then. I guess maybe it was partly my fault too. I always held him accountable. I needed someone to blame. I needed someplace to run away. Balance. Solace. Two things I desperately needed. Two things nobody had provided. Not since Jeffrey died. There's nothing left to lose, the inner war never ends. No more and no less, I couldn't forget but I couldn't bear to face the truth either. There were never any secrets between this gang, what was yours was mine and what was mine was yours. Down to the most intimate of details, but I could never manage to speak to anyone about Jeffrey. Nobody dared to speak his name. And then there was Rob, *secret* was his middle name. My hands shook and my bones trembled. Why? I guess they had never really stopped. The factory. The factory. Oh, the factory. *It's a hard life, hard life to live*. I couldn't remember his last words. Did I want to? If only things hadn't always been so blur and grainy. There wasn't a single day that went by where I didn't think of Jeffrey. Everything reminded me of him. Almost three years to the day, the memories didn't fade away. The resentment I felt, and the guilt, always asking myself why.

*Why Jeffrey? Why did it have to be him and not me?*

"So, how much money do we have left?" Shany asked in her little French accent, interrupting my crazy train of unsolicited thoughts.

"Enough for the weekend, but we might as well get some more now." Ritchie replied. "Are you in Rob? Ana and Eddie are already in for today."

"Tomorrow night, okay?" he proposed.

And so it was. Tomorrow night. Saturday night. Despite the harsh economic times people were always out on Saturday nights. It would be too easy to break in, ransack and leave. Perfect. In the corner of my eye I swore I caught Rob staring in my direction but did nothing about it. Did nothing but dismiss it. Rob was a master thief, already having killed multiple people in the line of *duty* he was also a master murderer. Especially good at covering up the tracks. The perfect soldier.

"Why don't we just pick up one of them hookers, steal her money and deposit her back on the street?" I proposed, "It'll be quick, painless for everyone and I mean, seriously, they make thousands every day."

Nobody replied, so I continued.

"Nobody cares about them, at least I don't."

Byron shot a sympathetic look at me. The kid had some insane ideology that I was depressed but the truth was that it was nothing but apathy. Apathy for everything around me, especially the hookers on the streets of New York.

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe they are just like us?" Byron spoke softly to me.

"Say that again?" I wasn't following.

"Hookers."

"And what about them?"

"Did it ever cross your mind that maybe they sell their bodies to make it by? Just to survive one more day? Like we have to steal in order to live through one more night?"

"What are you getting at by telling me this?"

"That maybe they put their lives on the line and worked just as hard as we do to get that money."

"Nobody said you needed to participate good Christian boy."

Byron's eyes were full of sympathy but I had none. *I need to live. I need to survive. I need to make it through yet another night just as much as they did.*

"You know that I do this because I love you Drift," Byron's gentle voice was only audible to me.

"And how the hell does you preaching about how Jesus is the savior and all that crap and turning your back around and robbing people at gunpoint make you the person to look over me?" I angrily snapped back at him who was taken aback by my outburst. "There is no love in crime and murder Byron, none!"

"You don't understand!"

"What is there to understand Byron? If you're such a man of God then why don't you turn yourself into the police and make sure all of our sorry asses get the life sentences we so justly deserve?"

"It's because *I love you* Ana! I am sacrificing myself, my life and my convictions so you can still have a chance at life. I know I am living in sin, we all are, but you still have a chance and I want to give it to you!"

"I have a *choice* Byron, and it's a choice I made a long time ago."

I had lost faith in humanity a long time ago. Or maybe it wasn't so long ago? Jeff was human, and Byron was human, but apart from them I could only see monstrous shadows on metal walls. Eddie appeared to be decent, but none of us really knew him that well. And looks are very deceiving. Ricardo was a cold-hearted son of a bitch and so was Rob. Nick wasn't too different apart that he was a little more easygoing than the rest of us. Shannon, well, she just blended in... like grains of sand on the beach, they are all the same... just a grain of sand on the beach. Another drop of water in an endless sea. None of them really matter in the scope of all of them but it's each individual molecule steaming from them all that make them *all*.

As I pondered my solitude and dark brown eyes faced me from each direction, Fred and Ebony arrived to break the cycle. Ebony's company didn't really bother me, but I hated Fred. Always did and probably always will. He was too much like Rob, minus the egoist trait. Little Ebony – or not-so-little Ebony – wasn't such a bad person. The 5'8" green-eyed eighteen-year-old from Layton, Utah had only been with us for a year. At 130 pounds with shoulder-length caramel brown hair, she could be a successful businesswoman. We were pressuring her to attend college in the fall but she was unsure of what she wanted to be. So we let her be. As for Freddy Babineaux, the twenty-two-year-old Yonkers resident reminded me a little too much of Rob. At 5'10" and 145 pounds with blue eyes and medium black hair, he could've had it all. But oh no, had to get into all of this crap to *protect* his poor little sister. *Go to hell*.

"What's hanging?" Fred asked as he sat down with us.

"A noose?" I snapped back.

Jerk.

"C'mon soldier! We're all supposed to be brothers and sisters here!" Fred rambled on trying to make conversation with someone, anyone.

"I am not your *sister* and you can go screw yourself!" I snapped back again.

"You moody little snot!" Nick grunted.

For a fraction of a second I thought of getting up and slugging him in the face but I wasn't in the mood for a brawl. I was hungry and I wanted food more than a fight.

"We're gonna head out to find some money tomorrow night, and might as well find some tonight too," Ricardo told him, "as for today, we'll probably just screw around and sleep."

"Why can't we just sleep at *normal* hours like *normal* people do?" I interrogated.

"Do we look like *normal* people to you Anastasia?" Ritchie snapped back.

"Maybe you're not but—" I continued before being interrupted.

"Okay guys," Rob jumped in, "let's just get this over with and so something while we're all here."

It only took a few minutes for Deanna Jane to arrive on her electric bike. Seriously, electric bikes? Defeats the damn purpose. The nineteen year old 5'4" and 119 pound African-American girl from Honolulu was Nick's sugar baby. The boys liked her enough to bring her in. She looked relatively normal, and maybe that's why they brought her in. The long-time Harlem resident had beautiful long black hair put into braids that were probably Nick's favorite feature on his mistress. She was beautiful, she could have been a diva. And she was another one who made the choice to live a life not meant for her for some momentary gain, yet it was the only one she really could look forward to. Maybe once upon a time I enjoyed being a soldier but that enjoyment was no longer. Not like we were ever actual soldiers to begin with.

I sighed as I got up and walked around the lot, following the rails, until I reached the area where multiple storage containers were lined up. The vaults of various kinds were scattered here and there all over the property, like they had just fallen from the sky. An old truck was even on top of one of the containers. A rusty green – probably a Ford – from the 50s just sat on top of a container. It had been there since we hung out in the area, and nobody really knew how it got up there but it was probably the only vehicle left on the lot. At least I had never seen another one, apart from the few abandoned train cars here and there on the trails but there were mostly useless without a locomotive and they were all nicely latched up so we couldn't break into them.

"I wonder how the truck got all the way up there on top of the container," I whispered to myself.



I pressed my back against a big orange container and let myself slide to the ground. I grabbed some dirt and let it slip through my fingers. That day was coming too soon for me. I sighed again as I saw Rob approaching, walking by himself. What the hell did he want? I didn't owe him anything. Don't think I ever did. Then, behind him in the distance, I saw Eddie. Also walking by himself in my direction. Rob was over to the container in no time. He leaned against the container, supporting himself with one hand against it. He wore some black pants and a simple brown dressy shirt like he did most of the time. His small, circular face clean-shaven. His hair combed back neatly, looking like a lawyer.

"You know," he began, "sometimes I wonder if you're related to someone like Adolf Hitler or—"

"Am not!" I angrily snapped back, "but sometimes I wish I was just so I could go on a rampage and feel no mercy!"

"Hey! Calm yo tits Drift! You know it's just a joke! It doesn't mean anything!"

"Did you come all the way here just to annoy me about mass murderers and serial killers? Oh, I forgot, you're one too."

"Don't get all revved up there, Jeff killed a lot of people in the line of duty too."

*In the line of duty.*

"You open your mouth again and speak another word of Jeff," I whispered through my tightly clenched teeth, "I swear I'm gonna break it."

"Can't you have a little fun sometimes girl?" His voice was sympathetic.

"Apparently not," I whispered, looking away.

"You need to take it easy sometimes kid! We are soldiers!"

"You and your stupid Nazi Aryan Brotherhood gang ideologies, I am not part of it! I'm not racist. Byron, my only friend in life is of ethnic Jewish heritage."

"You say you aren't but I bet you enjoy it just as much as we do!"

I slugged him in the face. Matter settled. Eddie arrived before any other punches could be handed out.

"You guys okay?" Eddie asked.

I didn't speak.

"Why don't you ask Anastasia that question?" Rob proposed.

All eyes shifted to look at me.

"Yeah, I suppose," I whispered.

"Suppose?" Eddie quizzed, "C'mon let's join the others."

Eddie had reached us at just the right time, he was probably able to hear us talking in the distance so he hurried up. He arrived at just the right moment because I was about to kick or punch or slap or just do something to Rob again that we would have both regretted. Eddie sat down quietly next to me, something he occasionally did when that was the only space available. Oddly enough, he seemed to have done it by choice, maybe just to get in between Rob and I. Since the crooked lawyer was leaning on the container on the opposite side, I supposed that's what he had done. I assumed Rob didn't mean to do me any harm but he sure never did any good either.

"By the way," I spoke harshly to Rob, "you outdid Jeff twofold and going on three."

"You'll get there someday kid."

"Damn Nazi."

And I walked away.

Jeff had only murdered four people, and not because he necessarily *wanted* to. Being such a small gang there had to be bloodshed. You had to prove to them other punks out in the streets that you were not to be messed with. Rob was at six victims and counting. Jeff hadn't lived on the street because he wanted to. He hadn't adopted the factory because he liked it or because he wanted to expose me to that kind of life. He did it because he had no choice.

In the streets of New York, if you didn't belong to a gang you had a 100% chance of getting shanked, or worst. People got mugged, raped, murdered, kidnapped, and God only knows what else daily. It was

just normal. Out in the streets there was no such thing as safety, not even the idea of *safe* to comfort you. You make your own safety, you defend your own turf. That's just the way it was and if you wanna survive you're just gonna have to put up with it.

In the harsh conditions of the godless streets of New York, you did what you had to do to survive, no questions asked.

# Chapter Four

It was a hot one when the sun came up. I sat up on top of a big green container, couldn't touch it with my exposed skin in fear that it would char my hands. Just before noon we said goodbye to Rob. *They* said goodbye to Rob. I avoided the whole thing and sat by the containers as I always did when they boys were saying their goodbyes to the others. Byron was the first to come back and join me. Byron was always the first one. I was becoming uneasy about time. I was growing uneasy about myself. About everything. Life. Death. Heaven. Hell. Something had to give. Something *had* to give.

"Are you okay?" Byron asked in his tender voice, "I know these are tough times for you."

"Tough is an understatement," I replied looking into his deep green eyes, "but I'm fine."

I actually forced a smile.

"I'm just so sick of feeling so helpless all the time," I continued, "something's gotta give."

Byron did not speak, he simply looked at me with those sympathetic green eyes. The soft green eyes of a preacher's son. Unable to retain my emotions any longer, I pulled him into a tight embrace. I buried my face into his chest – or more like his smelly shirt – and let his tight hold soothe me. I was getting too warm in my black sweatshirt and my orange prison pants way too big for me. Jeff had gotten the ugly sweatpants from the Salvation Army and I had inherited of them after he died. They looked like the remnants of a recycled prison jumpsuit and weren't very comfortable but they were somehow my favorite pants. They had looked good on Jeff, blaze orange gave him life. But the garb looked terrible on me. I shoved the bottoms in my boots as much as I could and used a piece of yellow rope to keep them around my waste. But it worked, and I didn't want to wear anything else.

"I'm sorry to disturb your moment," Eddie began, "but we should to fetch some food now that it's lunchtime. People have just thrown out the rest of their TV dinners and it's time to snatch them."

We crammed Ritchie's and Shannon's cars and drove back into the city. The restaurant-goers had indeed thrown out the rest of their perfectly good meals so we prowled the streets and looked into garbage cans to find some. When we had nothing to eat, we usually just ransacked a corner store or broke into somebody's house to eat and then leave. As simple as that! No harm done and no remorse involved. Everybody deserved to eat, whether they had to pay for their food or not. Jeff used to say, *if there was nothing wrong there would be nothing right*. It was just the way it was done on the street. Yeah, there were soup kitchens and homeless shelters but when living the life it's best you stay on your own turf. I sat on Byron and stared out the window as the buildings flew by. I assumed that's what you got for being the smallest person in a group. I really missed sitting on Jeff.

Trash bins were my speciality. I could fit in the tightest of places and reach down to the very bottom and grab the items nobody else could. At least that was one good thing about being small. In New York what you found, you kept. You picked it up, it was yours. No questions asked. So rummaging through garbage wasn't anything bad. There wasn't anything wrong with it. One man's junk is another man's treasure! And you wouldn't believe the kind of food them rich capitalists had absolutely no problem throwing out instead of giving it to some random old homeless dude on the sidewalk. We pulled up behind a restaurant and I slowly creepy crawled into the industrial trash bin where brand new bags of trash had just been thrown out. And I dived in.

"Hey Ritchie!" I called out, "Pass me a bag I found some stuff down here!"

I picked up a few half-eaten hamburgers and some fries. I hated hamburgers but I ate them anyway. Otherwise I wouldn't've had anything to eat. After finding enough food for the day and eating most of it on the spot, we jumped back in the car and brought the remnants to Lennie's house. Lennie still lived in his same large loft in which he used to live in with his wife and kids before his lifelong love had died and his adult children moved away. All of us had suffered great losses in our lives but theirs seemed to be irrelevant next to mine. It was selfish for me to think that way, but that's the way it was. Back at his loft I pigged out some more in potato chips and old pop tarts found in the cabinets. I always ate to the point that I'd want to puke if I put something else in my mouth for the simple reason that I could. I knew too well that some people died of starvation so I didn't deprive myself of eating when I could. Call it gluttony and a sin but it made me feel better about myself.

"Why do I feel like a murderer?" I blurted out.

"Because... you're with some?" Eddie theorized.

"Or because you want to kill," Ritchie added.

"We all have a murderer inside of us, somewhere," I contemplated, "but I think I like Richard's theory the best."

"Well, what are you waiting for?" he demanded.

He was right. What the hell was I waiting for? Jeff to come back to life? If so I would wait for one hell of a long time. Jerk from Portland, Oregon named Dwayne Jackson murdered my brother that I loved so much. The then thirty-three-year-old Washington Heights city council member and bakery owner senselessly took the one life that meant something to me. I'd always wanted to avenge my brother after that. I wanted the 5'8" and 286 pound man's head. His hard brown eyes showed no mercy and only delight from his actions. His short dark brown hair balding in most places looked like a pile of shit smeared on the top of his fat head. It matched with his ugly face. I thought of scaring the two children he had left, Stephen and Lisa but it would be too obvious who was responsible for it. Even if it wasn't me who terrorized him, I would be the one to blame. Just like Jeff.

What was I waiting for? Seriously, what? Even Byron had killed people. Ritchie and Nick had made him do it even if he didn't want to. It was all a part of acceptance, inauguration if you wanna call it that. If a small gang like ours was going to survive, there was going to be blood. Jeff had killed. Why didn't I? I had pondered the question the entire way to Lennie's in fact. I was the only one who'd had a free pass. I still hadn't found a good answer, Byron and I decided to take a walk instead of laying down after eating too fast for our own good. I needed air anyway, desperately. We walked in awkward silence for a while, without speaking. Things were mostly always awkward between Byron and I although he was very pleasant to be with. We shared an uncommon bond. The one of a murder. So I decided to pop the question.

"What does it feel to kill a person?" I asked, intrigued.

"It really corrupts a person," he replied darkly, not finishing his sentence.

"Do you get any pleasure or satisfaction out of it?"

"You might want to ask Richard or Nick that question, but for me there wasn't. I regret everything."

I took his hand into mine and squeezed it tightly.

"I know Byron," I continued, "but you were brought here for a reason."

"I know," he agreed, showing me his usual warm smile, "it may sound crazy but I know God sent me here for a reason."

"Do you have any theories?"

"Maybe just that you should be a scientist because you like theories."

We both laughed at once. Byron had never finished school either.

"But on a more serious note," he went on, "I don't have anything solid. Maybe just that one of you can be spared."

*Spared. Jeff could've been spared.*

"Now tell me your *theory* on wanting to kill a person," he continued, intrigued.

"Well," I sighed, "it's Jeff. It's been almost three years to the day and I just can't get him off my mind. It's eternal torment, pure torture. Something's gotta give."

"So, if I get this straight, you want to kill Dwayne Jackson and Greg Holliday?"

"I don't know, but it sure would be nice to have them freaking gone!"

"Don't get into that stuff, you still have a chance at life."

"I don't care. I need to do something. Jeff would've done something if it was me."

Tears filled my eyes and rage filled my heart. Jeff's death had been way too hard on me. I couldn't move on but I couldn't go back either. Every time I looked into the mirror and pushed back my hair out of my face, I could only see a reflection of Jeff. He was the most beautiful between the two of us. He had always been. I didn't have a single picture of him left. Some said that there was a picture of him on the headstone his grave but others said there wasn't a headstone at all. I had never been there to look myself. He was buried in Cobalt-On-The-Lake, which was quite far away when on foot through the vineyards. I had never even to Cobalt-On-The-Lake, didn't even know where the cemetery was and even

less on which lot Jeff was buried. One thing I did know, though, was that he had been cremated and I wore his urn tag around my neck *everyday*.

It was Eddie who had given it to me after his funeral. He was still employed as a mechanic at the time – that's where the coveralls came from – and had skipped work just to come give me the medallion. A few weeks later he was fired. Somehow his boss found out that he was stealing auto parts and selling them for his own person profit and fired him on the spot. Eddie supposedly told him to shove it and left the building, with a bagful of coveralls, and never returned. I had never asked him about it but I always admired him for stepping up and showing that stupid boss of his what he was made of.

Apart from Ritchie, Eddie was the only one who had managed to keep a job for more than a few weeks. Richard had worked in a pizzeria for a just a little over three months with Jeff but was fired too after he was caught masturbating with the pizza dough. I couldn't help but laugh every time I thought of that. Good for him! By the time Byron and I had finished our little walk around the area and returned to Lennie's, the boys had finished devouring the rest of the trashcan food I had picked up and Shannon gave us the remaining two pieces of bread – all that was left. I let Byron eat all of it because I wasn't hungry anymore.

"That's all you're gonna get," she said in an apathetic tone of voice, "if you wanna eat you know you gotta be present."

*Don't worry, I know.*

"You should eat," Byron reminded me, "you're only 88 pounds."

"That's 89, Byron," I replied, not wanting to hear it.

"Whichever it is, you're extremely thin and you should eat," he insisted.

Most of the time he and Eddie had to force-feed me as best as they could against my will but in the recent weeks they had been pretty easy about it and let it go most of the time. They probably had finally understood that it wasn't doing me any good anyway. All they did since they had stopped the force-feeding was hand me some pieces of cheese, they knew I would eat it. Cheese was my favorite food in



the whole world. Peanut butter the second, and raspberries the third. Jeffrey always made sure I had some to eat, no matter how expensive or hard to find they were, he always made sure I had some raspberries.

"Please eat a slice," Byron pressed on as he handed me a piece of stale white bread.

"Fine," I muttered as I took the slice and left.

Apparently he'd conveniently forgotten that I'd eaten not too long ago, but then again maybe I hadn't eaten enough for him. I sat on the roof of Lennie's loft while the boys inside conversed about their plans for the night. I really wasn't in the mood to go out and vandalize people's home or watch one of them dupe prostitutes and take their money. Not that it bothered me, but I was tired, lethargic. I wanted to sleep, and to sleep well.

"What you doing up there?" I hadn't noticed Eddie behind me.

"Oh, nothing," I replied blankly, "just relaxing I guess."

"Byron was telling me about your murder fantasies."

"Yeah, I'm sure he did."

"Don't do that honey."

"Why not? You already got eight under your belt!"

"I'm a serial murderer and it's not something I'm proud of."

"I know you're not Eddie but I'm here right now, so why should I just watch? You guys made Byron kill people."

"Richard wanted to make the kid grow some balls – and he did – but you're Jeffrey's little sister. We made him a promise when he brought you here."

"It's irrelevant now, he's dead."

"He might be dead but he's always going to watch over you."

"Don't try to preach that crap to me Eddie, he's gone it ends there."

Eddie was a smart man, and he knew when to shut his mouth. He did not speak another word about Jeffrey, he knew he couldn't win against me when it came to that. He was right about the promise though. Everyone had promise to keep me out of harm's way and a life of crime and murder when Jeff

didn't have the choice but to bring me to New York. I had to promise to finish school too. They had never let me kill anyone, but so much for the rest. So much for not breaking in, traumatizing people and ransacking their property and stealing their money. So much for not quitting school. So much for lies and broken promises.

"You know Eddie," I admitted in a soft tone of voice, "you're a nice guy."

"Thanks kid," he replied, satisfied with himself, "you were a sweet little girl to be around. You still are."

I smiled, for real, for the first time in what seemed like an eternity.

"I'll have to admit it to myself someday, but I like you."

"Feeling is mutual kid. Always been."

"I'm fond of you in a bizarre way, 'cause I don't really know you but we've through so many things together and there is this tenderness to you that they don't have."

"There's something inside all of us Ana, maybe they just don't show it all the time."

"Yeah I know Eddie, but you always consider me when they don't."

"They consider you, believe me they do, but you're one touchy little shit!"

We both chuckled at once. Eddie was right.

"Yeah I am, but only when they tell me crap about Jeff."

"It may not look like that, but they don't do it to hurt you."

"I know they don't Eddie, deep inside I know, but they are just so freaking clueless. You have brains and it's obvious."

Eddie laughed, but he knew it was the truth.

"And I don't feel like going on one of their crime sprees tonight and tomorrow." I grumbled on, "I'm tired and I want to sleep."

"No worries there girl," Eddie reassured me, "I'll stay with you."

"You don't need to."

"I want to. I know you can't sleep alone and Jeff would do the same thing if he was still here. Those punks have enough men for a robbery tonight."

I swallowed hard as a huge lump formed in my throat. Only Eddie could speak about Jeff in such a way that didn't *a/ways* make me angry. I choked as I held back some tears but they manage to escape from my eyes anyway. I broke into an uncontrollable sob when Eddie wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into a tight hug. He kissed my forehead and I buried my face into his chest, no longer able to control the rush of emotion.

"I feel like such a wimp to cry like this." I muttered out angrily, disgusted with my outburst.

"There ain't nothing wrong with crying honey," Eddie spoke to me in an unusually tender voice, "you never let yourself grieve. You need to let that out."

"This life almost killed me after I lost Jeff."

"I know, I know. I'll never forget the screams that came out of your little mouth that day. I had never heard such a sound in my life before."

A horrorstruck grimace appeared on Eddie's face as the bitter memories replayed in his head. I avoided that dark place in my mind completely. I did not want to go there. I wiped the few tears that had slipped out of my eyes and broke out of Eddie's strong hold. Nobody had held me like that in a long time, but I avoided thinking about the last time someone had to use force on me. I did not want to go there. I would do anything just not to go there.

"Hey y'all up on the roof!" Lennie's voice called from inside the loft, "Come back down!"

Eddie and I looked into each other's eyes for a fraction of a second before climbing down from the roof and entering the living room by the same window we had used to climb out onto the roof. I had not seen the girls leave in their car, but they were long gone, and most of the boys were sound asleep in the middle of the afternoon.

"You two should rest up so you can have some energy for tonight," the old man added.

"We're not going." Eddie told him sternly.

"Not going?"

"No, we're going to have some sleep and some time to reflect tonight. We both need it."

"Well, y'all are welcome to stay here tonight if you want."

Eddie looked at me, asking for my approval.

"We'll take Eddie's old shack," I told Cap'n Crunch, "that's where we're headed this evening anyway."

That was a lie of course, but I did not want to be bothered by them punks making carnage in the middle of the night when they got back from their spree. They always had a nasty way of waking up everyone in the house when they returned with some trophies. They could never wait until morning to show us what they had come home with. It was always *right now*. Instant gratification. I didn't remember the last time I had a decent night of sleep, but I was determined to have one in the near future.

"They're big boys, they'll make it through a weekend without you and me," Eddie smiled sympathetically at me, like only he could do when no one understood what I was going through.

"Ya wanna go back to the city?" I asked Eddie without emotion.

"What you wanna do there, kid?"

"Just get away from *here* maybe?"

"Sure. Sounds like a good idea, but we're gonna hafta walk there."

"Yeah, no worries, I have legs."

"It's a two hour walk back to the shack if you want to go there."

"Yeah, sure, that sounds nice. I want to be quiet for a while. It hasn't been quiet around here in too long."

Eddie bursted out laughing.

"You know you're right," he continued, still laughing, "it's never very quiet around here."

"Talk about an *understatement*!" I laughed too.

"I miss the quiet too sometimes."

"I miss my mind sometimes."

"You know it's not too late to get out of this."

"Apparently nothing is ever too late, but I have no interest in living in a big fancy mansion with people I don't even know."

"You'd rather settle for my dirty old shack that's falling apart?"

"As long as I'm with you guys, yeah, I would."

Eddie placed one arm around my shoulder in one swift motion as we were walking down the driveway of Lennie's place. The early afternoon sun was incredibly warm, too warm. I hadn't seen the sunlight in quite a while after some storm systems that caused a lot of flooding and endless rain even after the flood waters had subsided.

"You know," I went on, "sometimes I just get so tired of this lifestyle though."

Eddie listened attentively.

"I mean, sometimes I feel bad because I don't feel bad, if that makes any sense."

"Yeah, I can understand."

"I've seen people get killed, murdered, and some shit like that and I don't even cringe! And I wanna do it too!"

"I know Ana, I know. Every time you say that, I think about Byron, and I think about the look you had on your face when you ran over to him like that. I'll never forget that one either."

I swallowed hard, Byron was alive because of me. Sometimes I thought that he would've been better off dead but I was very fond of him and he was pleasant to be with. If I had taken pity for Byron five years ago, then why couldn't I take pity for another human being in the present set of circumstances, innocent or not? Maybe because my own innocence had been taken away.

"I guess I have murderer's blood running through my veins, look where my father is and how Jeff ended up."

"Don't speak badly of your brother Ana."

"Everyone else does!"

"He was a good man, a very soft character forced into a life of crime. You don't know how scared he was and how much he regretted it."

"He didn't seem to have remorse to me."

"His face never gave anything away but he was so scared, it tormented him day and night but he finally came to accept that he had already done it once and he could do it again. This is the life we have to live."

"That's exactly why I said he was without remorse."

"He did have some, a lot. I know, because I've seen it, I've seen what it did to him to kill people like that. It no longer horrified him but he cried a lot after every single one."

It seemed to hurt Eddie on some unspoken level to talk about Jeff, almost as much as it hurt me. Or maybe it was just because he knew it hurt me.

"He did?" I was surprised.

"Yeah," Eddie's voice was husky, "he did. Maybe not right after the murder took place but he did. We have to find a way to survive out here. Unfortunately this is what we've been handed as a way of life. The only way to get out is to die."

"There ain't no God on these streets."

"There ain't nothing but hate on these streets."

# Chapter Five

I slowed down and took a moment to think about my brother. Tall, handsome, and strong, but broken. Corrupted by murder and a life of crime. He loved me, and he protected me, and he taught me morals, but his morals had died along with him.

"I want to kill Dwayne Jackson."

It was more of an affirmation than ever before.

"Jeff wouldn't want you to do that," Eddie's tender voice was filled with disappointment.

"It's irrelevant Eddie, he's freaking *dead*!" I snapped back in an angry tone, "And so is my mother, and my father is as good as dead. I have nobody and nothing to live for."

"Jeffrey and your mom are watching you from the other side, Anastasia, they don't want to see you kill another human being."

I didn't speak.

"I'm sure they are happy to be reunited up there, you know, and they will always look out for you even if they don't walk this earth anymore." Eddie's voice was even softer.

"Don't talk about my family like that!" I screamed at the top of my lungs.

I swung my fist at Eddie and hit him in the ribs. He grumbled out a list of swearwords as he bit his bottom lip but continued to walk beside me during the whole ordeal. He didn't dare put his arms around my shoulders afterwards. I had fucked things up yet again. But he provoked me, it was his own fault that I hit him in the ribs! I augmented my pace as rage boiled through my veins. I didn't want to think about it, I didn't want to think about it.

"You nasty little snot!" Eddie muttered out through clenched teeth, "You've never been violent before."

"But I'm perfectly capable of it." I replied darkly.

"I thought you said you liked me!"

"I did, and I still do."

"You sure have one hell of a weird way of showing it!"

"You too Eddie."

He didn't speak. He began to trail behind me as we walked to Yonkers. The sun seemed to be even warmer on the side of the freeway. The black pavement absorbed the powerful rays and warmed my boots to the point where I thought my feet were going to roast inside of them. I had found the military-style boots I was wearing inside a dumpster in the back alleys of Bronx two years ago. I had no other shoes, so I dealt with them even on the hottest of summer days. After all, they weren't worst than the thick hoodie and the prison pants.

"I'm sorry Ana," Eddie sighed as he caught up to me.

"It's okay," I replied halfheartedly, "you know you're right."

"Let yourself grieve kid, you can't go on like this.

"It's the only way I know."

It was.

"All my life I had my mom and after she died I had Jeff but now I don't have anybody." I grumbled painfully.

"You still have me," Eddie's response to my complaint was a mixture of tenderness and anger.

"Eddie," I sighed, "I'm very fond of you believe it or not, but you can't bring Jeff or mom back. You can't change what is. You can't change anything."

"You miss them, Anastasia. Admit it to yourself once and for all."

"Missing them would mean admitting to myself that they left me."

"They didn't do it because they wanted to! Get that into your head!"

I didn't say anything.



"We're not gonna leave you, ever, that's for sure," Eddie was more sympathetic, "me n'the boys love you."

"Feeling is mutual Eddie," I forced a smile at him.

"I might not have showed it often, but I do love you, a lot."

"Thanks Eddie, I love you too, you know."

A faint smile appeared on the corner of my mouth but it vanished as fast as it came. I didn't feel like dealing with grief and anger at the moment so I just kept on walking, looking down at the pavement and living in the moment. Clouds slowly rolled in, and obstructed the sun. The day was still bright, but not as warm. The temperature had dropped significantly since we had left Cap'n Crunch's in Cobalt. I liked it better without the blazing sun scorching my skin constantly. Sometimes it scorched so bad tears pooled in my eyes because they had gotten so dry. I didn't like that feeling. It kinda looked like it was going to rain, again. At the end of the day I preferred to be wet and cold instead of parched and too hot so I told the enraged clouds floating over my head to bring it on.

I sighed and pushed my hair out of my face, goddamn hair, I hated it. It *had* to be black, therefore it attracted the sun too. But it was hidden behind the grey clouds, oh sometimes I wished I could've just grabbed them and squeeze them in between my fingers. They had always seemed so soft, like Jeffrey's hair. I couldn't compare Jeff's hair to anything else, because I had never touched anything else so soft. Even when it was all greasy and dirty and gross, it was still soft. I missed touching his hair when I slept with him every night. Ricardo's hair wasn't particularly soft, and it sure didn't smell like flowers either. I had never really touched Eddie's hair. He always wore a faded beanie way too tight for his head with only tips of black hair sticking out from under it. He never took it off, kinda like his coveralls. I never saw the shirt he had under them. The faded black collar was barely visible under the coveralls he always buttoned up right to the top. He probably felt the same way about his coveralls as I did with my orange pants. I loved them.

Eddie walked faithfully beside me, not speaking a word and uselessly wasting oxygen. I walked at my usual fast pace, looking down at the ground. My hair had fallen back onto my face but I didn't bother pushing it out of the way. I didn't care. I thought about asking one of the guys to cut it short on multiple occasions but but it never went through, I had no idea why. I sighed as the sun peaked through the fat

clouds. Didn't want to see the sun. I looked up and admired the run-down buildings of the area, the sun shining on the bare walls through the holes that once held windows. Windows and maybe life, families, something. The city did a great job at beautifying the neighborhoods that were still alive, but it did nothing for the old buildings slowly rotting away. They were my favorite buildings, home. Eddie's shack was the closest thing to home I had.

"Do you like it here?" I asked Eddie out of curiosity, "Yonkers?"

"Yeah," he replied, "it's better than Bronx."

"Yeah, any place is better than there."

"Yup, I agree."

"What about the city? Do you like the city?"

"New York City?"

"Yeah."

"I've only been there a few times, it's hectic."

"What about Cobalt?"

"Damn you ask so many questions!"

"I'm just trying to get to know you!"

"Oh, so you want to get to know me now."

I grinned at myself. I had never really bothered to get close to anyone, not even after Jeff died. I didn't even know Byron that well. I only knew that I liked him in a way that I couldn't comprehend. In a mysterious kind of way, the way that only street gangs can love each other and stick together through it all. We were soldiers, brothers and sisters, united by something under God and above us all.

"Yeah Eddie, I do want to get to know you since we're going to spend two days together."

"Well, to answer your question Anastasia, Cobalt sucks and I hate it."

"So why don't we go somewhere else? There must be other factories elsewhere!"

"Cobalt is our safe-haven, nobody can get us there."

"Dwayne Grey got us there."

I grimaced at the thought. I didn't want to think about it, I didn't want to think about it. Eddie swallowed hard and sighed, he didn't want to think about it either.

"Dwayne just *happened* to be there to steal some parts—"

"But he got my Jeffrey! He got *my Jeffrey!*" I screamed, swinging my fists at him again.

He restrained me but I kept on yelling and screaming at him. I had never really lashed out at anything or anyone before. I always kept it in, repressed it until it practically disappeared. Jeff's death had never bothered me so much. My moods drove everybody crazy. I couldn't be approached, I couldn't be talked to.

"Shut the hell up you darn little snot!" Eddie screamed right back as he slapped me in the face.

I stopped trying to hit him and stood motionless on the sidewalk. I wanted to hit him more than ever but I kept my cool. I contained myself as best as I could. I didn't want a full blown physical altercation to break out between us. I wasn't in the mood to try to hurt anyone although I really wanted to hit him right back. He had slapped me hard. My skin stung where his hand touched. I took in a deep breath, swiftly turned around and walked faster towards my destination, leaving Eddie behind. I didn't bother to look back at him. I looked straight ahead, not bothering to stop at intersections or to watch out for passing traffic. They all honked their horns at me but I didn't flinch. Their tires screeched against the pavement, I wished they had just kept going and obliterated me completely. I imaged Eddie shaking his head behind me, and closing his eyes every time I came close to being struck and killed. I deserved it. I wanted it in a way. I wanted to end, even if it meant total destruction. Some drivers shouted obscenities through their open car windows and all I did was flip them the bird.

I kept on walking by myself for a while before I turned back, curious to see if Eddie was trailing behind me but there was no one there. Eddie had bailed on me and I was left completely alone. So much for getting to know him. I sighed and looked up at the clouds in the sky that had obstructed the sun again. I walked all the way through Dobbs Ferry and Yonkers by myself. The pedestrians that occasionally crossed my path didn't bother to even acknowledge me. I had deliberately walked through the outskirts of town to avoid them. I wanted to be alone.

The workday had come to an end when I reached Eddie's shack. Somebody else's shack, but Eddie lived in it. The commuters filled the streets but I was out of their way, alone in the abandoned neighborhood before they crossed my path. I entered the old building through a broken window since I couldn't open the large metal door by myself. I was careful not to fall through the multiple missing floorboards as I made my way to the skimpy staircase and climbed all the way up. To my surprise Eddie was in his room, laying on his bed and looking at the ceiling. He was surprised to see me too.

"Come on in," he invited me.

I walked towards him and he motioned for me to sit down on his bed. It was only a single mattress stacked on top of industrial boxes and he took up most of it so I kneeled at his feet, resting my back against the wall.

"Come," he insisted.

I did as I was told and crawled over him, resting my head on his chest and letting out a loud sigh of exhaustion. The day had been long and uneventful but still very tiring. My more than two hour walk had worn me out. Light photons illuminated Eddie's entire room, revealing the dust gathered everywhere. Eddie gently put his arms around my waist without speaking. I didn't protest. There wasn't much room in the *room* and I didn't feel like trying to push him off of his own bed.

"I'm really sorry about what happened today," I apologized sincerely.

"It's okay kid," he reassured me, "it's alright."

"I'm just a runt that can't handle the truth and I'm sorry I had to take my anger out on you."

"I told you, it's alright, don't worry."

"Sure?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Thanks for not telling me to get lost or something."

"I'm sorry for calling you a little snot though, I didn't really mean that."

"It doesn't matter."

"Don't say it doesn't matter because it matters to me!"

I waited for him to continue.

"I *am* sorry about that."

"Forgiven."

"I just thought it was best to leave you alone for a while. It also gave me the opportunity to think a little bit too."

"I didn't think about much, I just lived in the moment for once."

"You should seriously do that more often, stop living in the past."

"You know Eddie, I'm kinda hungry."

Just as I spoke my stomach grumbled for some food.

"Well, shall we go get us some food?"

I nodded and we both got up and went rummaging through some trash in the streets. Supper hour was upon us, so food wasn't very hard to find. Somebody had either thrown or accidentally dropped some perfectly good pasta on the side of the street, it was still warm too! Eddie and I sat on the side of the road and picked out the noodles dipped in some sort of cream-like substance with our fingers. It was actually very good. Better than most of the leftovers thrown out the window that had missed the garbage can or left out in the world somewhere.

"This stuff's really good!" I muttered out as I ate.

But too soon, there was no more. I was still hungry but too tired to hunt for food. The boys at Lennie's had probably woken up and were on their own hunt for food but I hadn't walked two hours in the scorching heat just to walk back and deal with those punks. I had been going hungry almost daily since I had to hunt for my own food. Jeff no longer brought it to me, neatly arranged on an old, broken and dirty plate so I could eat half-decently.

"Wanna hang around the parks for a little while?" I asked Eddie, "I know one only a few blocks from here."

"Sure," Eddie accepted my proposition without hesitation.

Eddie and I screwed around the park, just hanging 'round until the sun began to sink over the horizon and created an orange inferno over the entire west end of the city. I loved watching sunsets with Jeff, and sometimes with Byron. Sunsets over water were my favorite, they were always so beautiful. I loved sunrises also, but sunsets gave me the assurance that the day was over, and that a new one would soon follow. Jeff always told me that a new day was a new beginning, it was the one thing that hadn't died along with him. Tomorrow is a new chance at everything.

"Good to go back?" Eddie asked.

"Yep, let's get going," I replied, looking away at the burning sky in the distance.

The walk back to the shack was short, and the darkness settled in quickly too. Twilight was upon us as a few dim streetlights turned themselves on. I could see a well-groomed cat walking in the distance, seemingly lost in the abandoned neighborhood. I looked up at Eddie and he nodded in approval so I kneeled down on the pavement and called over the kitty. The beautiful full-grown Siamese cat looked intently in my direction for a few seconds. It hesitated a little bit but soon came running towards me.

The beautiful feline sniffed my hand and looked up at me, meowing. I picked it up and cradled it in my arms as Eddie and I walked the remaining block back to his shack. The blue-eyed cat looked around but didn't protest and didn't try to slip out of my hold. I took off its red collar without even looking at it and discarded it in an empty lot not far from the shack. Eddie grinned as I did so, but did not speak. Back at my mom's I had a little calico, and I had no idea what had become of it after she died and after I was sent halfway across the country to live with Jeff whom my mother didn't know was practically homeless without any place of his own to come home to at night. Part of me felt like the cat, belonging somewhere long lost and wandering about aimlessly just trying to find a familiar trace of something called *home*.

Up in Eddie's room the cat sat on my back and licked itself clean, not that it was very dirty in the first place. I rested my head on Eddie's chest again and he began running his fingers through my messy hair. I looked up at him, resting my chin on his chest, and removed his old beanie. I threw it on the

desk in the back of the narrow room and ran my fingers through his hair. It wasn't rough, but not soft either. I had no clue how Jeff had kept his hair so soft despite the situation we lived in. Eddie's was always under his cap, and was very flat over his head. He grinned at me as I played with his hair, I couldn't recall seeing him without his cap before, except for a few occasions when he washed himself in a shower. We settled for sponge baths in public bathrooms or rivers and streams. Eddie seemed to be enjoying my fingers going around his scalp, making his hair unruly and messy like mine.

"Now this is what I call something mutually pleasurable." I commented, totally enjoying the scalp massage from Eddie's rough fingers.

"You make it sound so innocently dirty," he replied laughing.

"Maybe we should've gone out with the boys and gotten some money."

"Nah, let's just stay here, you got a four-legged companion now. And you still need to get to know me."

"I think I'm gonna name my cat Belle, it's French for *beautiful girl*."

"I should start calling you Belle, it's better than Drifter."

"Jeff used to call me *Ma belle* which means *my lovely* so I think you should just stick it to Drifter."

"Whatever you wish, but you shouldn't try to remove Jeff from your life completely. He's still part of you."

"I know Eddie, it just hurts so much."

Tears flooded my eyes as I thought of Jeff. I sighed as Belle meowed and looked out the window into the night. I turned my head to look outside too, I could see the stars. I loved the stars, Jeff and I would often lie down on the beach near Cobalt at night and looked at the stars endlessly illuminating the dark sky. I'd rest my head on Jeff's shoulder, put my arms around him and stare into the night until I fell asleep. Jeff would then bring me back to Lennie's or Eddie's until the morning sun rose too soon again. I could never spend enough time with him.

He could never hold me long enough, he could never tell me he loved me often enough. I had only known him and lived with him for three short years, but that had been long enough to shatter my whole life after he died. It no longer mattered if the sun rose every morning or not or if the stars came out at night, because Jeff was no longer there to watch them with me. Eddie stroked my cheek with his rough hand as I sighed heavily and let my mind return once again to that dark place I had fought so

hard to avoid during the day. I couldn't escape it, I would have to face it one day. Even my new cat seemed to feel my pain, somebody else's cat that I had brought in as my own.

"I wish you could've known Jeff too," I whispered into Belle's ear as a tear escaped from my eye.



# Chapter Six

Purring was all that resonated in the room as the sky turned a light blue color and the stars slowly faded away. Half of Belle's body rested on Eddie and the other half rested on me, the purring half rested on me. The cat seemed happy; it was warm, it was safe and it was in loving company. That was all a cat really needed and for a while there I wished I was a cat too. Did cats feel grief? *Could* they feel grief in the first place? The purring sequence was interrupted by the cat being startled by the house of a metal door slamming shut. The cat went straight to hiding in between two metal crates under the mattress and I bashed my face against the old glass of the window, almost making the entire life resonate out of me, to see who was outside while Eddie checked the hallway for an unwanted guest. The little car Ritchie had stolen was parked outside, but I still didn't want to see anybody. Turns out that it was Byron who stopped by to give me a few of my things.

"It wasn't clear if you said that you and Eddie would be staying here the whole time," he said softly as he handed me my bags, "so I thought I'd stop by and bring you your stuff just in case you won't be returning to the loft."

"Thanks buddy." I whispered back as I put the bags on the makeshift bed and pulled the cat from underneath it.

"Two days can be a heck of a long time without anything of your own."

"Thanks Byron, I really appreciate you thinking of me and looking out for me."

"Always Drifter. We're a family. Just so you know the boys just got back about an hour or so ago with some decent cash and other stuff, we'd just need somebody not too suspicious to go pawn it off."

"I'll do it."

"You don't need to do it now, I know you and Eddie want some quality time alone."

"Don't worry man, I'll do it, but that's all I'm doing."

"Okay, I'll be back with the goods in about an hour."

Eddie and I said goodbye to Byron before going down to the streets below to fetch some food from McDonald's with the rest of the coins I had stashed at the bottom of my duffel bag containing my clothes and the few possessions that I had been able to keep. The streets were quiet but we made it

quick. In the bathroom at the restaurant I took a sponge bath because it had been a few days and I was starting to smell like Ricardo. If the smell wasn't disgusting enough, the feeling was even worst. Back in Eddie's shack I swapped my clothes for some cleaner ones as well as dark colors because the prison pants would be too easy to spot if I ever decided to drift onto a wayward path and land myself in some trouble. It was bad enough the way it was without one of the few people in the brotherhood that didn't look "suspicious" for doing something illicit. I was going to do what I had to do.

I put on an enormous black hoodie from Pennington's and some baggy black jeans making me look like a real homeless person and not just some rebellious kid wishing they could live on the streets instead of in a cheap house with their families. If there was one thing I would have told them kids, I would've told them to stick their heads out of their asses and start appreciating what they were given, because all that I ever had had been taking away from me. I covered my unruly hair with a purple slouch beanie, the last thing that my mother had made for me before whosoever that controls all the stuff in life decided to take her away from me too. And then I thought of Byron, his family was still out there, but he couldn't be with them, and that was probably even more unbearable than knowing that all the people who ever loved you had long since left the world I lived in.

When Byron finally brought back some stolen valuables he had put all that he could fit into an old potato bag that I had picked up out of the garbage. I chuckled under my breath because if you walked into a pawn shop carrying some gold and silver in a potato bag the first thing the clerk was going to do is call the police. I shoved as much jewelry and other small items as I could in my hoodie pockets and gave the rest to Eddie so he could try to sell some on the streets or elsewhere. Byron gave us a ride to the downtown core where Eddie and I split up as he returned to Cap'n Crunch's loft. I had my cat under my arm as I walked down the streets of Yonkers to some pawn shops that, hopefully, would pay good money for some stolen junk.

"Alright Belle," I whispered to my cat, "let's rock and roll!"

Down all the way at the end of the street I spotted an antiques shop so I decided to stop there first in hopes that some of the jewelry was vintage and worth more in there than in a pawn shop. Belle remained quiet and passive under my arm, not trying to make a move to run for it or curious to explore

her environment. The shop had just opened when I walked in and was greeted by an old woman, probably the owner of the shop, who seemed to still live in the 1900s.

"Good morning young lady!" the old woman greeted me in an overly-joyous voice, "What can I do for you and your beautiful four-legged friend here?"

"Oh, I'm sorry about the cat ma'am," I apologized as I put my free hand into my hoodie pockets to take out some jewelry and handing the pieces to her, "but I'm looking to know if these pieces are antiques."

"Let me look at them sweetheart and I'll appraise them for you."

"Most of this stuff was handed down to me from my grandparents but I don't really have any use for this you know?"

The old woman's clothes looked like rags, even more like rags than my plus size hoodie. She didn't seem to think of me as suspicious and she loved cats so it was the perfect opportunity to make some cash.

"These two necklaces here are definitely antiques," she told me as she examined old necklaces with a magnifying glass, "and they are quite valuable too. I'll give you a hundred dollars for both, how does that sound?"

How could I pass up such an offer?

"Of course!" I exclaimed joyfully.

"The rest aren't antiques, sorry sweetheart," she went on, "but they are still beautiful pieces that I'm sure the pawn shops down the street would be happy to buy. These are made with quality materials."

I thanked the unnamed woman and went out the door with a nice \$100 bill shoved inside the back pocket of my pants. I wondered how Eddie was doing over at his end with his street soliciting. I walked into the first pawn shop and offered up a few pieces of jewelry, still using the same story I used on the old woman. I sold a few pieces to the first shop for a few bucks and went on to the second to try for a better price. The second one had a huge jewelry collection similar to the necklaces and bracelets I had in my pockets so the Indian man was more than happy to buy my stuff. At the third and last shop the

clerk was more reluctant to buy my old jewelry. He said he would buy it, but that it wasn't worth much so I decided to make the best with my negotiations, but to still no avail. Part of me was distracted with the weapons display behind the counter. I wanted a gun.

"How much for that Glock 17 behind the glass?" I asked pointing to the one I wanted.

"Six hundred," the man uninterestingly replied.

"I'll give you all of this jewelry and the four hundred I have in cash here."

"That's two hundred too little kid, come back when you're got something worth trading."

"Seriously man?! For the price that you want to buy this stuff from me you owe me the gun! I'll even give you the cat, these are priced insanely high in pet shops."

"You're too young to buy a gun anyway, but thanks for stopping by."

"Hold on, we ain't done yet!"

"Kid, what do you want?"

"The Glock 17, that's what I want. And who gives a hoot if I'm too young to buy a gun, I ain't too young to show this world what I'm made of!"

My voice was tense and apprehensive, the clerk knew what that meant, and he reluctantly opened the glass display and handed me the gun I wanted.

"Fine," he muttered out, seemingly out of exhaustion although the day had just begun, "that will be four hundred dollars, all of this jewelry, and the cat."

It crossed my mind to threaten him with my new weapon, take back my money and my cat and make a run for it but that was too risky. I would risk getting caught and losing everything. I had gotten what I wanted, so I thanked the clerk and went on my way. I regretted giving up Belle, but I reminded myself that I wanted Dwayne Jackson's head more. I had no problem giving up a few years of my life for a manslaughter charge after killing him because he had given me a life sentence when he killed my brother. I shoved the small handgun into my overly big hoodie pocket and went walking back to where I came from. The humid late morning air was sticky on my skin, especially underneath my thick clothes but I didn't dare to take it off just in case I got in a situation where I needed to hide something under it. I hadn't gone out just to stir up trouble, but it did have a way of finding me.

For a while I sat on the sidewalk at the intersection of two deserted streets. I thought about my cat, or, my former cat. Somebody else's cat that I had not only taken from them, but traded for a gun. Did the people who previously owned the cat have children? Did they ask their parents where their beloved kitty had gone? Back in Florida my mom had bought me a pet mouse, just this little white mouse that was so soft and friendly with humans, and one day it went missing. It had only escaped from its cage and went to hide under the couch when it got frightened by something and I was devastated not to have little Miranda in my hand anymore. A few hours my mom found Miranda wandering in the kitchen looking for some familiar surroundings and I had never been so happy to see a little white mouse crawling around. I guess you could say that somewhere between my life and my existence I felt bad in regards to the scenario I had created for myself. I wanted my cat back, my mouse back, my mom back, my brother back, my life back.

"The hell you doing there?!" a voice shouted out of a passing car.

I looked up, wanting to flip the driver the finger, and saw that it was Ricardo and Byron riding in an old baby blue Ford Crown Victoria.

"Waiting for Eddie," I shouted back, still too caught up in my train of thought to mutter out anything else.

"You're done?" Byron asked me before another car honked the horn from behind.

"Yeah," I replied giving him two thumbs up, "just waiting for him to complete his share."

Ricardo waved and then sped down the deserted street before the other driver honked again and started swearing in Spanish. I put my hand in my pocket and touched my gun. A grin swept across my face as I did. *I'm going to kill you Dwayne, you just wait and see now.* I marveled at the thought of sweet revenge. I could just see him, his face being blown off by my 9mm, the same thing he did to Jeff. I could see in the perfect detail the bullet going through his eye socket and coming out through the back of his skull, the blood splashing all over the wall behind him and me being the last thing he sees. Revenge is a dish best served cold.

"Drifter!" Eddie called out from behind me.

I signaled him to come and join me on the side of the street and in a few seconds he was standing right next to me. His pine green coveralls were dusty, like he had been rolling around in the sand of New Mexico, and his hat was still covering his whole head, leaving only a couple of black hairs sticking out at the bottom in the back. He had his hands in his pockets, seemingly holding something like I was, but he looked happy, as happy as he could be anyway.

"Where's your cat?" he inquired curiously, "Hope it didn't run away."

"No," I muttered as I looked at a ladybug crawling next to my leg on the sidewalk, "I sold it."

"Say again?"

"I sold it. You know, for money."

"You cannot be serious! You loved that cat!"

"I know, but I came out here to fetch some money, and so did you, so how much you got?"

"About four hundred, and you?"

"About the same, it's all about the right items in the right markets. People will pay top dollar for some of this old stuff."

"Too bad the boys ain't stole the rest of the bronze collection I sold this morning, people went crazy over that ugly junk. But hey, the dollar bills were nice!"

Eddie flashed me a smile, completely unaware that I didn't have a single penny in my name but instead had a 9mm pistol with a single round in the chamber inside my pocket. That's what I had traded my beloved cat for.

"I want to shoot a gun." I muttered to Eddie.

"Fine, you can shoot the gun," Eddie's smile vanished from his lips, "but you ain't shooting people you got that?"

"I got it man, I just wanna feel the power of the recoil against my shoulder and the sense of satisfaction that comes with it."

"Fair enough, Lennie's got a bunch of firearms that you can shoot down at the factory. Wonder if the boys or Shany will be passing through here sometime so we can hitch a ride back."

"You're a little too late Eddie, Byron and Ritchie stopped by like five minutes ago."

"Go figure."

"I have legs, I can walk."

Before heading back Eddie and I grabbed a bite to eat, and not from the garbage for once. I had some Starbucks coffee and two maple donuts that created an explosion of sweet taste and a sugar overload in my mouth. Eddie wanted to pass through the downtown core to get down to Cobalt because passing through the outskirts of town would add another hour to our commute on foot. I hated passing through the downtown. I hated seeing all those fancy New Yorkers with their noses stuck up in the air and their stilettos so high that they walked awkwardly like they had a stick stuck up their rear end. The businessmen with their expensive suits and their briefcases owned the sidewalks. They, the supreme authority of the side of the road and on the streets paved in gold being driven around in their Audis. Back in Cobalt screeching tires and flying gravel was all I knew.

"You wanna know what's amazing Eddie?" I challenged after I was done eating my junk food that Eddie had happily paid for.

"Try me," he retorted, seemingly lost in thought over something else.

"How people trying to survive by working the streets are degraded and looked down upon but these other greedy jerks who have money stacked up all the way to the ceiling are put on the covers of magazines and worshipped like they are God."

"I've stopped thinking that life is fair a long time ago."

"I just don't understand the mentality of people Eddie. These idiots are laughing, thinking that they deserve some respect when it's us putting our lives on the line just to make it by and we get nothing."

"If what that stuff Byron preaches is true, they are all going to hell."

"It upsets them when homeless people ask them for money by why doesn't it upset them when they see poverty littering the streets like this?"

On every street corner there was another homeless person with a little jar of coins sitting on the sidewalk, often near trashcans, just waiting for a good samaritan to give them some loose change. I wish I could have been fortunate enough to give them some without lacking any for myself but I probably had less than them. I had less integrity than them, or maybe I had more. I didn't sit around and beg for something, I went out and got it. Not a big deal who stood in the way, when I went out to get something I didn't stop until I got it.

"Drifter," Eddie began slowly, seemingly gauging my reaction, "where do you get your morals?"

"Up my butt," I blew him off giggling under my breath.

But the cold hard truth was that I had set out to kill Dwayne Jackson the same way he murdered my brother Jeffrey. *My* Jeff. I wished it could've been me. I wished it could've been anyone else but Jeff. When I was with him, my world was perfect. It was perfect. And it was perfect.

"You sure you want to walk back to go see the boys?" Eddie asked after a long moment of silence.

I was usually talkative with Eddie. He and Byron were the only ones I really could talk to. I was too busy contemplating how I was going to get revenge to even remotely talk, or even think for that matter, about anything else. I had to keep my cool, nobody could know I was roaming the streets of New York armed and dangerous. Or maybe that one shot in my gun was for myself. Maybe I didn't look suspicious in my enormous Pennington's hoodie but I felt suspicious. Something inside of me, about me, had changed. It was different and I didn't want to let my mind wander to that dark and evil place in my mind but I couldn't escape it.

"I don't want to go back to the factory." I finally spit out after a moment too long.

"You sure you don't wanna go back see the others?" Eddie's voice indicated concern.

Oh, the others. I liked to be alone since Jeff had died – was murdered. Byron and Eddie's company was nice at times but everything and everybody else just made me sick. Especially the factory. Jeff lost his life in that very factory.



# Chapter Seven

A car was coming at high speed in the distance. I couldn't quite see it because there was a big cloud of dust floating in the air but down the deserted dirt road there seemed to be a black vehicle coming towards the factory. I leaned on the side of the building and stuck my head out through the broken window to get a better view. There were no more windows, all of the glass had long since been broken, not that there were many windows on an industrial factory to begin with. I saw what seemed like a fancy city campaign car racing towards the factory passed the old containers and the barriers from one side of the property and the gang in the middle of some sort of commotion on the other side. I didn't know what was going on almost four floors below me on the ground but it appeared to be intense with a lot of yelling and people running around.

Jeff was running towards the factory with his arms up in the air trying to signal me something but I couldn't see what he was pointing to. I looked to the other side of the lot to see where Jeff was pointing to but there was nothing but a few trees and bushes near the river bank and some civilization far away in the distance on the other side of the water. It wasn't there that Jeff was pointing to so I looked back at him down below. He had almost reached the factory and was waving his arms up and down. Ricardo was running behind him, weapons in hand, and the rest of the bunch were hidden behind a metal crate. Only I could see them from where I was standing, the people in the campaign car couldn't, but they could see me.

Eddie was beside the orange container the guys were hiding behind and he was waving something at me too. He put his hands over his head seemingly in a motion to take cover but I still didn't know what all the commotion was about. So okay, maybe some people who worked for the city came by to check out the property to sell it to some land developer or whatever but they weren't the police, they couldn't arrest me or anyone of us for trespassing or whatever the hell else we were doing by basically camping out on the vacant lot. We weren't the only ones who had called that old factory home, the place was littered with graffiti on the inside. You could barely see the old rusted metal walls underneath all the spray paint and whatever else that had been splashed on the walls over the years since the operation had closed down.

Jeff, Ricardo and Eddie were still yelling something at me and eventually Eddie just pointed at the campaign car who had stopped at the foot of the factory. A big fat man stepped out of the car and pointed a gun right at me. I immediately understood what Jeff and Eddie had tried to signal me. Jeff wanted me to run, get out of there, and Eddie wanted me to duck. I threw myself to the ground just in time for the bullet to fly in through the broken window and make a piercing popping noise as it hit the wall across from me. Through all the resonating metal I could hear Ricardo's voice yelling something and shooting his gun at the people in the city car. I then heard some stomping on the old metal floors down below coming up the stairs. I knew it was Jeff so I ran downstairs towards him. I didn't know what was going on, but I did know that no matter what it was, he would protect me from it.

I'd gotten up in a panic and went running for the skimpy rusted metal staircase leading down to where the commotion was and about halfway down I encountered Jeff who grabbed me by the hand and pulled me down behind him in a not-so-gentle fashion. Jeff was unusually tense and apprehensive. His usually soft and gentle blue eyes were wild and panicked. He usually kept his cool during situations like those, he was the one to remain calm, like a good criminal he didn't let the adrenaline get the best of him. He could think, unlike people like Ricardo whose first instinct was to pull out his always-loaded gun safely tucked inside the waistband of his pants and fire until whatever he's shooting at is dead at his feet. But not that day. An unexplained intensity was present like electricity in the air as gunshots rang out and as my brother dragged me down yet another floor into some sort of industrial semi-basement on a lower level.

"Run!" Jeff commanded me as he gave me a push to propel me forward, "Just run out through that hole in the wall and run towards the river and don't stop!"

So I ran. I knew how to swim, if it ever came to that I could swim across all the way to New Jersey, or so I liked to make myself believe. I didn't look back once I darted out of Jeff's arms, I knew he'd put an end to whatever it was that was going on. I had my eyes fixed on the rectangular hole near the top of the old rusted wall when my foot fell through something and I landed hard on a metal grid in the floor. I let out a scream as I looked down in panic at my foot that had gone through and saw how far down the other floor was, I'd kill myself if I ever went through that.

"Are you okay?!" Jeff's anxiety-ridden voice shouted and echoed all over the place.

"Yes!" I yelled back as I got up and out of the grid and kept on running.

I safely made it to the other side but I came face to face with another large hole in the floor, one without the grid to walk over. I looked around to go around it but there was debris everywhere and in my state of fright I was afraid that it would be too long to run around it to get to the window. I wouldn't have time to make it out, plus I'd have to find a way to climb up there in the first place. A person my size couldn't just jump and make it out safely on the other side.

"Jeff! Jeff!" Ricardo's alarmed and overly panicked voice kept on shouting to the point where I thought his lungs were going to be ripped open.

In a freak moment of insanity I stopped to look over my shoulder and that's when I saw the big man from the city car standing only a few dozen feet away pointing his gun at me once again. I had nowhere to run. He was going to kill me. I was over for me.

"Jeff!" I yelled the same way Ricardo did.

"Jump! Jump Ana!" Jeff shouted back as he came running in my direction.

I looked at the huge hole in the floor in front of me. I wasn't going to jump. I couldn't. That would be just as good as committing suicide. I had to run. As I was about to lunge in the other direction to get around the hole to get to the window there was a gunshot and Jeff tackled me so we would both practically fall to our deaths down on the completely underground storage floor below. For the few seconds it took for our bodies to hit the ground it felt like floating. It was a disturbing sensation because of the eerie calmness in me present in that moment. In a moment like that your life does not flash before your eyes. There was no peace knowing I was going to die, but there was no fear either. All I could do was stare at the ceiling way up above progressively falling farther and farther away from me. Or actually, I was the one falling away from it. And then everything went black.

I didn't know how long it took for me to wake up after my body hit the floor, but there were no out-of-body experiences or floating sensations. There was no pain, only darkness and some obstructed light

somewhere higher above. I wasn't in heaven, and I hadn't gone to hell. That meant one of two things; the afterlife as they like to make you believe was a lie, or I wasn't dead at all. My eyes rolled around the place for a little while, seeing all sorts of weird shapes like dogs and cats floating around over me. Eventually the shapes manifested themselves to be Eddie, Richard, Freddy and Nick. My head began pounding like a bomb about to blow and I was freezing. There was something very cold underneath me with patches of warmth here and there. As the dogs and cats returned to where they came from it clicked in my brain that I didn't see Jeff.

"Oh my goodness!" I could hear someone's voice somewhere around me, "Are you okay Ana?! Are you still with me?"

I don't know what I muttered, or if I said something in the first place, but a pair of strong arms lifted me up. The ceiling replaced the floor and the cold metal floor was floating everywhere around me. My eyes darted rapidly from side to side finding a mixture of light particles, darkness, and dust floating around in between. There was a staircase somewhere but I had no idea if I was going up or down or if I was going somewhere in the first place. My head flopped over somebody's shoulder and I saw faces of people I knew but I couldn't remember who they all were. I managed to close my eyes for a few seconds or a few minutes, just long enough to take a breath and to open them again, only to see my brother's body covered in blood lying facedown in the basement.

# Chapter Eight

"Can't we just go back to your loft?" I asked Eddie, "Please?"

"You mean my abandoned shack with only one half-decent room?" his voice was emotionless, "Sure, let's go."

"Yay! You're the best!"

"Don't you ever forget it."

When the intersection to head towards the boonies came up ahead I made a sharp turn, Eddie muttered some swear words under his breath, but he followed me faithfully. The sun came out through a small patch of clouds and warmed my skin. For a moment I missed my cat. When moments like that struck me I put my hand in my pocket and stroked the handgrip of my newly acquired pistol. Giving up the cat was worth it. It couldn't be all for nothing. I was a soldier on a mission, and I couldn't let soft moments get the best of me. All that was left to figure out was how I was going to get to Dwayne Jackson and teach him a lesson about what family meant to me.

"What are you thinking about?" Eddie asked me as he faithfully walked beside me, still in his green coveralls and the rest of his usual outfit.

"Oh, just pondering life and death." I muttered in an absent-minded tone of voice not really wanting to tell him that I was plotting murder.

Eddie and I pondered together up until we made it back to his shack in East Yonkers. The red brick building never looked any better. It was crumbling more and more with each passing day. Sometimes floorboards randomly gave out and went crashing down into the basement in the middle of the night. If the city knew that people were living in there (which they probably did actually) they'd put a fence around the place with a big yellow and black no trespassing sign. That place was my home. Nobody could take it away from me. As awful as it was in there, it was my favorite place to be because only good memories were made in that tiny storage room on the second floor. No blood, no hate, no nightmares. It was the only real refuge I had.

"Wanna attempt the metal door?" Eddie joked well knowing that it was too heavy for me to open, "If one day we ain't around you'll have to find a way in."

"I can always climb through a window, this building doesn't have much left you know," I joked in return, "but let's see what this big ass door is made of!"

I grabbed the doorknob, turned it, and started pulling with all of my might, not that I had too much of it in the first place. I managed to get the door open a few inches, just wide enough for me to stick my hands inside in order to get more leverage and pull some more. I had no idea what kind of person would need such an enormous metal door for a fancy apartment building. What were they so afraid of? What needed to stay outside at all costs? Cannibals? Werewolves? The Ku Klux Klan? Catholic nuns? Jehovah's Witnesses? Why the big metal door and cheap windows that could easily be punched through? But then again, what in life ever made sense anyway? The place was my home and I *did* manage to open the big metal door.

"Okay, you can go in now!" I muttered through clenched teeth and it took me everything to keep the door open long enough and just wide enough for skinny little Eddie DeSalvo to fit inside.

I then jumped in myself and let the door slam loudly behind me. It made a huge crashing sound and the entire building shook and resonated in response. For a moment I thought the whole thing was going to crumble to the ground but the other thing that happened was glass breaking on the second floor.

"That's not good!" I laughed in defiance at the fact that I had successfully opened the door and let myself in without any help.

"I just hope that wasn't my bedroom window," Eddie muttered, "I really can't afford to board up that one right now! It's all I have!"

We both raced up the skimpy spiral staircase up to Eddie's room, being careful that the staircase wouldn't give out underneath it because apparently the slamming door had managed to break a window. Sure enough when we barged through the door of Eddie's closet, the window was shattered and parts of it were lying on his makeshift bed. The hole in the window was big enough for me to stick my head through it and look down into the streets below, where I saw that more pieces of broken glass

were lying on the sidewalk. I didn't feel so defiant anymore. There were no other livable rooms in the entire building and living in the basement was not an option because the building might as well fall on top of us at any moment.

"I'm sorry man," I sincerely apologized to Eddie, "I really am."

"Hey Drifter, it's not your fault," Eddie reassured me by giving me a pat on the back, "you're not the one who broke that window."

"Well, I am the one who slammed the door like that in order to get the window broken."

"So what? It's not your fault that this happened. It was not your intentions, no worries."

I cleared the bed of broken glass before I let myself flop down on the mattress and looked at the ceiling feeling guilty no matter what Eddie told me. I wasn't one to usually feel guilt, but I was straight with people. I was fair to the ones who were fair to me, and what happened was unfair.

"What are we going to do?" I asked Eddie after a long moment of silence, "I really don't want to move out of here or have to board up the window."

"It's gonna get hella cold if we don't board up the window Drifter." Eddie replied in a calm pensive voice, "But I don't want to have to leave this place either. It's like my own private sanctuary away from everyone."

"We'll figure something out," I promised him, "we always have."

"Yes," he affirmed in a soft voice, "we always have."

Eddie and I went out to a homeless shelter for some food and an extra blanket to spend the night. No matter how hot it was during the day, it was always chilly at night in an old half-insulated abandoned building like that. It was windy near the waterfront and not having a window to cut it out even just a little bit wouldn't be anything pleasant at night or during any time of the day as a matter of fact. So that night Eddie and I bundled up tightly together, hoping and praying that it wouldn't get too cold, that the warm weather would stay at least for another few days until we found a way to fix the situation. I could hear the wind whistling angrily outside but thankfully the bed was right below the window, sparing us from direct contact with the chilly breeze. The room was still considerably colder with the broken window but it was manageable until the morning arrived and the sun rose yet another day.

It was quiet, almost like the moments after a murder. I sat adjacent to the bed under the broken desk shoved in the dirtiest corner of the room. The rays of sunlight had just started piercing through the broken window and illuminating patterns on the wall. The city was just starting to wake up, I could already hear crews arriving at the docks down below and some more humming of engines in the distance. I held out my brand new weapon into the morning sunlight and admired it, but most of all I admired what I was going to do with it. It was a beautiful gun, handily fit into the enormous pockets of my enormous hoodie. Nobody would ever have to know! I had no problem giving a couple of years of my life to get that bastard back for what he did to my brother. Only, someone had already found out.

"Where in the world did you get that?!" Eddie's voice was more than surprised.

I hadn't even noticed that Eddie was awake. It was too late to put the gun back in my pocket and deny that I had such a thing. I easily could have stolen a gun from Cap'n Crunch's hideout but a missing weapon would have been too obvious. I wanted my own, mine and mine alone, mine to do what I wanted with it and the only person responsible for it was me. I hadn't stolen it, I had paid for it myself. The money might have dishonestly been gained but I still hadn't stolen the gun.

"This is what I got in exchange for the junk I pawned off." I blandly replied, already knowing what he was going to tell me in response.

"Why didn't you just tell me you wanted a handgun for protection?" Eddie's voice was sympathetic.

I wasn't expecting that.

"I don't know Eddie," I whispered softly, almost ashamed of myself, "I haven't quite been feeling like myself lately."

Part of me almost cracked up laughing at Eddie's naivety but I had to refrain from grinning too much because I knew too well that he was a very smart man and a very accomplished criminal.

"Or is that to kill Dwayne Jackson?"

"A little of both I guess."



Eddie got up off his bed and squeezed himself underneath the table and took me into his arms. I motioned to shove the gun back in my pocket but Eddie grabbed it instead and the two of us were in a dangerous tug-of-war for a loaded weapon.

"Eddie it's loaded!" I shouted for him to let go.

He did.

"How dare you bring a loaded weapon into my home?" he was angry, "You can't possibly be plotting murder for real!"

But I was. And he knew it.

"If you don't want me to have weapons in your home, I'll get out of it." I snapped back at him as I got up to barge out through the door.

"Hey!" he shouted back angrily, "Get back here right now!"

But I was already gone. I barged out through the door with mighty force. I was a soldier on a mission and I was not going to be stopped, not even by Eddie. The huge door slammed behind me but I didn't hear glass breaking, I guess it had already been all broken a long time ago by that point. The Ku Klux Klan and the Catholic nuns could enter the building, all that was left to fall off was the big metal door and the rest of the roof. I didn't look back when I barged out into the street. There was no turning back. I had already crossed that line and there was no turning back. So I started walking.

*Dwayne Jackson, I am coming for you and you will never know what hit you.*

# Chapter Nine

*It's a long and lonely road when you know you have to walk alone. Where are you Jeff? Where did you go? Does your soul even still exist? Is heaven for real? All that stuff Byron tells me about eternal paradise and being repaid according to what you've done. Justice will be served here in the physical because I am here and I exist. I exist and my own existence is a mystery even to me. I don't think the same way others do. They take life at face value but I don't. I look beyond, I seek the meaning, the soul. Why can't they be more like me? Why can't they understand that the struggle alone is just too much?*

*I look up at the stars at night, they are like satellites watching over me. All my thoughts come out of their den when the shadows fade. Maybe if I could fall asleep somewhere and see you again Jeff, maybe we could meet somewhere in my dreams. You'd be here and I'd be there and together we could go somewhere. I feel like I'm lost out here, like the stars in the sky at night just floating around in the atmosphere. Oh God, how I wish you could be my satellite. Come here and be the light that will guide me through the darkness. The guilt just shames me more. All the things that I try to hide are so much more obvious when it's not my own life. People are jealous because they see in me what they couldn't achieve. I will not be backing down this time. There is no forgiveness, or letting go, or letting God. If you're somewhere out there, I am calling out to you. Can you hear me now? They will hear me after this.*

*I remember that day that everything changed. I'm losing sight of reality and I'm losing the fight to still walk in a straight line. But what the fuck is straight in life anyway? I remember when something died inside of me. My heart? My conscience? And the world thinks that I have a problem now? They've got another thing coming! I don't walk around in blind obedience to life at face value. I walk around these streets with no hope with my eyes open just to remind myself that I can never let the memory fade away. Memories are trivial as they fade away and they can never be immortalized as the even the conscience will fade away along with whatever we preserved of our dear memories. And soon again we will all die and in a century there won't even be a memory of us. The stories will not have been passed down through the ages. If it's true what they say about the afterlife, it better be a nice freaking place.*

*If I die tomorrow, will there be anyone here to remember me? Do memories really go on until the end? Where does time begin and where does it end? I am so done with these endeavors. Meaningless. It's over. No longer. I will live to fight another day until I too fade away. But that's not enough. It never ends. Time is an endless waiting and in it it's so easy to fall apart completely. A concrete pillow, a man with no home. And I'm just supposed to get down on my knees and pretend that all the invisible people in the sky can mean something to me? There ain't no God on these streets! We've become desolate and hopeless, not that there was ever anything for us here in the first place. What is a battle without a cause? A bullet without a gun? Without you I can't bear to face the truth.*

*All I have is one last chance. I will not turn my back on you Jeffrey. Maybe I can't preserve what's left of you but there's nothing left to lose. I will do this for you. You left me but I will never leave you. An endless waiting passes me by but I've never left your side. In another place in another time I will see you again. My days begin and end with you. I wish I could forget and I wish I could forgive but it won't change the bottom line. I am here. With you. The end.*

It rained for days on end and there was no seeing the sunshine since I can't remember when. The people in the streets went about pretending like it was a day like any other. Their same faces looking like plaster, if they cracked a smile the whole face would fall apart. I wished I had my incredibly expensive stolen stray cat to cuddle with but it had probably been sold off to some Chinese restaurant to be cooked as expensive stew. At times my thoughts raced back to Eddie or even Jeff, but I didn't bother thinking too much about them since it wasn't healthy for me. It didn't feed my hatred. Thinking about them just made me want them back, yet it was for that very reason that I had set out on my mission. I was going to take back what was rightfully mine. The question was just how I was going to accomplish that. The days were long and the nights were cold. My stomach grumbled hungrily as I went on walking for days on end without a single bite to eat. I just wasn't hungry. I was weak but that didn't matter because I was a soldier. No matter where I seemed to walk all the buildings seemed to be the same. Only the faces in them changed.

*I don't know where I'm going, but I know where I want to go. God help me, I've come undone. The road is only long where you're missing home. Wherever I go, I arrive with nothing to show. I see all of these mindless people with smiles plastered across their faces like nothing else but the present moment*

*matters. It's apparent who has never had to face a hard day in their life. We hold our hands up to blind the sun because only the light is to blame for what we've done. This isn't the world I know. These thoughts are not mine, but belonging to someone I don't know. When I'm in my human form knowing too well what I'm about to do, everything has a glint of triviality to it. There are no glimmers of hope that shine in these eyes. Just what I think and what I know. But then again what's the truth in anything when all you know is said to be a lie?*

*If I could turn back the hands of time, I would change the entire course of history tonight. If only I could be granted a second chance, whatever it is that was done wrong would be made right. There would be no more tears, no more pain, no more nightmares and no more shattered dreams. Life would not be the absolute zero it is. Is there really such a thing as anything? Or only what we perceive it to be? Only what others tell us it is? So many people have told me to walk away, but what I never told them is that I've been walking my whole life. I'm in this world all alone and I realize that it's always been that way, and it's always going to be that way. I wish Jeff could still hold my hand through the storm but I know better than to think that way. Now it's a little too late.*

*Byron says that there is a time for everything. A time to laugh and a time to cry. A time for joy and a time for tears. A time to live and a time to die. A time to stay in the shadows and a time to step out. A time to walk in a straight line and a time to take a calculated risk. He says that God's hand is at work in everything in its due time. Well it looks like I haven't only been walking my whole life. If what Byron says is true, I'm going to burn for eternity in the lit coals of hell; the same place I am going to send Dwayne Jackson for what he did to my brother.*

The roads twisted and the roads turned, they went downhill and uphill. They wrapped around bodies of water and then there were some with fences right in the middle of them. I always managed to crawl underneath the fences of the gated neighborhoods to go do my creeping business. Nothing in life was foolproof or *homlessbumproof* for that matter. The fancy Mercedes and the Jaguars sped right passed me and didn't give me a second look. The cars and their paint jobs changed but the road seemed so eternal and without end. Finally I arrived to a place where the water met the land. I went around searching to see if I could find Jeff's footprints in the sand but his soul hadn't washed up on shore. I was never going to see him again. That very same day, whichever day that was, my hunger became

unbearable. How long had it really been? To me, time meant nothing more than counting down to the day Jeffrey was murdered. And even I couldn't see straight as to when that was exactly.

I must have been still in Yonkers because there were plenty of beautifully preserved parks. The suburbs were quiet and the buildings awfully reminded me of Eddie's shack. For a moment I wondered where he was staying at. I shook the thought out of my head as I looked up and saw the sun peaking through the puffy white clouds. Oddly enough the rays of bright yellow sunlight illuminated only me and where I was standing, everything else was still dark. I wanted to break down crying but I put my hand in my pocket and touched my gun. The bullet in the chamber was still in there patiently waiting for something that I didn't know would even be coming. So I kept walking. A neighborhood filled with nothing but government housing was up ahead. It brutally reminded me of Florida and my mom. We lived in one almost exactly like that. The light brown brick was exactly the same. The only difference was that we had lived in a duplex, the ones up ahead were all glued together like a puzzle gone bad.

I decided that it was time for a bite to eat, and one of the low-income housing apartments was going to be my restaurant. I walked quietly, minding my own business, down the mostly quiet street with only a couple of young kids playing around all the way to a lonely field behind the houses. A small body of water was the only thing back there. I couldn't see the bottom of the pond but I figured that it wasn't all that deep. I contemplated taking a bath for a while but I was too hungry and the place was probably not going to stay quiet for very long. And so I walked back to the other side of the field up to the backyard fences of the cheap government houses. They were quite tall, all made of the same dark wood, but they weren't tall enough to keep me out of the yards.

I climbed the fence of one of the houses, not knowing what I was going to find on the other side, and came crashing down in the green overgrown grass in the backyard. There didn't seem to be anyone home, but I could hear some people conversing and children playing in nearby yards. I couldn't see because the fence was too high but I could tell that they were close by. Underneath the kitchen window of the house there was a big plastic garbage bin, giving me access to the window which was quite high as well. I did my best to quietly mount the trashcan without falling off or causing some sort of distraction that would make the neighbors notice me. From up there I could see two yards away, there

was a young couple outside with a child playing in the yard. On the other side there was only a dog lazily sleeping outside in the sunlight. I was safe and undetected for the moment.

The window didn't appear to be locked so I put both hands on it and began sliding slowly. The window gently glided along with my hands until there was a crack big enough for me to enter the premises. I put one foot inside and then pulled the rest of my body through the window and successfully onto the kitchen counter inside. The place was almost exactly like ours on the inside. The same old off-white paint so darn old that it was beginning to peel off the walls. The beige doors were just like the ones I used to have, only the living room was arranged differently. Instead of being merged with the kitchen, it was crammed in the corner of the place in front of the staircase to go upstairs. Our place didn't have a second floor, only an ugly unfinished basement. When I was little I was always afraid that the monsters who lived in it would one day come up to get me. They never did, because I was the monster.

I opened up the door of a big stainless steel fridge and immediately saw some cheese so I took the slab of cheddar and devoured it whole right then and there. I sat in front of the fridge with the door resting against my shoulder and pigged out in whatever I could find that was to my liking. There was some spicy Italian lunch meat, some chocolate milk, ice cream in the freezer, as well as a half-eaten chocolate bar on the coffee table in the living room. For a while I laid down on the couch to let my food digest before continuing my journey and eventually fell asleep entirely. It was much more comfortable than sleeping under bridges or under patios and other odd places that were shielded from the frigid nightly winds, that was indisputable. I only awoke when I heard somebody inserting keys into the lock of the front door. I got up in a jiffy and torted back out through the open kitchen windows.

Jumping out I underestimated how high the window really was from the ground and I landed on my face again basically. I quickly recovered and kept running like a mad person all the way to the end of the yard that was quite big for the kind of house it was and jumped back over the fence, only to land on my face again. At that point I had no idea if anyone had seen or heard anything so I ran towards the little pond and jumped in it once and for all. It was only about four feet deep or so, shallow enough for me to walk in it with my head sticking out well above the surface of the water. For a short moment I regretted not taking a shower or a bath in the house and maybe getting a new pair of clothing if I could find something that fit me nicely. Since it didn't seem like anyone was coming for me, I kept walking.

*Dreams come slow and they go so fast. I still see him in my dreams sometimes, maybe one day I'll come to understand why. Never to touch and never to reach. Whoever said this pain would ever go away obviously didn't know what it meant to be here without you. Somewhere far beyond this world, I will feel nothing anymore. I will come again to join you, and nothing will ever be able to separate us from the eternal bliss that we deserve. We all make ourselves believe that we're going far. But in reality, are we even going anywhere? Progress is nothing but an illusion and in the end it doesn't even matter. Things aren't the way they were before. Once upon a time there seemed to be something called hope going around in the lives of people. What happened? It's like I woke up from a century-long sleep one day and this is all I came to find in life. There's honestly gotta be something more to life than this! There's gotta be something more to everything that we know exists! What about the unknown? Things unseen? There's no telling what those could be, and that's probably makes them so damn scary.*

Somewhere along the beaten path there was a lonely industrial railroad leading to somewhere different than where I was at. I figured that I must have gotten myself all the way back to Cobalt by then, like I had only kept on going round and round in circles the whole time, not looking for anything in particular, just telling myself that I was a soldier on a mission to keep myself from going completely crazy. As I walked by myself through a wooded area surrounding the railroad I couldn't help but wish that a wild animal would find me have a good lunch. But then again I would probably only have ended up pulling out my gun and shooting it, making a lunch for myself and whatever else lurked out there in between the trees where I couldn't see.

I walked all the way up to a clearing, and past it, the site of some new construction project. There wasn't anybody on site working, there wasn't anybody around whatsoever. I began feeling lethargic at that point in time. It's not like I hadn't been weak, famished and sleep-deprived before that point, but somehow it was different. I hadn't seen familiar civilization or even actual people in what seemed to be the longest time. I had only seen zombies programmed to do what they were told walking around in the streets with emotionless faces. I felt a complete separation from my own existence. Only my unspoken thoughts and bittersweet fantasies accompanied me on my journey. The voices in my head they didn't even talk to me. They didn't even tell me to lay down on the railroad and wait for the train to come rolling around the bend, I did that all on my own.

*Maybe, just maybe that bullet in the gun is meant for me. Maybe I am not supposed to be here either. Maybe this is nothing but a sick and twisted fantasy. There is nothing more to lose, and nothing more to be gained. All has already been said and done. There is nothing here left for me to do. You don't know what you've got until you lose it all over again. I will find the enemy within and I will end right where I began. I hate feeling this way, all my days feel the same. Yesterday was proof that tomorrow will too. How long had I really been gone? Days? Weeks? Months? Years? A lifetime maybe? My clothes are dirty, the water is cold, the clouds loom over me, and the train still hasn't arrived. So what am I waiting for? And then I woke up to the truth one day. And I went walking away to some place where nobody is ever going to find me.*

I came to realize that the train wouldn't be coming because there wasn't a train at all. The railroad hadn't been finished. The place wasn't a construction site in development, it was one that had been shut down years ago. By Dwayne Jackson. I was completely alone in my desolation. The half-finished buildings didn't even dare to loom over me. They stood their distance and didn't approach. I didn't look at them as I passed by because I was afraid to catch a glimpse of a choice that I had made long ago. I knew at that point that I had no choice other than to kill the motherfucker because the memories would simply never fade away.

*My focus shall not fail. My soul will prevail and I shall not despair. The memory is here to remind me. I remember that day that everything changed. It never fades away. I never want it to fall away from me. I don't know how I got this way. I know that I'll never be alright. Not until this over. If it ever ends. Pain is limitless. You cannot measure it or contain it. You can only choose how you're going to deal with whatever results of it. What goes up must come down. I wish that someone could be here to save me when I hit the ground. I never pictured life like this, with no shooting stars to grant my wishes. This is not the way life is supposed to be, somewhere along the way I must have gotten caught up somewhere in between. Sometimes I just take things way too far. I am going to do this. I am going to overcome this. But there are moments that I find myself not feeling so strong. The struggle alone is just too much. When I'm dead they'll know just who I am.*

The railway was a road to nowhere. But I kept on walking where the trees had been cut down for the train to pass through. I could hear water flowing somewhere nearby but I couldn't see it. I sure could



have used a drink. I could barely see the sky through the overgrown trees as I stepped off the path and went looking for the source of flowing, delicious, cold water. I thought I could see a clearing up ahead but I couldn't be sure. The Cobalt Conservation Area? I had never been there, but I knew it was out there somewhere. It hadn't just disappeared in the three years since Jeff had died. Maybe the fountain of life was flowing there, or maybe it was just sewage water, but whatever it was, I wanted to drink some. No matter how much I walked, the clearing seemed to be just as far as it was before. It was almost like the horizon over the Atlantic, you swim towards it and you're almost there but you look up ahead and the horizon is just as far away. Where time is an endless waiting, you never get to where you're going.

With my luck I fell face first into an empty ditch. There was no water, not even some mud for me to land in. Thankfully the ditch wasn't very deep, I got out easily and climbed up onto the other side. There were only a few leafy trees and when I got to the other side I didn't find the Cobalt Conservation Area. Instead I found the Cobalt Cemetery, that's where my brother was buried. I had never dared to venture there. I didn't even know where his grave was! The graveyard wasn't very big so I figured that it wouldn't be too hard to find but I wasn't sure if I wanted to go there. I wasn't sure if I was ready, or able at all, to face my inner demons and pay my respects to my brother who had given his life to save mine. I owed it to him to get down on my knees and mourn for a few minutes. It was enough as it was with the fact that I had never even gone to see his grave once after he was buried. I had had enough of the funeral. It would have been too much for me to see him be buried in a cardboard box. He had gotten the burial of a dog.

# Chapter Ten

At Jeff's makeshift funeral nobody had had enough money to buy him a real casket, so they put his body in a cardboard box. Not just some cheap wooden box, a real *cardboard box* like the ones you get when you buy a fridge. It was taped up with silver duct tape so nobody could see inside where the box had previously been cut up to liberate whatever fancy appliance was once in there. It didn't even seem real to me that it was *my* brother in that box, just lying there dead in a cheap box on top of a frame of metal pickets behind a run-down church that had long gone bankrupt because we had nothing else. The preacher man or whoever that man of God was that used to run the place still lived in the area and offered to have Jeff's body cremated at no cost to us. Randy gave himself permission to speak for my brother and allowed the old white-haired man to take my brother's body away, not knowing what he was really going to do with it.

"Jeffrey! Jeffrey!" I screamed out crying furiously as the preacher man was given my brother's body to be taken away.

Eddie and Richard pinned me down to the ground because I was freaking out and completely losing it. I screamed at the top of my lungs to no avail. I cried but there was nobody to dry my tears anymore. I hadn't even gotten a chance to say a proper goodbye to my brother.

"Calm down! Just please calm down," Eddie's exasperated voice begged me as I finally finished my fit of rage and grief, "we'll get him back, I promise you Ana."

"You don't know jack shit!" I snapped back.

We did get my brother back. A day or so later the man came back with a clear bag of grey dust, my brother's ashes. Ricardo literally dragged me out of Cap'n Crunch's loft back to the vacant church to say goodbye again to a bag of ashes that was put in another cardboard box. In the middle of my fistfight with Ritchie, Eddie arrived and gave me the medallion in Jeff's ashes. I put it on a chain and wore it around my neck ever since that day. Since nobody had a safe enough place to keep my dear brother's ashes, the municipality buried him along with a series of other bodies in plots that a local charity paid

for. I knew it was going to be a cheap burial, but I didn't have the heart to be there when he was put into the ground so I stayed home and clutched my new necklace.

# Chapter Eleven

I had no idea the kind of burial my brother really had been given until I stumbled into the charity area of the boneyard. His grave was the very first one next to the little paved path about halfway through the cemetery, on the far left side. At first the place looked like an empty field with nobody buried there yet, but that was a far cry from the truth. The place was filled with many unmarked graves. Only little rectangles of concrete were flat over each grave with only a last name and a number. That was all that was left of my brother. Just a last name and a number.

J. SIMS  
PLOT #307

And nothing else. As a matter of fact, how did I know it was even him? How could I know? Anybody could have our last name and have a first name that started with J! Was it even his cardboard box of ashes that they put in that plot? I fell down on my knees over his grave and broke down in an uncontrollable sob.

"Does it hurt when you breathe Jeff?!" I choked out through my tears, "Because it hurts when I do!"

*I never got the chance to say goodbye to you. Is there really a life after death? Is it true what Byron tells me about seeing you again once all of this is over? When you're young life is a dream, but when you get older you realize that there's nothing to be seen. The light will never touch your face again. Now that you're gone somewhere far beyond this world, I'm alone out here. Is anybody there? Does anyone care? The world will never know you like I do, Jeff. Nobody will ever love me like you did. Nothing in this life will ever fill the void that Dwayne Jackson created inside of me. That is the reason why I have to do this now. You are the reason things have to change Jeff. You are the reason I cannot turn back now.*

"I am so sorry Jeff! I am so so sorry!" I muttered out as I took a deep, painful breath, "It should've been me instead of you! It should've been me and not you."

For a moment I considered again pulling out my gun and pulling my brains out right then and there so I could be with him for eternity but I couldn't bring myself to be such a coward. I couldn't turn back without having gotten the answers I set out to find. Why did Dwayne Jackson have to kill my brother? Why did he want to kill me? What did it serve him? What did it leave me? Most importantly, how was I going to get him back? Because I couldn't let him get away with the murder of my brother.

"I've gotta go Jeffrey, I'm sorry I can't stay with you. I've got a mission to do. One that I have set out to do for you. Goodbye. I love you."

And so I collected myself, got up, and started walking again. I wanted to turn back so badly and just forget everything, put it behind me, but there was no doing that. Despite the fact that Cobalt was nothing but a small town, I didn't really know my way around it. It was spread out across miles and miles with nothing but rural roads and trees and vineyards and industrial lands and a billabong somewhere in the middle of that left by a massive flood in the early 1900s. I knew my way around Yonkers and most of upper Bronx though. Those were usually the places we hung out around, not the outskirts of Cobalt except for the factory lot, but nobody wanted to go back inside that building. All I had to do was find my way out of the village and find my way to Dwayne Jackson. The only thing that was left for me to do was find my way up to Washington Heights, pull the trigger, and deal with whatever resulted of that.

Once again all the streets seemed to be the same. I seemed only to be going round and round in circles again. Big buildings, small buildings, fancy buildings, abandoned buildings. Brown bricks. Concrete bricks. Missing bricks. Vacant lots. Dirt roads and paved ones, white Mercedes-Benz cars and black Ford trucks. I had no idea if I was coming or going or even moving at all. What if I was just kidding myself by creating some illusion of progress? What if I was nothing? What if I was never able to get to where I was going? It didn't seem to matter what I tried to do to keep the doubts and the fear out of my mind, they always found a way back inside. For the first time I was truly alone. There was no Jeff, no Eddie, no Ricardo. Just me. For the past three years I had grossly failed to realize what those boys really meant to me.

*Dear Jeff, there isn't anything I wouldn't do for you. I would lie. I would cheat. I would steal. I would kill. I would die. I would do it all for you my brother. I would break. I would crash and burn. I would suffer. I would do anything just to have you back for one more moment. I don't expect the world to understand this. The colors that this place shines surely aren't the nicest that I've ever seen. Oh Jeff, don't let me be lonely out here on my own. For you I would burn this whole world down. Light it up and sit back and watch the glow of the flames reaching up all the way to heaven. They say that everything black turns to grey and everything beautiful fades away. The radiance inside your eyes had never faded from my mind and this hatred has never faded from my heart. I am already dead. I will only rise to fall again. There's no turning back now. That's a choice I made long ago. Now I have some clarity to show you what I mean.*

Eventually, after hours, if not days of walking, I came to a secluded neighborhood behind a lonely railroad. The rails were always there, but the trains seem to have followed the underground railroad because they weren't around anymore. I first passed by several streets of run-down houses and low-income families before reaching the end of the very last stretch of road. It was just like in the movies where a poor neighborhood is built on a rich neighborhood. Or is it the rich that do that to the poor? But right in the middle of the street the two merged. Suddenly the shacks falling apart met houses with triple garages, backyard pools the size of New York City and driveways longer than the road I had walked lined with more cars than anyone could ever use in a lifetime. I should have been appalled by what I saw, but I wasn't. People who like to use fancy wording would call that being desensitized but I called it *life*. By that point I was so thirsty that I actually considered siphoning some gasoline out of one of them fancy ass cars and quench my thirst and just freaking die. It would have been a preferable alternative than dying *of* thirst.

About halfway down the street, right next to a big fancy grey brick house there was a medium-sized duplex with pink and white bricks and behind it a trench filled with water. It was the only middle-class building in the entire neighborhood, and I guess that it was right in the middle of the rich and the poor for a reason. But what I wanted more than a lavish lifestyle was the dirty water sitting in that trench in between the two properties. I walked over there without hesitation and threw myself on the damp ground near the trench, bent over on my knees and dunked my entire head underwater. I opened my mouth and swallowed some with a loud gulp before pulling out my head and letting the cold water drip all over my clothes.

"Well you sure look like you could use a drink!" a man with a Scottish accent called out from behind me, "Let me get you something."

I turned around, expecting some dude dressed in a fancy suit giving me a drink and telling me to get lost and to never set foot on his property again, but the man wasn't like that. He was an older man, grey hair, matching grey stubble, dark blue eyes with big bags under his eyes like he hadn't sleep in centuries and some casual clothes. There was a black oil stain on his faded blue jeans and I noticed that the nearby garage was open and he had some sort of industrial project going on in there with big creepy machines that looked like the kind that you use to build stuff. The man's dark blue shirt was clean but it didn't look new. He introduced himself as Robin Crowley, from some English place that ended in *shire* somewhere far away from New York. He walked over to me and handed me a can of club soda that wasn't too tasty to drink but I felt better almost immediately. I gulped down the whole can in only a few sips before standing up and walking over closer to the man.

"Do you want another one?" he asked me already knowing what the answer to that was going to be, "Come inside there's plenty more to drink."

I deliberated with myself for a few seconds as I trailed behind him to his side of the house weather or not I should go in with him but I reminded that I had a loaded gun in my pocket. I could make that man do anything I wanted him to by putting it to his head. So I decided to follow him inside the narrow entrance of the right side of the building. Immediately we were in a small kitchen with blue tiles everywhere and natural wood cabinets in one corner and the appliances in another with a tiny dark brown wood table right in the middle. It was covered in power tools and stuff like nails and screws and other creepy little gadgets. Robin brought me to the adjacent room which was a comfortable little living room with a very clean white carpet, two leather couches and a colossal flatscreen TV mounted on the wall. Dark drapes covered the windows so nobody could see in or out of the living room. I figured that Robin Crowley was a man that valued his privacy in a neighborhood where everything was probably nothing more than a big fake joke of a competition just to be better than the guy that lives next door.

"Here's some tea dear," Robin gently spoke in an almost whisper as he handed me a cup of what looked like green tea.

I took a sip and yup, it was green tea. I hated that crap. But I drank it anyway. If I was desperate enough to drink some of that nasty water in the trench, I could easily drink some of Mr. Crowley's warm green tea prepared with love just for me.

"I have to go finish up a project in the garage," he went on, "I need to bring it to work tomorrow but please feel free to take a shower and put on something warm. We can get you some more clothes later on, I just need to finish this first."

I nodded my head as he put on a plaid jacket and walked through the door, gently closing it behind him and leaving me the entire place to myself not knowing if I would find something of value or even a stash of money and run off with it. That idea was quite tempting but I was paranoid of getting into some petty trouble before having had the chance to carry out my mission. I started rummaging through the fridge for something to eat that wasn't disgusting or taken out of a garbage can. Downtown people threw their unwanted food out their windows as they drove down the street but in the outskirts of God knows where, I wasn't so lucky.

*And where the hell am I exactly?*

I was incredibly dirty so I stripped off all my clothes in the kitchen as I filled the large stainless steel sink with warm water. I rummaged through the counter until I found two brand new bottles of flower-smelling purple dish soap and started pouring some of it in the sink until enormous bubbles started to overflow everywhere. I sat down on the counter, put my freezing feet in the water, took some towels and indulged in a sponge bath. Water and bubbles overflowed everywhere onto the counter and the carpet and the floor but the experience was incredible. Real soap, clean warm water, nothing to worry about. After I was done washing myself I picked up my clothes off the floor and dunked them in the remainder of the water. I washed my clothes as best as I could before letting it dry on top of the back of the chairs and finally dunking my boots in the water. I was scrubbing with sponges and towels, still wearing nothing, when I heard the door slam behind me.

"What in the world are you doing?!" Robin's voice was shocked.



I was standing in his kitchen completely naked, with all my clothes wet except my Pennington's hoodie concealing a handgun folded on top of the kitchen table. For a fraction of a second I searched my mind for something to say but the only thing I could think of was *GET THE HOODIE BEFORE HE FINDS THE GUN!* So that's what I did. I bolted for the kitchen table and grabbed my hoodie in a fury before he could make a move. I put it on as fast as I could and put my hand in my right pocket. My gun was still there. Robin Crowley hadn't moved a single muscle. It was nothing but my paranoia of failing my mission settling in. Robin was not out to get me.

"Come here I'll get you something decent to wear."

I followed him into his bedroom where he pulled out the first shirt and underwear he found in his drawers and handed me the clothes.

"I'll properly wash yours," he said softly, seemingly taking pity on me, "you can wear this in the meantime."

*You know, the way I wash my clothes does just fine Mr. Crowley.*

"Thank you," I blandly whispered in return as I sat down on his bed and put on the clothes.

The white briefs were enormous but I managed to make them stay. The shirt was more like a dress too but it was definitely more decent than being naked. I buttoned up the brown shirt and looked at myself in the mirror behind the closed bedroom door. I didn't look all that awful. My hair was decent and the clothes, well, they were Robin's clothes. I dug up some socks from the bottom drawer of his dresser and put them on and unrolled them all the way up to my knees. Next up I looked through the closet for a hat and some sunglasses and paraded for myself in front of the mirror. I dug through some more clothes and switched up my outfit again once my little parading around was over and I started again. I eventually ended up with a camouflage coat and an NYPD hat so I took out my handgun and pointed it at the mirror. I looked pretty badass.

"This is it," I whispered to myself, "the apocalypse."

Afterwards I took off all the clothes and tried to put it back where I took it and put back on the original clothes Robin had given me to wear. I grinned at myself in the mirror one last time and for the first time since I had set out on my mission things weren't so bad. I had fun playing dress up, like teenage kids are supposed to.

"Mr. Crowley, are my clothes dry?" I asked as I walked into the living room where he was sitting, "I should get going soon."

"I've just put them in a dryer love," he replied gently, "but you know you don't have to go! At least have a bite to eat and spend the night! Tomorrow before work I'll bring you to the train station if you want."

I contemplated his offer for a moment. After all I did need to get to Washington Heights. But more importantly, where the hell was I anyway?"

"Uh, yeah, sure," I mumbled out, "and by the way, which city is this?"

"We are in Pigeon Creek, New York, dear. The municipality has been amalgamated with Croton-On-Hudson so if you need something we'll have to take a little ten-minute drive to the downtown."

"How far is Croton-On-Hudson from Cobalt?"

"Half an hour by car I'd imagine. Is that where you need to go?"

"Oh God! I've been out here for days and I've only made it to *here*?! But no, I need to get to Washington Heights."

"I'll take you there no problem dear."

I agreed to Robin's proposition and we made arrangements to get me to Washington Heights first thing after breakfast in the morning. In the meantime, Robin took me downtown Croton-On-Hudson to buy me some new clothes since he said that mine were rags. Yes, I had had them for years, probably most of my life, and they were quite torn but they were still very much wearable. I wore them to the store and some people looked in my direction in disgust since Croton and Pigeon Creek were mostly upper-middle class communities without people like me. People looked at me like I was either an alien that landed from another planet or a domestic terrorist looking to hijack a shopping mall. But all of that crap didn't stop Robin Crowley and I from going on a little shopping trip.

"Here, I'll give this to you while it's on my mind," Robin told me as he handed me a twenty dollar bill, "in case Washington Heights doesn't pan out and you need to come back."  
"Thank you Mr. Crowley," I replied apathetically, "but once I get to Washington Heights I will not be coming back."

I skipped the part regarding why that was.

"Ready to do some shopping?"

"Rock and roll!"

The two of us started by visiting a few downtown shops selling your average clothes. Not the thrift store but not the Queen of England's wardrobe either. Robin pressured me to buy myself at least two complete outfits but I hadn't shopped for clothes in such a long time that I didn't even know what I was supposed to look at in the shops. So I started by checking out the price tag on a black windbreaker but it indicated \$130 so I moved on to looking at something else.

"Did you like that jacket Anastasia?" Robin asked as he trailed behind me.

"I don't like the price tag," I replied in a neutral tone, "that's all."

"Come on! I'll buy it for you anyway. That's why I brought you here didn't I?"

"Mr. Crowley, I didn't agree to this to ruin you."

"I have more than I could ever need. It's you and me now, come on, bring the coat."

He twisted my arm and finally I just grabbed the jacket and lugged it around over my shoulder as I looked at the other clothing in the store. Robin went on and on about how the cold weather would soon be moving in and I should pick out a hat for myself and some new boots and blah blah blah. I nodded my head every time Robin asked if I liked something just to save everyone unnecessary trouble. There was a part of me that felt guilty to just let a complete stranger spend money on me without having anything but a bullet to give in return. I stuck my hand in my pocket and ran my fingers over my gun. I needed to find a way to Washington Heights before the morning because the weight of the situation was really starting to fall over my head.

"Let's head to the mall a little further downtown for some shoes?" Mr. Crowley glanced at me in approval as he gave his credit card to the clerk in order to pay for my clothes.

"Yeah," I replied looking in another direction, "sure."

The two of us walked two blocks to a small strip mall with a bunch of women's fashion stores and outlets. It wasn't really my style but I went anyway. What did I have to lose? There was no other way I was going to get that kind of clothes otherwise!

"Shoe store first." I muttered to Robin as he walked up to the front of the mall.

He nodded at me and we walked in to a small shoe shop where they sold almost every kind of shoe imaginable as well as making custom footwear for people with fat wallets. I spent most of my time glancing out the window instead of looking at the actual shoes. My boots were fine. And I wanted out of Croton-On-Hudson.

"I have to go to the bathroom." I told Robin as he was chatting with the clerk, looking for a particular kind of footwear for himself.

"Just over here," the young woman pointed to a door near the front entrance of the store.

I looked up and saw a washroom sign so I walked in that direction with some bags of clothes from previous stores under my arm. Robin had the rest but I had to make a run for it *right now*. There could be no waiting around or making plans to get the rest of the clothes and then run off. *The time is now*. So I slipped out of the front doors and made a run for it down the street, just hoping and praying that Robin hadn't seen me. I knew that it would take some nine and a half hours to get from Croton to where I needed to go but in spite of time, the weather and my own body not being on my side, I started walking anyway. I did my best to stay out of the downtown areas of places I passed through just in case Robin was somewhere behind me wanting to pick me up off the streets again. The only thing I regretted when I ran for it was not having been able to properly thank him for everything he had done for me.

*Keep it together Ana. Dammit keep it together!*

After some three hours of walking I made it to Millwood and took a bus to Hawthorne. I hopped on without paying and jump off paying even less. I grinned at what I had done in delight. I then walked the remaining three hours to Lennie's loft in Cobalt. Robin hadn't come after me. Nobody had. But Lennie was quite surprised and alarmed to see me on his doorstep after having been gone for nearly two weeks.

"What are you doing here?!" the old man asked when he saw me on the other side of the door.

"Can I crash for the night?" I asked in shame and embarrassment, "I need to get to Washington Heights in the morning."

"Where the hell have you been? Eddie said you just bolted one day and nobody ever saw you again!"

"Yeah, that's kind of what happened. I got angry and I went on a really long walk."

"Well thank goodness you're alright! Come on in!"

So I walked into his loft and nothing had changed except that there was more dust than there had been two weeks ago. The boys were not in the house. It was just me and Cap'n Crunch.

"We were staring to think you were dead out there, kid." Lennie's throat appeared to be clogged up as usual.

"It'll take a lot more than that to kill me!" I snapped back, "Will the boys be back tonight?"

"Nope, I'm not expecting to see them tonight but I can take you to them down in Bronx though."

"Nah, I don't want to see them. I need to get to Washington Heights."

"Can you wait until the morning? Take the train! At least sleep in a real bed tonight!"

Cap'n Crunch twisted my arm and I eventually agreed to stay for the night. As I laid in bed that night it came to me that I hadn't gotten any farther in the day than I would have if I had just stayed with Robin Crowley. I could have easily gotten on some form of public transportation instead of stopping by the loft but I was hungry and tired and at the end of the day sleeping in the cheap bed I usually got at the loft was probably the best thing I could have landed in. I slept about five hours, a quiet and dreamless sleep, before I grabbed a few snack bars and shoved them in my pockets before I barged out the door. I

had on some of the new clothes Robin had gotten for me with the rest plus my old clothes in a blue backpack. Despite Robin's words echoing in the back of my mind, I still wore my old Pennington's hoodie. After all, it was the hoodie that carried my murder weapon, I kind of needed it. I tried to be as quiet as possible when walking out the door so I wouldn't wake up Lennie but he heard me anyway.

"Take the money under the sink for the bus!" Lennie had heard me anyway.

"Thanks man!" I shouted as the door slammed behind me.

That was the last time I heard the old man's voice.

## Chapter Twelve

My plans had already been made. I had already taken the money under the counter without Cap'n Crunch's knowledge. I walked the short distance to Dobbs Ferry from Cobalt and took public transit all the way down to Marble Hill and then walked the rest of the way down to Washington Heights. By the time I got there after all the delays and the waiting and the stopping to breathe in the fresh air the city had woken up and business as usual was under way. City Hall was open and in session so it was my chance to get Dwayne Jackson once and for all and just finish what I had spent so much energy on to accomplish. I asked for some directions to City Hall and then barged right in through the front doors.

"Good morning!" I was greeted by the secretary at the reception desk.

"Is councillor Dwayne Jackson in the building this morning?" I asked trying to be as civil and polite as I could.

"No, I'm sorry, he won't be in office for another week or so. Would you like to leave your name and number and I will pass along a message to him to get back to you?"

"Uh, no thanks. I'll come back in a week or two. Thank you."

"Have a nice day!"

"You too."

I walked out of that city hall feeling more deflated than ever. I had wanted to badly to just see that one last look on his face before I blew him away in the middle of City Hall. I had gone through all that trouble to finally get down to Washington Heights for absolutely nothing because the fucker wasn't even around!

*Dammit!*

For the longest time I sat on the sidewalk at an intersection near the City Hall, just waiting for some idea regarding what to do next to just pop into my head and get into motion. The only thing I could possibly think of was either walk back or take public transit back to Yonkers and see if Eddie was home, apologize for all the shit I had done and ask him to help me somehow. I regretted the way things had

ended between the two of us before I left. If there was a single person I still cared about in the entire universe, it was him. I wanted to feel the warmth of his presence again. After having spent extended periods of time away from the boys I missed their annoying company. And then something I had heard Jeff say echoed in the back of my mind.

*"I've done nothing that requires forgiveness. I've only done what I needed to do to survive."*

I smiled softly at myself. Eddie lived according to that philosophy as well. Do what you've gotta do and fuck the rest. But it wasn't like that for me. I went round and round aimlessly in circles not being able to find what I was looking for. I wasn't even sure what that was supposed to be anymore. I didn't know anything about life. I didn't know anything about anything.

"I miss the sound of your voice Jeff," I whispered to myself as I held back tears, "sometimes the silence screams so loud and the loneliness won't leave me alone."

In a surge of anger I got up from the sidewalk and got to the nearest bus stop and made my way to Yonkers to see Eddie. Thinking about Jeff made me realize just how short life really was and how even the last person I loved on earth could be taken from me in the blink of an eye. I would have been completely lost without Eddie after Jeff died. He and Byron were really the ones that kept me walking in a straight line after Jeff was murdered. The others cared, it was obvious, but they weren't Eddie or Byron. They weren't Jeff. They couldn't fix me. They couldn't bear my grief for me. They couldn't take the burden of survival by yourself out in the streets for me. Were all the things I had done really forgivable because I needed to do them in order to survive? Maybe Byron's God would go ahead and say yes, but I didn't know anything about that. Getting even was all I wanted.

Back in Yonkers I barged into Eddie's shack but it was empty. There was nothing left in his room either. He had moved out. There was nobody except me in the neighborhood it seemed. In my despair and loneliness I collapsed to the floor and started to cry and ask out why. WHY?! I knew that Lennie would probably be able to fetch him for me but I wasn't in the mood to have to go through that or see the others. I knew that they'd give me an earful about my long walk and not even writing or calling for two weeks straight. I wasn't up for that. I didn't have the courage to face that. Once I dried up my tears I



unloaded the gun and put it in my backpack for my own safety. It was the first time my own safety even crossed my mind. I suddenly longed for Eddie and I wanted to live another day to see him again. I simply laid down on the bare floor and listened to the wind blowing through the broken window.

After an unknown amount of time passed by, I heard footsteps coming up the skimpy metal staircase. The Ku Klux Klan? Catholic nuns maybe? The door to Eddie's old room was still open but I was arranged in a way that I could see out into the hallway. I had no way of knowing who was coming up or what that person was coming up to do. I closed my eyes and imagined that it was one of my own coming up to see me. Or maybe it was Jeff coming back to get me and everything was just one big nasty dream and I would soon wake up from it and everything would go back to normal. I wouldn't have to go out and kill Dwayne Jackson because he wouldn't have ever killed my brother. I would still live with my mom and my dad and Jeff in a little pink house on a hill with blue skies up above. But that's not what I saw when I opened my eyes.

"There you are!" Robin Crowley's voice exclaimed joyfully as he walked into the room.

I wanted to cry when I saw him walk through that door but I couldn't bring myself to shed a tear. I stayed on the floor right as I was and Robin got down on his knees to push my dirty hair out of my face and gently stroked my cheek.

"Why did you leave?" his voice was just a soft whisper, "Did you get scared?"

"I don't know," I choked up almost crying, "I couldn't keep on doing what I was doing."

"What are you running from? Just come back home, I'll take care of you."

"No, I can't go back."

"You don't have to sail this world alone."

I didn't speak. I only wanted Jeff, Eddie. Robin eventually just got down next to me and held me in his arms. I held on to him with a tight grip so he wouldn't leave me. I couldn't stand to be lonelier than I already was.

"How did you find me?" I couldn't help but ask after an eternity of silence.

"I knew you were headed down to Washington Heights," Robin's voice was gentle and tender, "so I called up some of my friends and asked them if you had made it okay or if something had happened to you and that's why you disappeared on me."

"I'm sorry about that. It just couldn't wait."

"You could've just told me and I would have made arrangements for you to get there and do what you had to do."

"I'm sorry. So did you follow me here after I left Washington Heights?"

"No, actually the person I called to see if you were okay was the clerk who sold you the tickets to come here."

I chuckled under my breath.

"Go figure."

"And considering the condition I found you in at my place, I kind of figured that you were homeless so I asked around the place and some street guys told me that you and your friends bunked in this neighborhood."

"Yeah, the homeless communities kind of all know each other around here."

"It's good that you all look out for each other like that."

"Yeah, you can say that."

Robin Crowley and I spent the long cold and lonely night in Eddie's former shack. I refused to go back to Robin's duplex so he sacrificed his time and dignity to stay with me instead. For that he earned my highest degree of respect but I knew that in the morning he would have to go to work and I'd have to go back to being lonely and having to figure out how to move on without having to deal with my old life.

*I've come way too far to give up now. I know that's just the way it goes. Inside I realize that I'm the one confused. I understand the consequences to my choices and my actions. It is crucial that I don't lose focus. It is essential that I keep my eyes on the prize in this mission of mine. This world can break my back but it cannot break me. Things may be pitch black around me, but I still find a way to see. In life*

*there are so many missing pieces and only so much that you can do to fill in the blanks. I do not want forgiveness for what I'm about to do, I only want the world to know that I had to do it.*

In the morning, as expected Robin had to leave for work but not before he gave me some money for public transit and his home address. After he left I did the only true thing I knew how to do, so I started walking.

*Learn to walk away, but I've been walking my whole life.*

# Chapter Thirteen

Cold, that was the only thing I felt. A cold, hard damp surface. My back was sore and it ached painfully as I tried to get my face off whatever it was that I was laying on. I was face down on my stomach on something not all that comfortable and as I slowly started to become awake I thought I heard the sound of flowing water. It was close but I wasn't quite there. All sorts of sounds came alive all around me as my mind slowly awakened. Even my head seemed sore and momentarily about to blow but that kind of pain wasn't unknown to me. Despite everything I still managed to pull myself up and sit up on my knees, tilt my head back and just stretch my aching body.

Everything around me wasn't so black anymore. The sky was of a dark blue, progressively becoming lighter on the other side of the river. The sun was about to rise somewhere above the tree line not too far from me. The distant sky had already begun turning blaze orange with a few patches of dark yellow. There was also a slight breeze, very slight but chilly. That did not help the fact that my clothes were still damp from being soaked in water from the rain that came down the previous night. The bottle of Captain Morgan was still there as well. I had almost gotten to the bottom. There was no doubt in my mind that I totally could have if I hadn't just passed out right then and there on an enormous boulder at the mouth of some unknown river right in the path of a dam. It hadn't opened, probably because I would've been way too happy if I had gotten swept away.

"Hey!" an unknown male voice shouted from behind me, "Hey! You down there! Get back up here right now!"

At first I thought it was the police wanting to arrest me, after all trespassing on the property of a hydroelectric station was a pretty serious offense. But when I got up on my two feet, grabbed my backpack and turned back to put a face to the voice I saw that it was a young man of not more than eighteen years of age. Maybe even a little younger. He was waving his arms up and down and shouting something in gibberish.

"Get out of the basin!" the young man shouted again through a bunch of other things that I couldn't understand.

Then it occurred to me when I heard an overly loud sound of screeching metal only a few feet from me. The old rusted dams started to open up and water came violently rushing out. For the first time in a long time I felt pure fear. As much as I would have liked to put an end to everything right then and there, the overwhelming sense of fear that swept over me in that moment was the only thing that prevented me from being swept away by the water that seemed to be coming out of everywhere. I rushed as fast as I could across a couple of boulders separating the water from the land and up the small rock wall separating me from the bridge up above. By the time I got there the boulders were completely submerged underwater. The young man only had time to grab me by the collar of my shirt and violently pull me up onto the railroad before most of the rock wall was underwater too.

"Holy smokes man," I choked out, "you just saved my butt."

Above the hydro dam only a few feet away there was a bridge for cars and not too far from it there was the skimpy narrow bridge for the train that the dude and I were standing on. Below us there was nothing but raging water. The bridges were two small sections, connecting on each side of a miniature island only housing a single building surrounded by an enormous barbwire fence. The place was old, the concrete had started chipping off the walls and crumbling down nearby. The old 1930s windows looked like they were about to fall off the building at any moment and were covered in large, rusted steel bars. Nothing and no one was going to get in or out of there through the windows. There was a large brick chimney sticking out from the far left side of the roof like it was a giant smelter or some other creepy thing like that.

"What is this place?" I asked as I looked in horror at the decaying building.

"Welcome to the Old Sylva power plant!" the young man replied giggling, "The creepiest thing in Old Sylva and probably in the entire state of New York."

"Damn, that thing looks like Alcatraz. Honestly, a lot scarier than Alcatraz. Maybe more like Auschwitz."

"So what brings you to the Alcatraz-Auschwitz power station yo?"

"I just wanted to get away from everything and everyone, *yo*."

"Well it sure looks like I came at just the right time eh?"

"Yeah, thanks for that, whatever your name is."

"I'm Connor Patterson, nice to meet you."

"Thank you Connor Patterson, I'm Ana Sims but everyone calls me Drifter."

Before I continued the conversation I just had to stick my hand in my backpack and make sure that my gun was still in there. It was. Despite all the fear, the confusion and the commotion, just the tip of my fingers touching the muzzle of the handgun enabled me to breathe easier. I was still quite shaken up by the whole thing, but having Dwayne Jackson loom over my head all the time made what had just happened seem like a grain of sand on a beach or a drop of water in an endless sea compared to what I had to go through when I lost my precious big brother.

"Where are you headed to Drifter?" Connor asked me as he started walking and signaled to follow me.

"Anywhere but here for a while I guess," I replied somewhat angrily.

"Are you headed anywhere towards Queens? That's where I'm going."

"I guess that's where I'm going too now."

"Come and take a ride in my time machine!"

I followed Connor off the railroad bridge and passed the deserted bridge for cars. Just a few feet on the other side of Alcatraz station Connor's 1972 Nova was parked on a small dirt shoulder. The car was old and rusted and had been spray-painted a deep forest green because there were a lot of inconsistencies in the paint job. In a way it kind of made the car look like camouflage. I grinned as I opened the door on the passenger's side and sat down inside.

"You're brave eh," Connor spoke softly as he made the engine roar to life, "to just climb into a car with somebody you don't even know."

"Well I've got a gun in my backpack and I've got nothing to lose," I taunted him in return.

"You sound like a girl on a mission."

"I am."

"That's hot."

I didn't speak for a while as Connor turned the car around and drove back to Queens from Old Sylva. The sun was just rising making it for a spectacular view before everyone else woke up and turned the day into a waste.

"So, Connor Peterson," I taunted again, "what were *you* doing at Old Alcatraz generating station at this time of the morning?"

"That's where I go when I just want to get away from everything and everyone and simply watch the sunrise over the water in peace," he replied with a smirk on the side of his face, "and by the way, look at what's on the backseat."

I grinned menacingly at him before quickly peaking behind me and seeing a black pump-action shotgun in plain sight just sitting there on the backseat. I just grinned at Connor before turning back and noticing some red shotgun shells lying around the floor.

"When did you decide you wanted to be a thug, Connor Peterson?"

"When did *you* decide you wanted to be a thug who carries a gun in her backpack?"

"I was eleven years old. My brother was murdered when I was thirteen. And now I think that after three long years it's time that I kill the man who did it."

"Interesting. Well my uncle raised me pretty much my whole life and he's a thug, so it's kind of in my blood you know."

Despite the surrounding circumstances Connor and I managed to engage in a mitigating conversation during the short drive to the outskirts of Queens. In a sweeter kind of way, Connor kind of looked like a really badass version of Zac Efron with his dark sandy hair falling over parts of his eyes like that. The early morning sunlight brightly illuminated his green diamond eyes and I couldn't help but notice a small scar over his right eye. The little white scar was barely noticeable on his light skin. His nose was slightly crooked to one side, another barely noticeable feature, but I figured that it had ended up like that after being broken when he was younger. He was a young man of your average build so he could've been anyone but he wasn't *everyone*, because not everyone rides around with a twelve gauge shotgun in the backseat of a classic car.

As we rode back to the city from the boondocks of Old Sylva I saw Connor checking me out as well and examining my features and dirty clothing. My black hair had started to grow out, despite recently getting brand new clothes there were already holes and tears in them. I had a few other pieces in better condition in my backpack but I wanted to save them as much as possible just in case an occasion presented itself for which I needed to look at least semi-respectable and not like the homeless bum I was. There was no doubt in my mind that Connor new I was a drifter and a gangster not only because of my stereotypical appearance but because of my demeanor and behavior towards him. And then there was the one in a million chance that Connor and I were known to each other. Or maybe he was part of an enemy gang. But at the end of the day the government was our common enemy.

"Where are you from?" I asked Connor out of curiosity.

"A little of Bronx and a little of Whitehaven, New Jersey," he replied keeping his eyes fixated on the road, "and you?"

"Cobalt. You know, behind Dobbs Ferry."

"Yeah, I know where that is. Some of the best wine in the entire state of New York comes from that little vineyard on the lake over there. It's also close to the bridge I always use to get back to the New Jersey side. Have you ever been to Whitehaven?"

"Nah, never crossed the bridge to New Jersey. But I know where Whitehaven is, it's like right across the Hudson from where you can overlook the river from the waterfront in Cobalt."

"Exactly! Right next to Palisades Park! Just an old piece of crap little place in the boondocks right on the border of New York and New Jersey. But that's home really."

"That's cool man, so what are you doing so far from home in a place far worst than whatever old pieces of crap you can find in Whitehaven?"

"I've got some business to do in Bronx but I also have some roots in Old Sylva. I used to spend my summers there and from time to time I like to visit again and get a little taste of the days when things were better."

"I understand."

And I did all too well. I felt the exact same way about Florida and living with my mom. I missed my mom a lot, about as much as I missed Jeff. I had coped well with her death though. I understood



terminal illness a lot better than murder. To the day I still had no dang idea as to why a city councillor would want to murder someone like my homeless bum of a brother.

"So, Connor Peterson," I began again after a few moments of silence, "are you some kind of Heisenberg?"

"No," he chuckled, "I've never been into drugs. My uncle Damian is a weapons dealer and I'm the deliveryman."

"The black market I take it."

"The *only* market."

I grinned at him and I saw him grinning back from the corner of my eye. There was a mutual understanding between us as to why we were both there riding in his car.

"Is that a special delivery in the backseat?" I taunted.

"That's actually to deliver a very important message about crossing territorial lines," Connor replied in a very serious tone of voice, "one of the assholes who hang out by the abandoned shipping docks just south of Queens pissed off my uncle and he really shouldn't have done that."

"So you gonna go blow his brains out with that?" I chuckled.

"No," Connor replied in a serious tone again, "just give him a little warning."

"Well I must be in the wrong business."

"And you, where are you from? What do you do? Let's stop talking about all the shit I've done wrong and tell me more about you."

"Homeless. Got some homies in Cobalt. I've got a gun and a single bullet and I want to kill Dwayne Jackson."

"From Washington Heights."

"That's right."

Connor and I had some mutual respect for each other and what we did. He wasn't too far from me and I wasn't too far from him. We were on the same level. Different worlds did not separate us. Maybe to some degree he reminded me of Eddie.

"So," I rambled on as we arrived in Queens, "you're taking me on a ride-along?"

"You and me," he replied smiling at me, "we belong to the same class of people. So yes, I'm taking you on a ride-along. Have you ever done this before?"

"Yeah, my gang bros have done some pretty nasty shit in front of my face but I've never actually done it myself. I want to, but it's the city councillor that I want to do."

"We can do him after. It could be pretty fun. Bonnie and Clyde. Natural Born Killers."

"He's away for now, that's the only reason I haven't already killed him."

"Why aren't your gang mates with you on this?"

I chuckled under my breath. They thought it was okay to just break into some old man's house and rob him of his life savings but it's not okay to get your rightful revenge.

"They don't think it's worth it to kill Dwayne Jackson," I finally spit out after a long moment of silence, "they want me to stay gold."

"Ponygirl huh?" Connor laughed loudly, "But your guys have a point. They care about you. You can't hold it against them."

Connor had a point. The guys *did* care about me and they only did what they had to do in order to survive. It wasn't a good life. It wasn't a nice life. But in gangs as small as the one I belonged to, we had to defend our territory. There was going to be some blood spilling and a rampant infliction of fear. Eastern Cobalt belonged to *us*. The world belonged to *me*.

"When we get near the docks I'm gonna ask you to hide in the back of the car so they still think I'm alone," Connor spoke seriously, "I don't want to get you into trouble because I'm sure my uncle Damian will have great plans for you if you wanna stick around."

"Help me kill Dwayne Jackson," I was more serious than I had ever been in my entire life, "and then I'll do whatever you want."

"You've got yourself a deal, but first I've gotta take care of this business."

"Deal."

As we arrived near the old shipping docks south of Queens, Connor gave me the signal to jump in the backseat and crouch down so nobody would see me back there. I felt vulnerable because I had left my backpack with my handgun in the front seat. While I was at it I collected a few of the shotgun shells and loaded the gun for Connor and whatever he was going to do with it. In the matter of just a few minutes the old car came to a screeching halt and Connor got out, letting the door slam behind him, and then reach through the open window and grab the shotgun.

"You really shouldn't have done that Ratablavasky!"

That was the only thing I heard Connor say as he walked farther away from the car before gunshots erupted in the distance a few moments later. Fast forward a few more seconds and the shotgun came flying back in through the window and landing on the backseat before Connor practically jumped in the car and took off in a fury. More gunshots erupted from behind immediately after and some bullets shattered the back window of the car and Connor muttered a long list of profanity.

As sat up to see what was going on and I saw that Connor had blood on his face and there was some dripping off his hands and onto the steering wheel. He didn't appear to be in pain and he didn't appear to have been shot, but *he* had obviously done something.

"Get down!" he angrily shouted at me as I climbed up into the front seat with him.

"Yeah right, get down," I snapped back as I got the shotgun and loaded a round into the chamber, "I'm in this too now."

Connor grinned at me for a fraction of a second but the smile was soon wiped right off his face as more bullets broke the windows and one completely obliterated the mirror on the passenger's side. Connor then made a very sharp turn that send me plowing into him with a loaded pistol grip shotgun and him plowing into the door on his side. All the loose junk in his car went swinging around all over the place as well but the only thing going on in our minds at that point was to get out of that piece of crap abandoned shipping dock alive and in one piece. Nothing else mattered. A million dollars could've flown out the window and it would not have mattered. All we wanted was to hang on to our dear lives for just another few moments.

The adrenaline running through my veins completely consumed me. It had been so long since I had stepped out onto the battlefield. There was an aspect of it that I liked. It gave me some twisted sense of satisfaction. It gave me the feeling of making a difference. I was just going to leave the world a colder place than it already was, but I was standing up for a cause that I believed in. I would die a martyr. I would go down in history. Everyone would remember my name. But I wasn't ready. I still had a mission to accomplish. If I was going to die, it wouldn't have been a satisfying death. I simply wasn't ready.

"I see the message wasn't received," I spitefully told Connor as we left the shipping docks.

"Now we've just gotta get rid of these punks," Connor's voice was shaky, "but we're still in the boonies and it don't look like they are going to get off our butts."

"Well they won't ignore my message," I spoke apprehensively as I stuck half my body out the window and sat on the car door with my feet on the seat.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Connor shouted in return as he grabbed my foot and tried to get me back in the car.

But he didn't succeed. I had the shotgun loaded and ready to go and I was going to blow away Ratablavasky and whoever else was in that little yellow Jeep behind us. As the got closer and got ready to fire at me I noticed only two individuals inside the vehicle; the driver and some other dude with blond hair holding a pistol in his hand, kind of like Connor and me except that my gun was bigger and the two of them were going to find out the hard way when I pulled the trigger.

"Get down right freaking now!" Connor shouted as he did his best to drive and watch out for the punks inching closer and closer to us.

And then I fired the gun. The thing recoiled into my right eye, probably giving me an enormous black eye but I loaded another round into the chamber and fired again. The second time I hit the Jeep and destroyed the window but I wasn't able to see if I had hit anyone. The Jeep swerved a little bit but it wasn't long before the shooter stuck his arm out the window and that hand had a very itchy trigger finger. I briefly ducked back into the car to avoid a fury of bullets coming my way, but a few seconds after the shots were fired I got back out there and fired the two remaining rounds in the shotgun. I hit the driver fair and square because the Jeep swerved and was about to plow into an abandoned

industrial garage but the passenger, still armed with his handgun, shot one last time, having a very good and clear aim at me, and hit me. I dropped the shotgun into the street below me and ducked back into the car holding one side of my head with my hand. That's where I had felt the bullet. I reluctantly took my hand away and looked at it. There was only a small amount of light red blood on it, so the wound wasn't all that bad. Half of my face wasn't missing.

"Oh gosh!" Connor seemed frightened, "Are you okay?! Turn around and look at me!"

I turned over to his side, pulled my hair out of my face and let him examine the wound. He seemed to be incredibly relieved to see whatever it was on the right side of my head.

"The bullet only grazed you," he let out a huge sigh of relief, "but part of your ear is missing."

Connor pulled out a purple rag out from under the seat and gave it to me so I could apply pressure to the small wound. I could breathe a little easier knowing that it was just a little piece of flesh at the bottom of my ear that had gotten destroyed by the bullet and not anything more serious. The message had been received, that was one less problem looming over my head, but Connor and I still had to get out of that thug neighborhood without getting stopped by the police in our bullet-ridden car.

"Is it bad?" I asked Connor as I removed the towel pressed against my ear.

"Nah," he said in a soft voice, "but you won't be wearing pendant earrings anymore."

I chuckled in relief.

"Thanks."

"You're lucky as hell that you turned at just the right moment so the bullet *only* got the bottom of your ear and not something more serious!"

"Yeah, no kidding. I just hope that this is to the liking of your uncle because it cost me a piece of my ear!"

"Oh Drifter, he will love you!"

That gave me a twisted sense of satisfaction. A sense of belonging, making a difference. As the reality of what had just happened began to sink in I raised my hands up in the air and cheered. Connor began to cheer along with me for a while until he parked the car in the back alley of an old corner store and signaled me to follow him.

"We'll leave the car here and take public transit the rest of the way," he said as he unscrewed the New Jersey license plates from the car, "and you'll put these in your backpack and take them back to my uncle Damian."

I nodded in agreement and we went on our way. At the bus station we cleaned ourselves up in the bathroom before boarding the first bus out of Queens. To avoid being noticed by possibly witnesses to what had gone down in the shipping docks we changed busses and trains often and took the long way back to New Jersey. That meant passing through the heart of Washington Heights and right passed City Hall. Both Connor and I looked intensely at the building and there was no doubt in my mind that he was thinking the same thing I was. In that moment I prayed that the police wouldn't arrest us before we had the chance to carry out our mission. The pressure was mounting on me to accomplish what I had set out to do. My train of thought was interrupted when Connor's cellphone rang in his coat pockets. His clothes weren't all that much nicer than mine.

"Uncle Damian!" he spoke with a grin on his face, "Yes, it's done."

A grin appeared on my face too as I listened to him have a very brief and cryptic conversation over the phone. After a couple of hours of hopping off and on of public transit constantly, the two of us finally arrived in Whitehaven in the early afternoon. Upon being dropped off at the bus station there, I looked around the little neighborhood. It was a mixture of antique beauty with modern functionality. Of course as Connor and I walked to the neighborhood where his uncle Damian lived, things changed. The old buildings were decaying. It awfully reminded me of that poor old neighborhood in the boonies of Yonkers where Eddie and I used to shack up. Damn, I missed Eddie more than I was willing to admit to myself.

Damian Welker lived on the fifth floor of an old six storey building with faded burgundy bricks. It was one of the much older neighborhoods in the town of Whitehaven but it sure looked a lot better than Yonkers and Cobalt. A few blocks down the road, passed the trees and the river, I knew that Cobalt was back there and in the distance the factory was there too. It was an odd feeling being on the New Jersey side looking across the Hudson to the place I called home. It was so close yet so far away. It was right there right in front of me yet it was unattainable, I couldn't get there. For the first time since I had set out on my mission, I could see the life in front of my eyes for what it really was. My entire life I had never been able to appreciate the basic concept of *life*.

"C'mon Drifter," Connor grabbed me by the arm and pulled me towards the building his uncle lived in, "my uncle Damian doesn't like it when people keep him waiting."

We had to enter through yet another hefty metal door of the Ku Klux Klan and Jehovah's Witnesses only to come into a building that smelled like mold and smoke. Eddie's shack hadn't smelled like that because almost all the windows were broken but Damian's building was a disgusting place to live. There was no elevator either so Connor and I had to climb up a long and narrow flight of stairs all the way up to the fifth floor. Most of the tenants there were out working in the middle of the afternoon but the place was still loud with a bunch of kids crying and dogs barking. That place was no place to try to raise a family. The streets and the factory weren't either but I still preferred that over Damian's building. I swore the stench of that place clung to your soul.

"Give him a little bit of time to get acquainted with you," Connor warned me as he was about to open the door to his uncle Damian's apartment, "he's not exactly the trusting type, you know."

"I can understand that," I spoke softly, not knowing what to expect from his uncle, "if you don't watch your own back in this world nobody will."

Damian's apartment was filled with cigarette smoke and a small man was sitting on an old black leather couch smoking another one. The place was incredibly claustrophobic and it was dark, almost like there weren't any lights at all. Most of the windows were taped up so there was no natural light coming in from outside except for the small cracks in between each of the pieces of red and black tape. That apartment was the definition of a dark lair.

"So this is what you brought me?" the man, probably being Damian Welker, spoke curiously as he got up off the couch and came to take a closer look at me.

"No," Connor spoke seriously, "she's for me."

"Oh," Damian seemed somewhat surprised, "okay, then move along."

I glanced over at Connor in the dark room hoping that he would explain what had just happened.

"He wanted me to bring someone over," Connor spoke in a low voice almost like he was embarrassed, "so he could have a good time, so to speak."

"Oh," I had to refrain from cracking up in laughter, "I understand."

Connor looked like he was about to burst out in laughter himself but that probably would have insulted his uncle, and Damian looked like a pretty uptight guy.

"There are some bandages and some alcohol in the bathroom just to the left here," Connor pointed out as his uncle played around with the TV remote, "if you want to take a closer look at the bullet wound."

I thanked him and ran off to the bathroom. I turned on the bright white light and looked at myself in the mirror. Okay, the wound wasn't all that bad. I wasn't dying. It was just a small piece of my right ear at the bottom. The small amount of blood had dried and I felt no pain. For a little while after it happened there was been some slight tingling but then again, the adrenaline was pumping through my veins and had taken complete control of my body. There was no time for the stinging and the pain, but thankfully I had been spared that. I had also been spared my life, and that was the most important thing of all because I still had something to accomplish before I was ready to join my mom and my brother in the realm of the dead.

I took out some rubbing alcohol from the cabinet in the bathroom and cleaned up the small amount of blood from my ear but didn't need to bandage it any further. My ear was fine but otherwise I looked like crap. I needed a haircut. Since I had a clean change of clothes in my backpack and there was a cheap stand-up shower with a big hole at the bottom of the door in the bathroom, I decided to jump in to clean up a little bit if I was going to present myself to Damian Welker as a semi-respectable criminal.



After I got out of the shower and after making a big mess of water on the bathroom floor, I put on some black skinny jeans and a leopard top. I shoved my dirty clothes, my Pennington's hoodie, Connor's license plates and the gun in the backpack and left the claustrophobic bathroom. I swore you had to go through the door sideways because everything was so crammed up together in there.

"I see you're making yourself at home!" Connor joked as he invited me to sit with him and his uncle in the living room.

"I'm sorry," I muttered as I approached cautiously, "I haven't seen a shower in a long time."

The living room was another dirty and dimly-lit tiny room. It was almost completely square with an enormous TV mounted on the wall near the door to go out into the hallway, a small couch on the wall opposite of it, an industrial spindle next to it as a coffee table and an expensive massage chair in the corner. In the other corner next to the TV there was a small pool table and plenty of cases of beer with cans in various stages of consumption littered all over the room. The dark red living room rug was stained with stuff I didn't want to know and I could see silhouettes of decorations on the walls but I couldn't quite make out what they were because the room was too dark.

"Come over and have a seat!" Damian commanded in a tone of voice that I didn't want to disobey.

So I walked over and sat down next to him on the couch while Connor was very vocally enjoying the massage chair.

"Connor told me what you did," Damian spoke in a low, scratchy voice.

I waited for him to continue.

"I know a warrior when I see one," he went on, "do you know what I brought you here to do?"

I didn't, but I knew that Connor had mentioned that his uncle wanted to "have a good time." And it was a bonus that Connor had recruited me because I was one of his own, there was a mutual understanding between us that only two people who stood for the same things could comprehend. I decided to prove

myself to Damian by showing him what kind of good time I could give him, so I scooted over to his side of the couch and came onto him. I climbed up onto his lap and gave him a big wet smooch on the lips. And he didn't like that very much.

"Get off of me!" he shouted angrily as he pushed me off of him, "Don't come on to me like that!"

Connor was doing his best to refrain from laughing in his massage chair drinking beer and I somewhat wanted to crack up laughing myself but it was no laughing matter for Damian. It was apparent that the blood was boiling in his veins.

"I guess you don't want to have a good time after all," I muttered to myself as I rearranged myself on the other side of the couch.

"I don't screw little kids!" Damian angrily snapped back.

Damian got up off the couch abruptly and went to fetch a glass of water from the kitchen sink that was just nearby. Connor was no longer finding it so funny as well but I was lost in what was actually going on.

"You see this picture right here," Damian spoke apprehensively as he shoved a picture frame in my hand, "that was my daughter Tanya. They found her body facedown dead in the rain down by Marble Hill. And I wasn't even there to hold her when she took her last breath!"

I looked down at the picture and saw a young woman of about twenty who somewhat looked like me. Damian's voice was cracking up as he struggled to stay more. It was obvious that he had a lot of remorse for whatever had happened to his daughter. He hadn't forgiven himself, and to some degree I knew how he felt because I myself was on a mission of revenge.

"It's just too bad that I never told her that she deserved much better," he finally choked up crying, "maybe if I had just been there for her she wouldn't have went looking for love and acceptance from all the wrong people."

Despite all the things going on through my brain, I still managed to find a place in it where I could feel sympathy for Damian. I extended my hand towards him and pulled him over next to me on the couch and wrapped my arms around him. He cried for a while but soon just returned to being apprehensive and unforgiving.

"Come down to the warehouse with me and we'll get you a proper gun," Damian muttered as he shoved on a leather trench coat and signaled me to follow him.

The two of us walked a few blocks down to a group of storage warehouses near the Whitehaven Conservation Area where Damian opened one up and invited me inside. In the remnants of daylight I finally got to see what the man looked like since his apartment was so damn dark. Damian was about 5'10" and very skinny. His neck was covered in various gang-related tattoos but I didn't know what they meant and I didn't dare to ask. He had short dark brown hair that was starting to grey and a matching extended goatee-style beard. Connor had told me that Damian was in his forties but he looked more like he was in his fifties. There were big dark bags under his liquid copper eyes that made it seem like he hadn't slept in over a century. His leather coat was muddy at the bottom and the rest was quite dusty, almost like he had been playing around in some artificial desert. His black jeans had faded to grey and I noticed a dried bloodstain on the tip of his left boot. His olive green shirt was the only thing on him that looked clean. Considering what his apartment looked like, I couldn't hold him to any sort of higher expectations.

"I still have your license plates in my backpack," I spoke softly, not knowing how he was going to react, "I'm sure Connor told you about that too."

"Yes he did," Damian's voice was sharp but not aggressive, "you are a true contender. You and Connor will do a couple of things for me and then I'll make sure the job you set out to do gets done."

# Chapter Fourteen

My new .44 caliber handgun was one hell of a sexy thing. The chrome-like color was amazing to look at and the patterns engraved in it were even more impressive. It was a true collector's item and it was entrusted to me. I could almost see myself in the metal, it was that shiny. Damian had also given me a few magazines full of ammunition and a nice leather pouch to carry the weapon. In exchange I gave him my Glock for him to sell as he distributed a large portion of illegal guns for sale in the entire state of New Jersey and a few parts of New York. The amount of weaponry that came out of a little moldy apartment was incredible. Damian only had a few so-called "employees" but his guns sure got around. That's how Damian Welker and Connor Peterson rolled. I was part of the team now too, and that's how I rolled as well. Hell yeah!

"I told you that I can't pay you until he pays me," Damian's tone of voice was boiling with rage as he berated somebody over the phone, "so it's just going to have to wait!"

Damian eventually just hung up the phone mid-conversation and angrily flopped down on the couch.

"Son of a bitch!"

I cautiously went to sit down next to him and asked him what was wrong.

"You and Connor have four days to come up with half a million dollars," he finally muttered after an exaggerated deep breath.

"And what's my cut of that?" I asked him, ready and willing to go on a mission.

"Your cut of that is that you don't go to prison and the person I owe it to doesn't come and kill us," Damian was belligerent, "and maybe I'll take an huge risk for you and kill Dwayne Jackson."

As much as I would have liked to get up right then and there and tell him to deal with his own problems and whatever trouble he had landed himself into, I had vowed to work for him and I was not a hypocrite or a pussy. I was a soldier. I did my duty without objection.

"How do you want us to get this money?" I finally asked.

"How the hell would I know?" he was still just as belligerent, "That's why you and Connor work for me! So figure it out!"

I barged out of the room with my head about to detonate and went to see Connor down in the streets below. He was cleanly dressed and smoking a cigarette, seemingly waiting for something.

"What's going on?" I asked him as we both started walking.

"It sounds like my uncle is in trouble with debt," he spoke gently.

"And he's entrusted the two of us with finding half a million dollars in four days."

"That's insanely risky to try to sell that amount of weapons out on the streets. We'll all have our asses in jail and no money at all."

"Who says we have to sell weapons?"

"What are you getting at? How the hell else do you want to get half a million dollars?"

"The boys in the gang I used to be part of used to be robbers. We stole stuff for a living. It got messy a couple of times and a few of the guys served some time on the inside but we always managed to keep a low-profile lifestyle."

"And you guys robbed for half a million dollars in four days?"

"Probably not, I only went to a couple of robberies in my lifetime, but I know how the job is done."

Connor looked pensive, contemplating my proposition.

"I'm listening," Connor finally let out a sigh.

"Okay," I grinned at him, "I'll teach you the basics. All we'll need is a car."

"I've got one."

"And a couple of tools such as a crowbar to open windows and doors"

"I've got that also."

"And I guess I don't need to tell you that we'll need a small concealed weapon."

"No you don't."

"When the sun goes down we'll be headed to the boonies of New York and your uncle Damian will get his half a million dollars."

Connor wasn't convinced.

"I really admire your determination," his voice was just as desperate as it had been before, "but I don't think it's as simple as robbing a couple of stores and a couple of houses."

"I know it's going to be tricky," I tried to reassure him, "but if we're all in this together, we can do it. I have no doubt about that."

"I'll take a leap of faith and trust you on this. Let's just not tell my uncle Damian."

"Let's rock and roll!"

Just as the sun was about to go down, Connor and I jumped in a metallic blue 1991 Chevy Cavalier and set out to get some money. To avoid being seen, we avoided the downtown and heavy populated areas of Whitehaven and the surrounding communities. Connor took me on a ride around the Conservation Area of Whitehaven and eventually we ended up on a small dirt road by the Hudson with a big sign that read *Old Mill Road*. I didn't see any sort of mill or factory in the area but a little further down the road there was a clearing in the trees by the river and on the other side of the river there was the factory. It was haunting to see it at sunset from the other side of the river, that was my one and only home.

"I had no idea you could see it from here," I whispered to myself.

"Why do you think they call it Old Mill Road?" Connor's voice was soft, "Have you ever been to the old part of Cobalt?"

"I live there."

"That place was the biggest manufacturer of industrial metals in the entire United States! Then the government shut down the plant like sixty years ago and that's all that's left of it."

"That's where Dwayne Jackson murdered my brother."

Connor didn't speak. Both of us were beyond words as we looked at the factory in the distance. Seeing it like that just gave me one more reason to kill the son of a bitch that murdered the last person I had left on earth. It was just one more reason why I wanted to get Damian his money so he could help me get the job done.

"Tell me where you want it." Connor spoke in a dry voice as we crossed the bridge into New York from New Jersey.

I gave him directions to a neighborhood just east of Yonkers where the boys and I had once ripped off a bakery and a house. The following day Cap'n Crunch had seen some security footage of four of us during the robbery on national television so we stayed away but we never got caught. I knew how to do it right the second time around and I was going to show Connor how we did it in New York.

"We're going to park a few blocks away from the places we are going to rip off," I told him sternly, "and we'll do the rest of the magic on foot."

"I didn't know Yonkers was such a beautiful city," he spoke in an absent-minded tone of voice, completely ignoring my instructions, "it's almost paradise."

"It's a twisted paradise." I muttered as I pointed towards an alley behind an old building.

Connor parked the car behind the building in a position that made it easy for us to make a run for it if we ever landed ourselves in hot water.

"Survey carefully your surroundings," I commanded, "this is the kind of occasion where it's good to be paranoid."

"Oh don't worry," he replied blandly, "I figured that much."

"Go around all the nearby buildings, seemingly minding your own business or looking for something, and spot any cameras or other junk that isn't too good for us."

"And what will you be doing during that time?"

"I'll go rip off the apartment with the open basement window over there."

Connor shook his head but I simply grinned back at him. I walked over to the basement apartment on the adjacent street and looked for any signs of life in the area. Things were quiet. It was pretty late, the sunlight was almost completely gone, so there was a good chance I was going to get away with what I was doing. So I stepped in through the basement window into a dark room and looked around again. There was nobody. I walked around and eventually found a small bedroom. I checked around for valuables and found two pairs of cheap golden earrings so I shoved them in my pockets and left the

premises without incident. I knew it was going to be a long night if the only things we were going to get our hands on were old junk to be recycled like broken earrings.

Connor was patiently waiting for me on a park bench when I returned to the site I had designated to be the meet-up area after the jobs were done. I quickly flashed him the earrings under a dim streetlight but he didn't look impressed. He knew that it was going to be a long night too and a very long four days and that at the end of the line we probably wouldn't have all the money Damian needed. I didn't know what was going to happen then, but that was something I didn't want to think about. I wanted to focus on getting as much stuff and money I could get my hands on so maybe I could skip town if whoever Damian owed money to came after us. Or maybe I'd just have enough to kill Dwayne Jackson and whatever happened to me afterwards was just going to happen.

"This is one of the quietest neighborhoods I have ever been in at this time of the night!" Connor chuckled softly.

"So I take it that you didn't see anything," I raised an eyebrow at him.

"Nope. There's nothing here. What's next?"

"That little corner store at the end of the street. It closes in just a few minutes. Let's sneak in."

"You've got to be kidding me!"

"Just come! Worst case scenario, they will see us and tell us to get out because the store is closed."

"Unbelievable. Just freaking unbelievable."

But it worked. We opened the door just a bit, and very slowly, so nobody would notice and slipped inside. Connor hid behind the enormous potato chips rack while I crept behind the counter as the hispanic woman was closing up the front doors and left through the back. When I heard the back door close, I signaled for Connor to come out. At the same time I got up on the counter and disconnected the sole security camera that was videotaping the entrance.

"Pretty impressive," Connor spoke in partial satisfaction, "so now what?"

"Look around for cash or valuables," I told him as I examined the cash, "go in the back room and I'll join you. Oh, and snatch some food while you're at it."

Three thousand dollars later, we left through the backdoor into the night.



"That was pretty sweet," Connor spoke softly to me as we walked around the block, "but we'll never get enough money."

"Let's try a fancier neighborhood," I spoke after a moment of silence, "because this won't be enough."

As we drove around the boondocks of Yonkers with the car lights off, a man from my past named Robin Crowley came back to mind.

"I know someone whom we could rip off," I spoke in an upbeat voice.

"For another three thousand dollars?" Connor wasn't impressed.

"Nah, maybe ten or fifteen and a couple of prized possessions."

"Okay, try me."

I told him my plan regarding Robin Crowley. I had come up with a scenario where I would call him and tell him that I was in trouble and I needed him to come and pick me up right away at the corner of so and so street, but during that time Connor and I would break into his house and take whatever we wanted and leave by the time he came back. Connor sighed loudly, still having his doubts about my plan, but he didn't have any better ideas so he handed me his cellphone and told me to dial his number.

"Tell him you need some money or whatever," Connor joked.

"I'll do my best to improvise," I grinned as I punched in Robin Crowley's number.

"Best of luck, and this better be worth the drive!"

"I promise this will work."

I had to promise it more to myself than to Connor, but I knew that Robin wouldn't let me down.

"Hello?" Robin's tired voice answered the phone.

"Robin!" I shouted in a distraught voice, "I need you help!"

"Where are you darling? What can I do for you?!"

"I'm on Palisade Avenue in Yonkers and I need you to come pick me up and take me back to your place and hide me there until morning!"

"I'm coming right away! Just hold on baby, I'm on my way!"

"I'll need enough money to fly out of New York first thing in the morning. Please prepare that before you leave. I promise I'll get you the money back as soon as things get settled!"

I gave him some fake address to come and pick me up at and kept him on the line for nearly ten minutes, which gave Connor and I plenty of lead time to get to his place while he was coming for me. We calculated that we'd have about an hour and a half to rummage through his property and maybe some surrounding properties as well. And so we went on our way.

"Amazing!" Connor laughed his head off as he drove down the empty streets, "I've gotta give it to you Drifter, you're quite the little criminal."

"Maybe my guys could help you out too for a small cut of what they get," I proposed as I looked at the clock and saw that our days were quickly counting down.

"I have no doubt that you're guys are good crooks, but I do not want anyone other than the two of us in on this. My uncle Damian doesn't do business with anyone that he hasn't done business with before."

"But he's doing business with me, and these are my guys."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but the man feels sorry for you. You really got him somewhere it hurts."

"But that wasn't any of my own doing."

"I know. But just keep things the way they are right now and I have no doubt that my uncle Damian will come to have tremendous respect for you."

The rest of the drive to Robin Crowley's place was as smooth as ice. When we got there we easily got in and right there on the kitchen table we found the bag he had prepared for me. In it there was five thousand dollars and some clothes. I rummaged through his room and found a few pieces of gold and silver so I shoved them in the bag and went searching through another room.

"Too bad we can't steal that stove of his," Connor joked as he looked through the kitchen, "and how the hell did you get under this guy's skin like that?"

"That also wasn't any of my doing," I laughed, "the guy just completely pitied me. I reckon maybe I hit the same soft spot with him that I hit your uncle Damian with."

"You're either amazing or just really freaking lucky!"

"Maybe this is just the universe telling me that I'm doing the right thing!"

We both did our best to not disturb too many things as we searched Robin's place high and low. Connor swiped two laptops and some computer accessories in the living room while I managed to find a portable safe under a bed.

"Connor!" I shouted, "I just found a safe but it's too heavy for me to carry by myself!"

Connor immediately came over and the two of us brought the safe to the car and shoved it in the trunk. We also both agreed that it was probably time to leave so we packed what we had into the car and drove out of there in a jiffy. Connor and I both cheered as we drove back into some of nastier neighborhoods of New York.

"How much do you think we have now?" Connor asked me in a joyous tone.

"About ten thousand now," I admitted, "but it's unknown what's in the huge safe."

Connor decided that before we should report back to his uncle Damian, we should still try to rip off some of the nice houses in the south of Yonkers just like I had told him I wanted to do. So we drove back down there and roamed around like complete creepers until we found a neighborhood that was to our liking. Nice houses with nice toys outside meant nice things and valuables inside as well. All we needed to find was a house with absent tenants, manage to get inside unnoticed, take what we wanted, and leave. It just happened that Connor had packed some break-in tools in the trunk of the car before we left so busting open a patio door or a basement window would be too easy.

"This is almost like a movie!" Connor laughed again as he parked the car down the street from the house we had picked.

"Actual break-ins are so much easier than what they want you to believe from watching movies." I added, "People all want to feel safe, and when they do, they let their guard down. And when they let their guard down, it's people like us who profit."

"I'll give it to you again Drifter, you're pretty good."

"Now let's get going!"

Breaking into that house was a lot trickier than I had originally thought. Most of the basement windows were very securely locked with pieces of wood jammed from one side of the window to the other to prevent them from opening unless someone inside removed the pieces. The windows on the main floor were too high to reach without climbing onto something and there wasn't anything to stand on without having to move a large trash can and the last thing we wanted to do was make any kind of noise. Eventually Connor and I just decided to use the sliding door in the back, and it was easy enough to open, but the moment we opened it an alarm system went off that sent us running for the hills. We drove out of that place in a hurry unlike anything else and just decided to go back to New Jersey and look at what we had collected.

# Chapter Fifteen

Part of me felt guilty to have scammed a good man like Robin, but I cared more about having Damian kill Dwayne than hurting Robin's feelings. I didn't care what I had to go through to get to where I wanted, I was going to do it no matter what the cost. Even if the police shot me after blowing out Dwayne's brains, it didn't matter. As long as I knew that he was long gone, I would be able to die satisfied with my life. The only thing that kept me going in the search for half a million dollars was believing that Damian Welker really was going to get the job done for me at the end of the line. I would not be swept aside. I was going to see the day Dwayne Jackson was going to be served with what he deserved. It was nothing more than a matter of time.

"You guys seemed to have brought back some interesting stuff," Damian commented as he met up with us in the street below when we arrived just before four in the morning, "did anyone follow you here?"

"I wouldn't have come back if we were being followed," Connor commented in return.

"We'd be in cuffs if someone had been following us," I muttered at my turn.

Damian grinned at me. He liked that mentality. And I hoped that he was going to like what we brought him. We popped the trunk so we could unload our stole property and bring it into the apartment for closer examination.

"Damn!" Damian was impressed at the safe, "You guys definitely scored big!"

"That was all Ana," Connor grinned at me, "she was quite impressive tonight."

Once we had unloaded everything and hid it inside the apartment, I jumped in the shower and cleaned up. I then walked into the first bedroom on the right and flopped down on the bed with nothing but the beach towel to keep me covered. I dozed off right then and there. I was exhausted. I had been up for nearly twenty-four hours and I had only slept some four or five hours the previous night. If I could get drunk and fall asleep by the dams in Old Sylva, I could easily fall asleep on a bare mattress lying on the floor with nothing but a cheap pillow and a ripped up grey sheet. I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the mattress and I slept the entire rest of the night, not that there was much left because it was four in

the morning, but I only woke up again during the noon hour. At least the clock on the wall indicated 11:58 and there was sunlight shining everywhere from a little window at the top of the south wall.

The window, like all the others in the apartment, was partially taped up but there was one little rectangle on top that was bare and could let in the sunlight. The room was tiny and dirty. It all reminded me so much of Eddie's shack. I was okay with Eddie's shack because I didn't have to pay for it, but I would never have paid for an apartment like Damian's in a million years. Next to me on the mattress Damian was laying face-down and snoring lightly. It seemed like I had camped in Damian's bed after all. He was covered in a forest green blanket that looked like it was a piece of a sleeping bag and a patchwork quilt on top. Since the man was sleeping soundly, I decided to gently pull the patchwork quilt off of him and cover myself with it. It was warm and comfortable so I ditched the towel by throwing it on the floor. I cuddled up inside the blanket and rested some more until Damian finally woke up some twenty minutes later.

"You sure have a way of making yourself at home," he commented, still half asleep, "just laying naked in my bed like that."

"Sorry," I tried unsuccessfully to refrain from laughing, "back at Cap'n Crunch's loft there wasn't enough beds for everyone, so you had to go to extremes to secure yours, and most of the time you had to share it."

Damian was giggling uncontrollably next to me.

"Cap'n Crunch?"

"Yeah, the old man's last name is Crunch."

I laughed too as I was thinking about it. I had nothing but good memories of the old man, and I missed him too.

"Well, a man's not gonna complain when there's a naked pretty girl in his bed."

"I'll leave, I'm just gonna find some clothes."

"Take a moment to just relax and I'll rub that shoulder of yours. I see that you've injured it somehow."

"Yeah, it was when Connor pulled me up onto the railroad tracks, he kind of just dropped me and the whole being shot thing didn't help with that bruise either."

"I bet you ducked pretty quickly into that car. Did you piss your pants?"

"Pretty much."

I giggled and turned onto my back so Damian could rub my sore and injured shoulder. He pulled the patchwork quilt off the upper half of my body and let his rough hands create magic with my shoulder. The warm rays of sunlight shined on the two of us and for a moment I wasn't so hot-wired, I was calm and relaxed and Damian wasn't belligerent like he usually was. He was more like dad Damian than ex-con and criminal Damian for a moment. His hands were rough but his touch was soft. In just a few minutes my sore shoulder wasn't so rusty anymore. The sun shining in my face like that reminded me that I had to do a job outside the walls of the moldy room and I felt incredibly deflated despite the perfect moment. At the same time it reminded me of those kinds of tender moments shared with my brother and I did something I lonesomely did; I started to cry.

"Oh baby don't cry," Damian spoke softly.

For a brief moment he got up and grabbed me a black long sleeve shirt and handed it over to me and I put it on. To me it was more like a dress, which was the whole point. Damian then put his arms around me and held me tightly against him, kind of like I had done when he broke down about his daughter's death. He held me until I stopped crying and then brought me a clean change of clothes. They weren't my clothes so I figured that the outfit once belonged to his daughter.

"We've got a big day ahead of us today," Damian continued to speak softly to me, "you and Connor did great last night, keep up the work. Along with the money I've gathered we've got nearly sixty thousand dollars now!"

I got dressed and found Connor in the massage chair in the living room again. He looked pretty well rested and he grinned at me when I walked into the room.

"I reckon that you have some experience in pawn shops too," Connor giggled as I noticed Robin's laptop on his lap, "we've got more money to make!"

All I could do was grin. Yup, I had experience in that too.

"You look pretty good in that suit," he went on, "now you'll just need a haircut and we'll blend in like anybody else."

"Yeah, no kidding," I replied, "those judgmental jerks tend to get suspicious when someone who looks poor comes in with plenty of gold jewelry and electronics."

Connor and I both laughed at the memories of what we had done the previous night. It had worked out perfectly, almost like the script of a movie. But if there was one thing I had learned from the boys and what I had experienced living the life out on the streets, it was that you should never get too confident. It's when you thought too highly of yourself that you made mistakes and things weren't like they are in the movies anymore.

"Here," Connor handed me a few dollars as he walked me out of the building, "take this, and hand over your weapons. There are more than a vast selection of hairstylists downtown. Pick one and let them work their magic."

I grinned at him, handed over the gun and went on my way. Before Robin Crowley and I crossed path, I'd *needed* to look poor so people would have sympathy on me and give me a few dollars when they saw me on the streets. It wasn't as effective as just stealing money, but it did keep me out of trouble for over five years so it was something I kept on doing. However, sitting in the stairway of the subway station and just loafing around sidewalks had lost its appeal in the past couple of years. I became too prideful to wait around for people to give me a few coins out of their pockets every once in a while and I decided to get it myself. Not everybody gave me cash, but I could easily rank in a few hundred dollars every week. The boys would have let me keep it for myself but I had little use for money so I gave it to them to use for the betterment of the few real places where we could sleep in at night. That is, not the factory and not Eddie's shack.



"How much does a quick haircut cost?" I asked as I went in the first shop I saw.

"For kids it's twenty dollars," the woman replied in a distracted voice as she proceeded to shave some guy's head.

"Good," I replied in satisfaction, "because that's all I've got."

It wasn't. But I kept the other twenty for myself, you know, just in case.

"Have a seat," the woman finally took a quick look at me, "I'll be with you shortly."

I didn't sit around doing nothing for very long. Soon it was my turn. I sat in the fancy chair and simply told the woman to make me look presentable. I told her that it was for a school picture and that she should just keep it simple because I knew that my twenty bucks wasn't going to get me very far in a salon like that. A few chops of hair later, my look had been completely transformed. I wasn't given any particular hairstyle, but my hair now came down to just passed my cheekbones. It was clean, simple, just what I was looking for. The top half was my natural hair color and the bottom half was what was left of the black dye and it looked kind of phony but it worked for me. I was very satisfied with the haircut and with the lifestyle. I no longer needed to look like the panhandler I previously was, because I made a living as a criminal.

I thanked the hairstylist, gave her her twenty bucks and went on my way. I knew that the afternoon wasn't going to last forever so I quickly got back to Damian's apartment. Connor had already loaded the car with some of our stolen items so when I got back we left immediately. Instead of going back into New York, we rode around the cities of New Jersey to sell our stuff. I put some jewelry in a bag and visited pawn shops and consignment stores on foot while Connor took the bigger items to other shops on the other side of town with the car. I had experience in the business, so things went smoothly on my end. Around the supper hour local boutiques started to close for the day so I walked back to our designated meeting area and waited for Connor to come back, just hoping that the police hadn't picked him up or something. But after about twenty minutes, there he was.

"Excuse me sir," I flirtatiously joked with him as I stuck my head into the car through the open window, "I don't know where you're going, but by any chance, would you have room for one more troubled soul?"

He blushed and cracked up laughing. He unlocked the door and I got in.

"Oh," I continued as I showed him my bag of money, "and I have a couple of thousand in here."

"No shit!" he exclaimed, "That electronic junk I got wasn't worth very much."

"That sucks."

"Yeah, I'm pretty disappointed, but if we can score big tonight we'll have over a hundred thousand."

"Unfortunately we can't scam Robin Crowley every day."

"Shame mate, the majority of our money came from him! But stores are usually a pretty good opportunity. There are a bunch of little old laundromats in Whitehaven."

"And you think that the coin machines in there contain hundreds of thousands of dollars?"

"No, but it would be easy."

"Sorry to burst your bubble my friend, but I'm not in the easy business over here. I'm in the money business. So we're going to have to come up with a plan to make a heck of a lot of money in the next three days."

"Two and a half."

"Whatever man. I want something to eat now."

On our way back to Whitehaven we stopped by a local Mexican restaurant and I had some of the spiciest food I ever put in my mouth. I swore the people in there were laughing at us because of the faces we made upon swallowing our food and feeling the burn. But it was great. I enjoyed myself.

"I've got a random question," I told Connor as I sipped on some cold water.

"Try me," he replied, seemingly uninterested.

"How do you know I'm not a police informant?"

"How do *you* know *I'm* not a police informant?"

"I don't. But I reckon that police informants generally don't go on crime sprees like we did."

"I reckon that you reckoned correctly. When I picked you up you didn't strike me as the type of person who'd be working with the pigs."

"How so?"

"You just had that edge to you. The kind that passionate thugs have. I've been at this my entire life, I know one of my own when I see them."

The question was trivial. Police informants are *informants*, not criminals. They do nothing but pose. Infiltrate. They are hypocrites. Both Connor and Damian had proven their seriousness in the business. Why would the police be after someone like me anyway? With all the murderers and rapists roaming around, someone busting into a shitty corner was about the last thing on their radar. Whitehaven was a super quiet and laid-back town and the heat didn't seem to be on Connor or Damian. They looked like a bunch of poor people trying to make it in life, not a group of high-ranking weapons dealers.

"Connor?" I began.

"Yeah?" he didn't seem to be eager to listen to my ideas for the night.

"Do you think it would be possible to sell a few guns to pawn shops? I mean, a few here and a few there will bring us some extra dough."

"It would be possible, but that's not how my uncle Damian works."

"I understand. I wouldn't want to step on his territory."

"You really wouldn't want to do that."

"Has he ever gotten physical with you? I mean, just violent in general."

"Nah, not with me. He's always been rather soft with me. Why?"

"My guys got physical a few times with me, but it was mostly to restrain me."

Connor burst out laughing, almost choking on his food. I laughed too. The atmosphere was so lighthearted, like we weren't going to go on another crime run after the sun went down. Part of me didn't really want to go either. I simply wanted to have a normal night in good company. I missed movie night at Cap'n Crunch's. He had nothing but a bunch of old VHS tapes that we watched over and over but I missed watching *Valley Girl* and *Pretty In Pink* over and over every couple of weeks.

"We should head back," I spoke after an extended moment of silence.

"Yeah," Connor's voice was soft, "my uncle Damian tends to get uptight if we are gone for too long."

Back at the apartment Damian had made a sale so he sent Connor and I to deliver it. I gave him the pouch of money without speaking but there was no doubt in my mind that he knew that I didn't want to go out on another crime spree at night. Crime is always fun at first, but I got kinda bored of it after a couple of houses.

"Drifter," Damian spoke only as I was walking out the door, "your haircut is phony."

"Your beard is weird!" I retorted as I shut the door behind me.

The weapons delivery was successful. We delivered a bundle of guns wrapped inside a blanket in a guitar case and got another guitar case stuffed with over fifteen thousand dollars in cash. The three of us really were in the black market empire business! It was getting dark and the days were getting shorter. Summers were nice and long on the East Coast but that didn't prevent me from noticing the change in the daylight hours. None of that made a difference to me, but I thought about my guys and the girls still out on the streets. I had smashed Eddie's window so he couldn't live in there anymore and I was worried about where he had ended up. I didn't even know if he was alive or dead! But my mission was more important than any of those trivial things. I'd see Eddie again. I'd see Byron again. I'd see Ritchie again. Just not in the near future.

"How much money do we have now?" I asked Damian as Connor and I lugged in the case full of money.

"That would make a hundred thousand now," he spoke apprehensively again, "you guys did good but we've only got two more days to gather four hundred thousand dollars. That's just not feasible."

"Can't you like, give a portion of the money to the dude you owe it to and give him the rest later?"

"I've considered that, but maybe it's just better we go off the radar. I'll figure something out. For now you two just have a drink and enjoy yourself. Oh, and Drifter, if you're going to sleep in my bed please put some clothes on!"

"Yes sir!"

I bit my bottom lip and grinned at my total audacity for having done what I did. Connor handed me a bottle of organic beer and I challenged him to race me to the bottom. We were going to put on a show

for Damian but he made it abundantly clear that we could not at all costs get drunk because he'd need us in the morning. By the end of the night I had only won one round against Connor when it came to drinking beer but we watched reruns of Jeopardy on TV and I got him almost every time even though I had a bunch of drinks. Damian was quite impressed that a street kid could be so smart despite having literally no education. At least not the kind that you get from going to school. When it came time to sleep again I totally crashed Damian's bed. Not to make him upset and uptight I slept on top of the sheets with all of my clothes on. He couldn't complain.

The following morning it's Damian who woke up by rubbing my shoulder again. I rolled over closer to him so it would be easier for him to massage my shoulder even though it had considerably improved. With his other hand he ran his fingers through my hair and told me in a gentle voice that my new haircut looked good on me. In response to that I stroked his chin and told him that his beard wasn't weird and we both cracked up laughing. The light was just starting to come into the room so it was still quite early in the morning. I had slept well and I was ready to seize the day. I didn't know what would be required of me, but I was ready and willing to do it. I kept my eyes on the prize through whatever I had to do so it didn't matter what it was.

"Have you decided?" I whispered to Damian.

"I'll do my best to negotiate with him baby," he whispered softly in return, "and by any chance, have you ever had any dealings with a man named Greg who was formerly associated with the city councillor?"

"No, I've never heard of him, do you think we can use him to get to Dwayne?"

"That's what I was hoping you'd tell me."

"Well we can blackmail him into doing what we want. Tell him that you know what Dwayne did at the factory."

"First I want to know where things stand between them because I've still got a budding criminal empire to keep under the radar of the authorities over here."

"I understand. But whatever you need, I'll help you."

"I know baby, you've shown a lot of promise in the short amount of time that you've been here. For now you and Connor just need to make a delivery before breakfast."

We both got up and I cleaned myself up a little bit. Damian was becoming belligerent again as he handed Connor the weapons in a duffel bag. Just a few minutes earlier we had shared a series of such intimate and tender moments.

"Your uncle has some severe mood swings," I commented as Connor and I got in the car.

"Did he kick you out of his bed or something?" Connor did nothing but laugh.

"No, actually he was very affectionate towards me before we got up. And then the belligerent switch turned on for no apparent reason."

"I don't think he understands himself what exactly goes on inside his brain."

"Was he like that before his daughter died?"

"I don't know. I was too young back then but I do know that he was always very sweet to her and he's always been nice to me too."

"Well I like the guy, when he's on his best behavior."

And it had been. The day I left I was angry and cracking up. I had absolutely no consideration for anything or anyone other than myself. All I wanted was to get even and along the way I forgot the real reasons why. It was all anger and no grief. When Connor and Damian came around they alleviated some of that anger by giving me understanding. It's not that my guys never did, but they were unwilling when I was hellbent. It didn't want to stay gold, I wanted to take back what was rightfully mine.

"We're here," Connor spoke after a long moment of silence as he parked the car on the side of the street, "stay in the car while I handle this. Afterwards we can go out and have a fancy breakfast somewhere."

"Your uncle said that he'd try to make a deal with the guy he owes money to," I spoke softly, "so he can give him the rest of the money later. And in the meantime, we can get the real money from that other jerk who owes him."

"The other guys has always been going for paying back. I don't know why this time is different. But he won't screw around with my uncle Damian again."

"Let's fix the problem once and for all."

Connor delivered the guns without incident and two of us had a *fancy* breakfast at a nearby McDonald's. We basically ordered the entire restaurant to ourselves and pigged out simply because we could. When Connor's cellphone rang while we were eating out by the picnic table I reached for it and answered it myself.

"Hello Mr. Welker!" I greeted Damian, "I have a proposition for you!"

I told him about my plan and he agreed to it. All he wanted was another fifty thousand dollars so he could make the first payment to the man who wanted his money while Connor and I went looking for the other man who owed him money.

"Don't blow his brains out if you don't absolutely have to," Damian was belligerent, "he's always been a good customer. A loyal one and an earner, but he owes me."

Connor looked over at me as I was listening to his uncle berate the entire world in another one of his moments of madness, seemingly unsure of the man who raised him most of his life for the first time.

"Let's go reclaim what's rightfully ours!" I smiled at him as I hung up on Damian mid-sentence.

"You know he's going to flip his lid about that," Connor spoke cautiously, referring to me hanging up on the boss.

We had the home address of the man whom we needed to collect money from, all we needed to do was find it in a city and a neighborhood neither one of us had ever been in. Usually that guy arranged for exchanges in public places, I figured because he was afraid of Damian turning on him. Well that was his own fault because he didn't give him the money that he owed him.

"Didn't we drive down this street twice already?" Connor was irritated since we had no GPS whatsoever and we couldn't seem to get anywhere.

"Connor, slow down," I urged him, "that house right there. We saw the owners leave not too long ago. We should go in and swipe something!"

"No way in hell! It's broad daylight!"

"Too late, because I've already made up my mind."

Before he could say anything else I grabbed the crowbar from under the seat and got out of the moving vehicle. I hid the weapon inside of my jacket so nobody could see it and crept into the backyard through the neighbor's yard. I opened an unlocked window and went in. The place was just your average middle-class house. It was nice, newly renovated, beautiful furniture, and probably something valuable somewhere. We only needed another fifty thousand dollars by the late afternoon and I figured that I might as well do what I'm good at while I can because maybe we'd be faced with an aggressive opposition when we'd find the man who owed Damian money. I wanted to be prepared, just in case. Even if the man was spoken of as a good associate, if there was one thing I learned from life on the streets it was that nothing was ever really what it seemed.

The first thing I did inside the house was open the fridge and eat some cheese. That cheese was the first I had eaten in months, or maybe even years. At least it felt that way. I devoured a couple more pieces and then headed upstairs to look for some jewelry or electronics. Those were perennial bestsellers as far as trafficking stolen goods went. In the first bedroom I grabbed a pillowcase and I shoved whatever I thought was of value inside it. I emptied an entire jewelry box in it without looking at its contents, swiped a couple of statues that were either expensive or the knockoff from the dollar store and found a beige cat drinking from the toilet bowl in the bathroom. When it saw me it came over and sniffed my shoes, and then went right back to doing whatever it was doing long before I arrived.

In the second bedroom on the second floor I found a cellphone and a debit card on a night table so I put the items in the pillowcase and went looking around. I periodically peered out the windows just to make sure that Connor was still parked down the street and the police weren't on our trail. In an upstairs storage room I found a gun cabinet but I wasn't able to bust it open. However, I did manage to remove the lock from the ammunition container stored in a nearby closet and take the bullets for myself. As I was rummaging through some boxes in the storage room I heard the cat race downstairs and begin meowing. Shortly after I heard the front door open and people coming inside the house. Crap! I had completely neglected to watch out for the tenants of the house. And you'd figure that it would be the first thing on your mind.



As I heard footsteps coming up to the second floor I quickly ran into the second bedroom I had gone in and hid underneath the bed and prayed that the person coming upstairs had merely forgotten something and would leave soon. But just like a scene right out of a movie, a woman and the cat came into the exact room I was in. The cat came sniffing around under the bed and licked my nose a couple of times while the woman looked for something in her closet. I could also hear people talking downstairs so I figured that there were maybe three or four people in the house without counting me. Soon after I heard someone else come up the stairs but that person headed in another room because it was still just me and the woman and the cat in the bedroom.

"Wow!" a man's voice exclaimed in a nearby room, "It looks like Anastasia went on a rampage while we were gone!"

*Anastasia?!*

"That cat requires more attention than a human baby," the woman in the room with me muttered before she sat on her bed and spoke to the cat.

The two of us grinned at each other as we went on our way. I kept thinking back to the unknown man named Greg. I had no clue who he was supposed to be. I didn't even know what Dwayne Jackson wanted either. Even after three years, I had no idea why he brutally murdered my brother one day. As much as that puzzled me, I really didn't care what the answer was. All I cared about was getting even, regardless of whether or not I'd ever find out the *why* behind everything.

"Are you okay?" Connor asked me in a concerned tone of voice, "You seem to be awfully distracted. Did something happen back there with my uncle Damian?"

"A man named Greg," I commented, "your uncle Damian told me that he had some sort of connection to Dwayne Jackson but I don't know him."

"I know you really want this, and my uncle wants it for you too, but don't get hung up on this. We'll get him regardless of when or how it happens."

"Thanks for the encouragement buddy. The anniversary is tomorrow."

"I'm sorry."

"I've been hellbent on revenge for months and rarely ever gave a single thought to my brother. It's just a few weeks ago that I visited his grave for the first time."

"My uncle Damian and I care about you and we won't let you not be okay."

I smiled softly to myself. I loved Connor and Damian too.

"Back home," my voice was beginning to crack, "I was always so angry and belligerent and holy smokes my behavior was just like your uncle's."

"You're quite audacious," Connor smiled at me, "but your apparent mood swings are nothing like what my uncle goes through in a day!"

"I forgot to appreciate my people back home. I was too busy with residual emotions and now I miss them."

"Nobody says you can't go back to see them."

"I know. But I've really gotten my act together, if I ever had one in the first place, since I've been out here. It's been something positive to just get away and think."

Paranoia was setting in and I wasn't feeling too confident anymore. My airways were tightening and I was having a hard time to breathe under the bed with my bag of stolen items. It was another of those *get out of here right now* situations but I was helpless to do anything until the people left the residence or at least the woman left the room. I desperately wanted to get out of there but it was impossible for me to rack my brain and come up with an escape plan. All I could do was wait it out. Finally, some twenty minutes later the woman went back downstairs but the man was still in the storage room because I could hear him muttering profanity to himself as he cleaned up the mess *Anastasia* made. After a while it became apparent to me that the tenants of the house wouldn't be leaving again anytime soon so I just got out from under the bed and closed the bedroom door, leaving only a little crack so I could peer into the hallway.

I opened the window and looked down into the street below. It was way too high to jump. That would have been committing suicide even if I didn't break my neck on impact. Connor had turned the car around and parked it on the other side of the street. I saw him lift an eyebrow at me from the driver's seat and in response I flipped him the finger. As the minutes passed I finally became desperate enough to walk into the hallway and start slowly tiptoeing downstairs. Thankfully the main entrance was right in

front of the staircase so I could just bolt outside and make a run for it. Once I reached the bottom of the staircase I looked around and noticed that there were three people making conversation in the living room right next to the staircase but they were all too distracted to notice me. I was trying to be as quiet as I could but in my state of paranoia I swore they could hear my heartbeat resonating through the atmosphere.

I slowly unlocked the front door with one hand while I held the heavy pillowcase full of stolen goods with the other. All of my fingers were trembling and my breathing was erratic but I did my best to keep it together. I opened the front door just wide enough for me to squeeze my little body through the opening. Once outside I made a run for it towards Connor's car. He made the engine roar to life and he came speeding towards me. The passenger door was open so I threw my pillowcase of stolen goods inside the moving vehicle and jumped in behind it. Most of the contents of my makeshift bag spilled onto the floor of the car but I cheered and I laughed as the two of us made it out of there.

"That was pretty brazen," Connor's voice was both filled with frustration and joy, "but it looks like you got away!"

# Chapter Sixteen

After more than a few hours of aimlessly looking around, we finally found Richard Parker's house. Finally the man who owed money had a name thanks to a reserve address lookup. Damian knew him simply as *Park* and considering the type of business deal the two were involved in, I probably wouldn't have used my full name either. It was a little white house, the second from an intersection in an older neighborhood. The house was old, but it was in good condition. It badly needed a new roof but I would have gladly shacked up in the place any day. Being a homeless drifter, I had checked out my fair share of houses in hopes that one day I would wake up and it would be mine and life on the streets was nothing more than a distant nightmare. So much for that.

"You knock," Connor ordered, "I'll be right behind you with my gun in hand for when he opens the door."

I knocked. And I knocked. And I knocked. And I knocked again. Richard Parker wasn't home despite that both his vehicles were in the yard and through the basement window we could clearly see a light on. I rang the doorbell but nothing happened. I then saw that the wire connecting the bell to the rest of the house had been cut.

"You're going to break in?"

It was more of a comment than a question.

"Yes."

Connor and I both went into the backyard of Richard Parker's house and busted down the door. Just a few forceful kicks and the thing swung open. By the looks of the fruit on the counter it appeared that there hadn't been anyone in the house for quite some time. There were no signs of life on the main floor so we went down to the basement in hopes of finding something. In the basement living room the TV was still on but the rabbit ears looked like they had been violently thrown to the ground. As we

examined the place the signs of a struggle were apparent. Something had gone on down there and I wasn't sure I wanted to know the details.

"A deal gone bad?" I asked Connor.

"I don't know man," his voice was just a soft whisper, "but help me look around in case we can find at least part of the money he owes my uncle Damian."

"By the looks of the place I don't think we'll find money here. This place looks like a crime scene."

"Or at least let's get back the guns he got from my uncle. Last month he requested an exorbitant amount of fully automatic rifles and ammunition for them."

"And where does your uncle get his weapons?"

"Oh he's got his connections from his time back in the slammer."

I looked around in a small bedroom on the west side of the house while Connor checked out the other one next to the bathroom. I found nothing but blue cloths neatly vacuum packed into clear plastic bags in the closet and an industrial supply of stash cans. Most of them were empty but a few contained multiple sets of safety deposit box keys and 8mm tapes. I figured that they might have been porn shows but then again, I wasn't really interested in knowing.

"Connor?" I called out, but there was no answer.

I walked out of the room and went looking for Connor. I found him across the hall standing in the doorway of the bedroom on the east side of the house seemingly frozen in time.

"Connor!" I shouted in frustration.

"Ana," his voice was barely audible.

"What the hell do you see in there?" I demanded as I walked towards him.

He obstructed my view of what was inside the room but from just a few steps behind him I could clearly see a colossal blood splat on the bedroom wall. That would have explained why Damian hadn't been able to reach Park for the past couple of days and the signs of a struggle in the living room.

"C'mon!" I urged Connor as I pulled him by the arm, "There's nothing for us here."

There was nothing but dead silence for most of the ride back to Whitehaven. Connor seemed overly nervous and that was highly unlike him. The thought of a predator looming around seemed to have got to him on a level far more profound than he was willing to admit to himself.

"Do you think," I began, "that the man who did that to Richard Parker is the man your uncle owes money to?"

"I wouldn't think so, they've been on good business terms for a long time," Connor's voice was shaky, "but then again, how the hell would I know anything? I'm just the delivery boy."

Back at the apartment Damian greeted us with a big smile on his face. He was smiling even before I handed him the pillowcase full of stolen things. He seemed awfully joyous about something, unlike the two of us who were horrified.

"Guess who made it to the regional news at noon!" Damian exclaimed.

We waited for him to continue.

"Two teens are the suspects of a rash of break and enters near the New York-New Jersey border! At this point they only said that they believe that at least one of the suspects is female. They rambled on saying that the two were of small build, and were wearing dark clothes."

I looked over at Connor and grinned at him but he wasn't smiling.

"Could be anybody," I smirked, "but we all know who it is!"

"Now what's the problem?" Damian belligerently asked Connor, noticing the mediocre expression on his face.

The two of us then proceeded to tell him what we had seen in Richard Parker's house.

"So you found him brutally murdered in his basement bedroom?" Damian questioned.

"Connor did," I replied in a low voice, "he didn't let me go in."

Damian looked at Connor for further explanation.

"Only one of his arms was sticking out from under the sheets," Connor's voice was even lower than mine, "but all the sheets were soaked in blood and there were multiple splats on the wall and the floor. So the sheets were put over him after the job was done by the looks of it."

"There were no signs of forced entry upstairs," I continued, "but there were obvious signs of a struggle in the basement."

"So it seems like the two were known to each other," Damian observed.

"That's what I've been thinking too," I whispered back, "and there's a sick part of me that thinks it's your man who wants his half a million dollars."

Damian contemplated the situation for a few minutes but he didn't seem convinced.

"I don't think it's my guy," he went on, "he'd clean up his messes if it was him."

"Yeah," I retorted, "the person who did that didn't do a very good job at covering up."

"And while you two were out I made a few phone calls and I didn't find your man Greg but I did find some other connections that I'll work on checking out."

"Thanks man, I appreciate it."

I flashed Damian a quick smile to say thank you before going to sit with a rather distraught Connor in the living room.

"You look awful bro," I muttered as I flopped down on the couch next to him, "I would have taught that you'd been exposed to this kind of stuff before."

"I have," he replied apprehensively, "but not like that! None of my uncle's longtime business partners were brutally murdered in cold blood like that. That's what gets me on edge."

"Yeah, I can understand that."

"This business ain't like it is in the movies. You don't just randomly kill someone over a deal gone bad for no reason. You've gotta know what you're doing and how to go about it. There's a new player in town."

"I've gotta talk about something with your uncle, but you hang in there buddy, Damian knows what he's doing."

I left the room and went to find Damian in his bedroom. He had a bunch of papers scattered all over the bed and he seemed to be searching for a particular piece of information.

"Do you think that Dwayne Jackson did this?" I asked him as I stood in the doorway.

"Why would he do that?" Damian raised an eyebrow at me.

"He left a similar mess behind when he murdered my brother."

"But that was at an abandoned factory. This is in a heavily populated residential neighborhood!"

"Does it make a difference? He just killed my brother for no good reason and he seems to be at it again. Richard Parker didn't even have a single weapon in his house!"

"What are you going to do about it?"

"We're going to blackmail him and see what he does."

Damian was still puzzled but he accepted my offer. Nobody had a better idea so we started brainstorming how we'd blackmail the murderous city councillor. I told Damian that we should start by using the Richard Parker crime scene against him, just to see what he'd do in response while some of Damian's associates would be monitoring him. If we got the reaction we wanted, we'd move on to blackmailing him with the murder of my brother Jeff and finally we'd kill him, but not before he gave us a huge sum of money.

"Do you have records of the guns you sold to Richard Parker?" I asked Damian as I was cooking something up to frame Dwayne Jackson.

"Of course," he replied still searching for something, "the records are written in codes so the popo can't match them to the actual weapon, but I'll write them in plain English for you if you think you've got a lead."



"I reckon that you know which guns are yours, so if you can find out if Dwayne and the criminals who work for him have them, well that will be a bonus for us."

"Not a lot of people work for me, but if you and Connor keep bringing in the extra money I'll be able to pay some people do keep tabs on them."

And that was that. We had a plan and Damian was about to execute it. It wasn't long before Connor got over the fright that Park's body had put into him and he cooperated nicely. He had some excellent ideas that we all put to good use in our progressive blackmail scheme. We were set to laugh our blackmail assault the day Damian was to meet up with the other man to give him a portion of the money he owed him.

"Are you ready for this?" Damian seemed worried about me, "This is no petty theft or hiding under beds during home invasions. There might as well be murder involved here."

"I've been waiting for this moment for all my life." I boldly replied.

I went about my business undistracted on Jeff's anniversary. I felt more sure than anything about my vengeance at the end of the line so I did everything in my power to make everything go smoothly until then. I knew without a single doubt in my mind that Jeff would have done the same for me. He had given his life to save mine, the least I owed him was to see justice through and we all knew that that meant taking matters into my own hands. I was more than ready and willing. The afternoon before Damian was set to meet up with the man whom he owed money to, we mailed out our first piece of blackmail to Dwayne Jackson so he would be receiving it at his office the following morning. Damian had hired two men to keep tabs on him and a couple more to investigate and dig up some dirt on his associates.

But we got nothing out of it. Dwayne Jackson wasn't about to budge. If it was really him who had done that, he wasn't about to give up his secrets. Over the weeks Damian had managed to pay back all the money he owed without any problems. We saw Richard Parker's gruesome murder on the six o'clock news for a week straight but the police didn't have any leads on who might have done it or why. The man hadn't been known to police and no illegal substances or weapons had been found in his house. The rash of brazen break and enters had only escalated with a bunch of copycats going at it at the same

time we were. Belligerence was still rampant in the Welker household and I was becoming impatient because the incomplete job had been dragging on for too long.

"Damian, help me lure Dwayne Jackson," I spoke apprehensively, "and I'll kill him because I'm seriously getting sick and tired of waiting."

"Patience my dear," he wasn't completely belligerent with me, "I promised you that I'd take care of it for you."

"A promise, is that all it'll ever be?"

"I told you that I would do it! Learn to take my word for an answer!"

"On Tuesday evening, drive me to Cobalt. I'll make sure the bastard is waiting for me."

"No way in hell! That's way too dangerous."

"Fine, then I'll do it myself."

Damian didn't seem to take me seriously. To him it seemed like I had never been serious about Dwayne Jackson. To him it looked like I had only wanted to put on a show and prove something to myself. But I wasn't kidding myself, I was going to accomplish what I had set out to do. On Tuesday morning I took public transit down to Washington Heights and visited City Hall in person. I asked the lady at the front desk to squeeze me into an emergency meeting with Dwayne Jackson but she repeatedly refused. Eventually I just kicked her desk and walked outside into the back parking lot and waited for Dwayne Jackson there. After about an hour of being agitated and restless, I finally just found a piece of paper and a pen and wrote him instructions to bring me a hundred thousand dollars in a duffel bag right after the sun went down and the rest of the instructions in a charade poem.

In the distance there is a factory  
From across the Hudson you can see it clearly  
I know what you did down there  
And what you've been up to elsewhere

You can try to run and hide  
But on you I've got my eye  
Meet me down there and be alone  
I'll also be unarmed and on my own

I only want a hundred thousand dollars, no harm done  
And I'll keep your secret safe from everyone  
Meet me under the canopy by the riverside  
I'll be waiting for you inside

I left it tucked underneath the wiper of his SUV and went back to Whitehaven with nothing to show. Damian was somewhat surprised to see me again as I wasn't covered in blood and I wasn't in cuffs because I had murdered someone at City Hall. That seemed to reinforce his theory that I wasn't serious about getting the job done, however.

"Get me a paddleboat Damian," I demanded when I returned to the apartment.

"For what?" he seemed to find it funny, "What are you gonna do with a dinky boat?"

"I need to get across the Hudson tonight."

"Well take public transit for God's sake! Isn't that what you took this morning?!"

"Nobody can see me."

"And you just expect that paddling to the other side of the river will make that a reality for you?"

"I don't give a hoot about what you think Damian! Just get me the boat!"

"I'll get you the boat but for my sake and yours, after what you want to do is done, don't show your face back here."

"If I die tomorrow, promise me that you'll get the job done in memory of me."

It made no difference to me. I wanted the job done and whatever came next came next, that's all. Damian sent Connor to get me the boat and when he came back I took it myself down to the river. I had packed a bag with two handguns, a machete and a bowie knife to bring with me to the meeting. In the poem I had written that I was going to be unarmed but that definitely wasn't going to be the case. I knew that Dwayne Jackson wasn't stupid enough to come alone either so I wanted to be prepared just in case I lost or dropped a weapon or one was taken from me during an altercation. Whatever the scenario, I wanted to get the job done no matter what the cost.

*It's now or never.*

Once across the Hudson River after a very successful paddleboat ride, I got everything set up. I hid the boat in the vegetation near the river for the rare chance that I could get away and climbed up the bank to the factory lot. I knew that there was a hollow metal post in there near the back that was partially broken that was also big enough for me to fit in. That's where I was going to hide while I waited for Dwayne Jackson. I didn't expect him to come alone, and I certainly didn't expect him to bring money. I didn't expect him to show up at all, honestly. He really had no reason to show up if he did not commit the things I had accused him of. The plan was vain and it was futile, but I was right there. I hadn't went through all that trouble for nothing.

He was either going to come to me, or I was going to go to him.

# Chapter Seventeen

The crickets were singing their gloomy song and the stars were shining over a part of the roof that had collapsed. It was just me and my sorrows. I had been inside a freaking broken metal pillar for hours and hours and hours and hours and hours. It was freezing cold out there and I was exhausted. I was home yet I was alone there. All of my guys had long since gone from the factory lot. I didn't know why I was still holding on to the false notion that there was hope for me out there. The fraudulent hope that Dwayne Jackson was going to show up and that I was going to kill him. I contemplated the reasons why he murdered my brother but just like the three previous years before that, I couldn't come up with anything. Because there wasn't anything to come up with. Maybe I should have just waited for Damian after all.

As I was about to bow my head down low, I heard a vehicle approaching in the distance. It was either Dwayne or the police. In that moment every sound around me dissipated never to return again, because I couldn't focus on anything else. The water stopped flowing. The wind stopped blowing. It was nothing other than a vehicle approaching in the distance. As much as I would have loved to jump out of the shadows and engage in a full-fledged battle with whoever was coming my way, I gave it everything I had to stay in the shadows and wait. I gave it everything I had and everything I had was bad. Both my body and my mind were exhausted at the end of the line but I gave it one last push to at least go out like a warrior if it was going to come down to that. There was really only one way to find out.

The tires came to a halt near the east side of the factory. I heard a door open, and then that same door shut a few seconds later. If there had been more than one person in the vehicle, only one of them came out. A sole set of footprints walked around in the dirt slowly, seemingly to survey the surroundings, before I heard those same footsteps step onto the metal flooring. I was no longer alone. I wanted to badly to jump out of the shadows and surprise that person but I stayed put for just a little while longer. Preferably, I could get that person from behind when they would least be expecting it. I bit my bottom lip and waited a few more seconds, listening to every single sound I could pick up the sound of my heartbeat sounded like an atomic bomb on top of all the gentle sounds of the night.

"I brought you your money!" Dwayne Jackson shouted in an annoyed tone of voice.

He had really come!

"Son of a bitch," he rambled on angrily, "stood me up!"

"No, I didn't," I muttered as I stepped out of my hiding place to where he was standing.

I didn't know who he been expecting to see, but he hadn't been expecting *me*.

"Anastasia," his voice was barely audible as the duffel bag he had been carrying dropped to the ground.

"There is a time to stay in the shadows," I spoke in complete apprehension as I took out my handgun,  
"and a time to step out."

And I pulled the trigger. The bang echoed everywhere to the point that my ears were ringing. After a few moments I had to remind myself to breathe because the mission was finally over.

"That was for Jeff you son of a bitch! He was innocent!"

# Chapter Eighteen

The sky was starting to turn a light blue outside. The stars were almost completely gone and the sunshine wasn't too far behind. It was just me, Dwayne, a humongous pool of blood and the silence. He had been alone and there really had been an enormous amount of money in the duffel bag. I had stopped counting after I had reached five thousand. The rest of the night I had sat on the cold metal floor with my legs crossed a few feet from Dwayne's body. I had been waiting for the police, or at least someone else to arrive, but nobody ever did. I automatically assumed that Dwayne had been guilty of the things I had accused him of, or at least he had some other skeletons in the closet that he didn't want the coroner to find. All of his secrets were probably never going to be known but that didn't matter, the corruption had died along with him. It was just a matter of time before people came to realize that something was horribly wrong.

I wanted to drag the body into the pit where Jeff's body had been but the fat city councillor was too heavy. There was no way I would be able to do that by myself. At dawn I took out my machete and decapitated Dwayne Jackson. I threw his ugly head into the pit and threw the machete after it. The entire night I had felt nothing but blankness. There had been absolutely no emotion. No feeling of satisfaction. No feeling of shame. No feeling of remorse. No feeling of joy. I had finally killed the man who had taken the last person I loved away from me but it in no way made me feel better. Frankly, I was disappointed. It was all over. My life's mission had been accomplished and I had gained absolutely nothing out of it. I had never felt so damn deflated in my entire life! Part of me just wanted to scream and ask out why but I would not have gotten more of an answer by doing that.

The sky was a fierce red when I grabbed the duffel bag and started walking to the storage containers the boys and I always hung around just praying that somebody would be there. But I was alone on the lot. Just me and a dead mutilated body. And then there was a bag with a huge sum of money that I was never going to be able to enjoy because sooner or later I was going to be arrested for murder, and most importantly, a hundred thousand dollars wasn't going to bring my brother back. The money had merely been a tactic to blackmail Dwayne Jackson, I had no real interest in it. But Damian did. He still needed a large sum of money to pay back some dude he owed money to and since Connor was on his own, I decided to pay him a visit. I had left him high and dry and that wasn't my style.

I walked back into the factory and took Dwayne's car keys from inside his pocket before jumping into his campaign car and driving off the lot with my weapons and the bag of money. I drove without disturbance to Whitehaven where I parked behind Damian's building and took a deep breath. There was no going back. It was done. I had finally killed a man and I was about to give a criminal a big bag of cash to pay a debt. I took ten thousand dollars out of the duffel bag and kept it for myself just in case I needed it to skip town or kill someone else or whatever the hell else and wrote Damian a note telling him that if he never saw me again I hoped that he'd understand. I knew that he'd understand why I was dropping off some money, but to some degree I had come to care about him and Connor and the two of them were always going to be somewhere in the back of my mind. While I was at it, I decided to go look for Eddie and Byron and maybe the other guys too. I owed them a proper goodbye.

After I dropped the bag in front of Damian's door, I drove back to Cobalt to find my boys. There was another neighborhood on the other side of town that we often hung out in when being on the factory lot was unappealing. But that little neighborhood in the boondocks was also deserted. Not even a stray cat walked by. Since I was done looking around there, I headed down to straight to Yonkers to a few other places I knew my guys liked hanging around. Nobody was there. Almost like all of my gang members had just evaporated off the face of the earth. In a moment of madness I drove down to Old Sylva and parked the city car where Connor had parked his old time machine the first time I met him. I cleaned up in the water and took public transit back to some more familiar places. I took a snooze on the subway and ate in soup kitchens alongside people who told me that God was with me, completely unaware of what I had just done.

By nightfall, a deep sense of desolation had settled in. I was, for real, *completely* alone. I felt a deep void inside, like something was ripping me apart. I wanted Jeff to come and comfort me but it was useless to kid myself, I knew more than anything that he would never be coming back. I began feeling sick about what I had done to Dwayne Jackson but I kept on telling myself that if I hadn't put an end to him, he would have put an end to a multitude of other people. After all, there was a reason why he complied with my blackmail and came down to the factory with a bag of money. There was something he didn't want the world to find out. Too bad I didn't know what that was myself. Finally I simply decided to walk in the boondocks of Dobbs Ferry by myself after nightfall in order to collect my thoughts in peace and solitude.



As I walked in a back alley near the old downtown area I spotted a cat in the shadows. I slowed down my pace so I wouldn't frighten the animal as I approached it. In an adjacent alleyway there was light coming out of an open bedroom window and I clearly saw the cat when it walked into the light and looked up towards the roof of the tall building. It was a Siamese cat, just like Belle. Was it her? Could it really be her?! I squatted down near another building and watched the cat for a few minutes before it noticed me. It seemed to be curious about me and it approached me cautiously. When the cat got close enough I let it sniff my hand before I took it into my arms and held it close to me.

"We are finally together again Belle," I whispered to the cat as I hugged it tightly.

The cat soon started to purr in my arms but our beautiful moment was disturbed when I heard some footsteps coming towards us from the other side of the alley. My cat got frightened and jumped out of my arms and climbed a semi-demolished wall on the right next to the building behind us. I soon pulled out my loaded handgun and got ready for another brutal encounter.

"Who's there?" the familiar voice demanded.

"Stay back!" I shouted in response, "I'm armed!"

"Drifter?" the voice became soft, "Is that really you?"

"Ritchie?" I was completely taken aback.

Soon enough the voice in the shadows emerged into the light and sure enough it was Ricardo. I never thought I'd see him again but there he was right in front of my face. For a moment I thought I was hallucinating but I knew that whatever aspect of delusion there might have been, the moment wasn't all up in my head when he touched my arm and I felt the cold hard squeeze of his long fingers.

"It's really you!" Ritchie exclaimed with joy, "For God's sake we all thought you were dead!"

"I'm not dead yet," I spoke softly, "but Dwayne Jackson is."

"He's dead?! You honest to God killed him?!"

"Go to the factory and you'll find his decapitated body. I left his car in Old Sylva."

"Why in the world did you do that?!"

"I only did what I needed to do. Jeff was innocent and I am the only person who loved him enough to serve that bastard Dwayne with what he deserved! I'm not ashamed to be the person that I am today!"

Belle was meowing from the roof of the single storey building, unable to come down and too scared to jump. I shot a mean glance at Ritchie before starting to climb up that old partially-collapsed building to save my cat.

"Don't climb up there!" Ritchie shouted anxiously, "The roof of the building is burned and you'll fall through!"

I had almost reached the top when Ritchie started to climb up after me, which scared me cat. Belle was right at the edge of the building waiting for me but when she saw him, she began running towards the other end of the building. Once I reached the top I climbed onto the flat roof of the old brick building and sure enough I started to fall through the roof. Thankfully Ritchie was right behind me still scaling the wall and just in time he grabbed me by the ankle and propelled himself backwards. We hit a bunch of falling bricks on our way down but when it was all over the two of us were safely laying flat on our faces at the bottom of the building. My head was sore and pounding from the fall but I had no broken bones. It might have been a different story if I had fallen right down to the basement of that building.

"It's just a freaking cat!" Ricardo muttered angrily, almost like Damian did in one of his belligerent moods, "Get over it!"

He obviously hadn't fallen from as high as I had because he quickly got up from off the gravel as if nothing had ever happened. He then got on top of me and pinned me down to the ground.

"You really shouldn't have killed the city councillor," Ricardo's voice was filled with diverse emotions.

"Why not?" I taunted, "He murdered my brother for no reason! I could not have known what the future would hold. I did Jeff a solid!"

"You don't understand. Jeff is dead because of me!"

"Is that right? Oh big bad Ritchie feels guilty now!"

"No! Shut up you damn little snot! In a robbery over three years ago I murdered Dwayne Jackson's niece!"

"And nobody in the gang knows about this?"

"No. I never told them. Everyone, including Dwayne, thought it was Jeff and I just went along with it."

"That's why he wanted to kill me. He wanted Jeff to know what it was like to live without the person he loved the most!"

"I'm so sorry Ana! I never wanted your brother to die!"

"You damn jerk! I should shoot you too! You deserve it just as much as Dwayne did!"

"It's all over now. Just skip town and make a life for yourself somewhere else. I'll never be anything more than a crook and a street thug. You can still get out of here alive."

"Nobody gets out of here alive."

Richard slapped me in the face with an open hand and ran off into the dark alleyways surrounding us and before I even had the chance to get up to pursue him he was already out of my sight. I didn't know what to think or how to feel so I just sat on a stash of fallen bricks and cried. I never thought I would have been betrayed by one of my own like that. Never in a million years would I have fathomed *that*. I knew that he had done some horrible things in his life, but I never thought that he would have left my brother to be killed like that. But at least I had gotten the answer to my most burning question. I would at least be able to fill that void inside of my soul. Jeff was innocent. I was innocent. We were innocent. It wasn't about us. It had never been about us. How Dwayne Jackson came to the conclusion that Jeff had done that, it was too late to get answers, but one question had at least been answered.

After what seemed like an eternity I finally collected myself and started walking again. The blankness inside of me was like a consuming fire, only that it didn't burn. It swallowed me like an overpowering force of running water, yet I didn't drown. If I had felt like crap before, it was nothing compared to what I felt alone there in that back alley with nothing but a stash of bricks and some ashes. Even the cat never came back. I had never felt more alone in my entire life. If there was such a thing as utter and complete loneliness with nothing but your memories and your sins, that's exactly what I felt inside. I longed for Eddie or for Byron. Ritchie hadn't even given me the chance to ask where they were, or if they were even still alive. Life could be gone in the blink of an eye. Life was nothing but a vapor that stayed for a little while before vanishing like it never came.

"A time to kill and a time to heal," I whispered to myself as I thought of Byron, "a time to weep and a time to laugh."

Since it was too late to take public transit to another part of New York, I laid down underneath a bench at the bus stop and did my best to doze off because I knew that it would only be a matter of time before there was a statewide manhunt for the person who mercilessly murdered a well-respected city councillor.

"A time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace."

# Chapter Nineteen

I took the first bus out of Dobbs Ferry at five in the morning. I looked like hell and I felt like the devil himself. The search for pleasure was overrated. There was absolutely nothing to be gained from life. Everything was utterly meaningless. I took public transit all the way down to Trent Woods, another small community near Queens. There was an old French man named Gerard Lacroix who had ties to one of the girls in the gang and who had a couple of properties in other states. I was going to give him my ten thousand dollars and ask him to let me live in one of them just for a little while until I figured out what I wanted to do next. My life's mission had been accomplished. What else was there left to do in a pitiful young life? I had often contemplated suicide but that was not the answer. I felt like there was still something else I needed to do.

The bus dropped me off in the downtown of Trent Woods just as the sun was climbing up into the sky. I hopped off and went roaming around to see if I could, by any chance, find the old man's house and try to explain to him who I was and why I needed his help. There was no going back to see Robin Crowley or Damian Welker. If Gerard Lacroix was of no help to me, I would just have to improvise and I wasn't the best at doing that, especially when my only resource was ten thousand dollars and an illegally obtained handgun. Regardless of if Gerard Lacroix could help me or not, I was already on my own, and that was a choice I had made long ago. After walking a few blocks I thought I spotted the old man's house so I went and pounded on the door. Worst case scenario, it wasn't his house.

"Drifter?!" Shany was the person I saw on the other side of the door.

"Shannon?" I was just as surprised as she was.

"What are you doing here? You're the last person I expected to show up for the funeral."

"The funeral? What funeral? I'm looking for Gerard Lacroix and I know now that this is his house."

"His funeral. He croaked four days ago. He left everything to me."

"Son of a bitch! The last person who could've helped me just had to freaking die! Is it just me or all of my resources just get wiped right out from under my feet at the same time?!"

"What did you need him for?"

"I need to skip town. I wanted to know if I could kind of rent one of his properties in Utah or something for a little while until I figure out my own life."

"What did you do this time?"

"You'll see it on the news in the next couple of days."

I thanked Shany for her time and the food she gave me before going on my way again. Just as I was walking down the street back to the downtown, I encountered Byron driving an old blue Pontiac.

"Byron!" I shouted in a mixture of shock and excitement.

"Drifter!" he shouted in response, "Get in the car!"

I quickly jumped in and buckled myself into the passenger's seat as he made a U-turn in the middle of the quiet street and went back from where he came from. Byron looked shocked to see me. All of my people had been shocked to see me so far but I couldn't really comprehend why. I looked much better with my new haircut and the mostly new clothes I had on. Some of the guys disappeared for weeks at a time but when they came back nobody was shocked. But then again, they weren't Jeff's little sister.

"My God," Byron spoke after taking a deep breath, "we were all sure you were dead!"

"Why? Because I was gone for a while?" I chuckled under my breath, "It wouldn't be the first time I ran. And for the record, I was on a brazen crime spree. I'm sure you've heard about it on TV. I was even caught on camera robbing a corner store!"

"Didn't you hear what they found down by Bonnie Creek?"

"Nah, I wouldn't even know where that is."

"It's east of Cobalt, another little wine village, but the police found a mass grave with the bodies of at least fifty teenage girls that about match your description."

"That's creepy. When did they discover that? I haven't even heard of that!"

"Two days ago. They also found a few male bodies in another location but apparently the crimes don't seem to be connected at this point."

"Two days ago. That's when I killed Dwayne Jackson. It must've been him!"

Byron looked at me in confusion and wonder. What was so shocking about me killing a dude?

"I blackmailed him, telling him that I knew what he had done," I continued, "and he must've thought that I was a corrupt cop or some other person that had found the burial site and was willing to keep quiet. But he was so surprised when he saw me. He totally hadn't been expecting me."

"What did you blackmail him with?" I had Byron's full and undivided attention.

"The murder of some dude named Richard Parker. But it probably wasn't him after all."

"What makes you so convinced that it was him?"

"The fact that he came to me and he did everything I told him to. Actions speak louder than words Byron. There was obviously something that guy didn't want the world to know."

Byron looked at the road ahead, completely puzzled. Obviously he had heard certain things that I didn't know about yet. The guys had been agitated for a while long before I had left on my mission and it was apparent that that feeling had only grown stronger during my absence.

"Where's Eddie and all the other guys?" I asked Byron after a long moment of silence on his part.

"Eddie's gone," Byron replied in a soft voice, "and Richard and Nick skipped town. We don't know where they are."

"What do you mean? Did you guys all of a sudden disband after I left?"

"Eddie was shot and killed down by the shipping docks south of here and we don't know where Rich and Nick went. But I reckon that they suffered the same fate."

"I saw Richard the night after I killed Dwayne. He saved me from falling to my death and then he ran away."

"The cops must be onto them for some reason. They wouldn't just ditch us. We have all been feeling kind of on edge lately just to put it mildly. It's like there is a sense of impending doom looming over our heads."

Eddie was dead. I hadn't even gotten the chance to say goodbye. He was one of the last people I loved on earth and he too probably had gotten the burial of a dog just like Jeff. Part of me wanted to cry but my heart had been too hardened to do so. I was so done with crying over things that I couldn't change.

"Was he with a guy named Ratablavasky?" I asked after another moment of silence.

"Who? I don't know anyone named that." Byron's voice was even softer.

"Eddie, did he have any connections to a thug named Ratablavasky?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Me and a kid named Connor shot some people in the shipping docks near Queens a while ago."

"It wasn't you Ana. It hasn't been that long."

"How can you be so sure? I've left nothing but a path of destruction since I left. There's no telling what happened in the wake of the havoc I've caused!"

"You didn't kill Eddie! End of story! Where did you see Richard?"

"Dobbs Ferry."

"Any indication of where he was going?"

"Home? Cobalt?"

Byron exhaled loudly, obviously stressed and very tense because of something that he still wasn't telling me.

"What about old man Crunch?" I asked before Byron could respond to my previous ramblings, "Richard could've easily gone to see him."

"No, he couldn't," Byron's voice hinted an unspoken uneasiness, "because the old man had been in the hospital undergoing cancer treatment."

"And since when does that old dude have cancer? He was fine when I left!"

"He seemed fine, we all know that. But apparently he had an undiagnosed case of aggressive and terminal cancer. The doctors are trying to buy him some time but I'm giving him another couple of weeks and that's it."

"Can I go see him?"

"No way in hell! The authorities have somehow managed to find out about his criminal activities and if you show up there, they'll be onto you."

"Why would they be onto me? They know nothing of what I've done with the gang. I've been off the radar my entire life! That stuff's got nothing to do with my recent crime spree."

"It doesn't matter. Sooner or later there's gonna be a manhunt bigger than anything you could ever imagine for Dwayne Jackson's killer."

"How long?"

"Give it a day or two and the police will start connecting the dots."



I took a deep breath myself and tilted my head back. I looked at the fluffy white clouds floating around the overcast sky completely without emotion. It was all over, it was really all over. It was nothing more than a matter of time.

"The police," I spoke gently but seriously, "they are onto you. They are onto all of you, that's why you are all scrambling to get your act together. That's why you are all so darn agitated."

"Yeah," Byron admitted in shame, "Crunchy had known for a while that the heat was onto him for tax evasion but nobody had been expecting the recent blows we've all suffered."

"A time to be born and a time to die."

"Since when do you read the Bible?"

"I don't. But I've listened to everything you've ever said. There is a time to be silent and a time to speak. What people seem to ignore is the fact that *silent* and *listen* are spelled with exactly the same letters."

"This is your time."

"You know Byron, I've spent most of my life up until now being angry. Harboring that angry and animosity prevented me from seeing clearly and accomplishing anything."

"And when did this clarity strike you?"

"When I realized that killing Dwayne Jackson had been nothing more than a waste of my time and energy. It didn't accomplish anything except make me overly paranoid."

"Paranoid of what?"

"Everything! Everything had been falling apart, seemingly all at once, and my mind is constantly in a state of unrest now."

I rambled a little bit to Byron about my bizarre mixture of feelings but he couldn't help me. Nobody could. What was done had been done and the only person responsible for my actions and what resulted of them was me. My end was near.

"I'm gonna take you to Fred and Ebony's," Byron spoke after another eternity of silence, "there they will give you a bag of money and you're gonna get out of here and whatever happens after that it's up to you."

"No," I muttered in protest, "I am right where I want to be. And I've already got ten thousand dollars. I don't need anything more from you."

"Did you steal that?"

"Dammit you ask so many questions all of a sudden! No. I blackmailed Dwayne into giving me a hundred thousand."

"Let me guess, you spent the rest! Come on Ana! I'm trying to give you a chance here! I'm trying to pay you back for saving my life!"

"Oh my God, that was such a long time ago Byron. It's irrelevant now."

"Don't say it doesn't matter to you because it matters to me! I was doomed but you save me."

"I condemned you is what I did! I didn't give you a life! I ripped you away from whatever life you might've had!"

"Well that's just too bad my dear friend because this is my life now, it's not what it was before."

"Why did you stay? Isn't it against what the Bible teaches to live this kind of street life?"

"Maybe it is, but there is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens. He was willing to give you a chance to leave all of this behind and I was willing to sacrifice a part of myself and my life in order to do that."

I shook it off as nonsense.

"God wouldn't do something like that." I muttered.

"Jesus gave himself for humanity's sins," Byron went on, "who says that I can't sacrifice my teen years to make sure you got out of here? I believe without a doubt in my mind that God put me in that situation to make a difference!"

"Sorry man, but it's too late for me."

"It may be too late to undo the choices you've made, but it's not too late for forgiveness and to be right with God."

"I've done nothing that requires forgiveness. I've only done what I needed to do to survive."

"Ana, please."

"No, Byron. I feel like I can face the day so just help me get out of this town."

Byron didn't have too much of a clue more than I did regarding what we were supposed to about what came to be known as *the situation*. I knew that he had wanted nothing more than to help me and to

make me see the goodness in life. I felt guilty about having let him down the way I had. I had let myself down too. In all the mistakes that a single life could make, murder wasn't one that would just go away.

"Is your dad still a preacher?" I asked Byron, "Minister? Priest? Whatever the difference between all of those titles are."

"Minister," Byron replied softly as stopped the car on the side of a residential street, "yeah he's still doing that."

"So go home."

"And go back to what? I haven't seen any of my folks in over five years! In another two years they might as well declare me legally dead."

"At least you have something to go back to Byron. Just go back and deal with whatever results of it. For the short time that I have left here, I'll be okay on my own."

"If I go back home, you're coming with me. Whatever happens between now and the end of the road, I'm not letting you go."

"You realize that doing that is as good as committing suicide."

"I'm supposed to be dead Ana. I'm only alive because of you. The least I can do is hold your hand when it all goes down."

And so Byron and I went on a suicide mission.

"I still have ten thousand dollars," I spoke as Byron made the car engine roar back to life, "don't you want a taste of the good life before our time is up?"

"Whatever you wanna do," he replied with a smile on his face, "we've got nothing to lose now!"

"Why don't we go down to Rhode Island and have a dip in some of that salt water?"

"It sounds good to me!"

"Summer is almost gone. And I'll never swim in the ocean again."

"Then what are we waiting for?!"

Byron flashed me a huge smile and I couldn't help but duplicate it. Byron turned the car around and we headed the other way. The sky cleared and made way for beautiful sunshine, almost like it was a message from heaven telling us that it was going to be okay. We took our time on our way there, eating

out and stopping by shops on the side of the road. Our lives were going to be all over soon, the least we could do was have fun until that day.

"So if you have ten thousand dollars," Byron spoke as the two of us were waiting to pass through road construction, "and you said that Dwayne gave you a hundred thousand, what happened to the other ninety?"

"I gave it away," I replied without emotion, "to Damian Welker."

"The gun salesman?!"

"Yeah, that's him. It is to my understanding that you two know each other?"

"I saw him on the news just the other day! There is a warrant for his arrest in like, a lot of cities. How'd you come to know him? And more importantly, why'd you give him money?"

"Uh, well, I guess you could say that he's my former boss and that one of the jobs I was on was collecting half a million dollars."

"In that case you might not just be wanted for murder."

"I highly doubt that the police have much on him. That guy was a chameleon. He was hidden in plain sight in a small town and he didn't have a worry in the world."

"Since the discovery of the bodies the police have been cracking down on crime so much more. They've got law enforcement from municipalities, the state and even the Federal guys are lurking around just waiting for someone to be careless and slip up."

"In that case it's probably better we don't leave the state."

"We should still try to get to Rhode Island. If they catch us, then they catch us. But if they don't, then the world belongs to us."

I contemplated what Byron was saying for a moment. He was right. It was just a matter of time before we'd get caught. Whether it was in New York or in New Jersey or in Rhode Island or anywhere else, it was nothing more than a matter of time.

"What's got you doubting?" Byron asked tenderly as he saw that I was obviously distraught.

"I'm not sure I'm ready to say goodbye, Byron," I muttered as I struggled to keep my voice from cracking, "I still have so much unfinished business."

"I'm afraid it's a little too late for business Ana."

"Turn the car around Byron. We're going to see your parents. Just do it."

"You know, I'll see them when we get caught."

"Going to Rhode Island on vacation was a dream that I've never lived before, but there are things so much more important than that. A time to search and a time to give up. Well it is to my understanding that this is my time to stop searching for something that I will not find because it isn't out there."

Byron looked at me with compassion in his eyes and turned the car around despite that we had almost made it to our destination. We had been on the road for some more than three hours before we turned around. I still had so much money to burn but before I went out with a bang, I wanted to make things right with someone that I had wronged.

"Let's take a drive down to Pigeon Creek," I told Byron "I've gotta make a cash deposit there."

"There's a bag under the seat," Byron spoke as he made a sharp right turn, "I figure that you probably don't want to see this person face to face."

"No," I laughed gently, "it's probably better I don't."

I put five thousand dollars into the brown canvas bag under the seat and wrote a note apologizing for what I had done to him. Robin Crowley didn't know about Connor so I didn't mention him. I also knew that five thousand dollars was nothing more than a fraction of what I had cost the hard-working good man, but it was all I could give him. For the time that I had left I wanted to keep the just over four thousand I still had. I still needed to make it for a couple of days.

"Turn left here and it's that house right over there," I gave Byron directions to Robin's place, "just park at the end of the street and I'll drop the bag on his doorstep."

It turned out to be much easier than I had originally thought. Robin Crowley was at work so he wasn't anywhere on the property to surprise me like he had done when I attempted to take a sponge bath in his kitchen. I noticed a newly installed security camera surveying the property but I wasn't breaking in. I was turning at least part of a wrong into a right and to some degree it actually made me feel better to know that when he got home he would see me dropping him his bag of money on his doorstep. When I got back to the car Byron had a big smile on his face.

"You're really determined to make things right aren't you?" Byron spoke almost joyfully.

"I acknowledge that I can't get away with this," I spoke softly, "so I might as well try to do some damage control before it's all over."

"I am very proud of you Anastasia. I always knew that you were golden."

"I'm tarnished now, but I am laying down my life. I did what I came out here to do. Now let's go see your folks."

By the time we reached Bronx it was nighttime. It was too late to do anything other than rent a cheap hotel room and have some fast food. Bronx wasn't exactly our territory gang-wise so we weren't going to roam that land at night. I made Byron rent a cheap hotel room and get us some McDonald's downtown before calling it a day. We were both very tired from all the emotional stress and the tension so we didn't go out looking for the church owned by Byron's parents. It would still be there in the morning. It was Saturday night anyway, we were going to have some better luck in the morning if we were looking to talk to someone.

The hotel room was only forty bucks so we got what we paid for but it was one of the nicest places I had stayed in during the past five years. Our room was on the seventh floor, overlooking the city lights shining bright at night. It was nothing but a small room with two single beds side by side with a table with a lamp in the middle. It was by far one of the smallest rooms I've ever seen but it was better than the street. Byron slept on the bed against the bathroom wall and I slept on the one right underneath the window. There wasn't even a cheap little TV in the room, and not even a Bible in the drawer of the end table. I laid down on my back and stared at the little holes in the ceiling for a while until I finally dozed off. Byron had fallen asleep a long time before I did and there is no doubt that he slept a lot better than I did.

In my sleep I was tormented by the things I had done. The police were running after me because Dwayne Jackson had some back to life and told the entire country that I had brutally murdered him. He knew where to find me and he sent the authorities there. I woke up in cold sweats in the middle of the night expecting to wake up in a jail cell or something similar. But the hotel room was still there. Byron was still sleeping soundly in the other bed next to me. Only the city light outside illuminated the bare grey walls of the place. Not a thing had changed. I thought about Richard. Where was he? I knew that

he had never meant to hurt me or Jeff and even less have one of us killed but the whole scenario was still incomprehensible in my mind. The more I tried to figure everything out the less I was able to understand. Finally, I just gave up and drifted back to sleep for an hour or two before tormenting images invaded my dreams.

"AnastasiaAna! Wake up!" Byron's voice seemed to be coming from another world, "Ana! It's just a dream! Wake up!"

And I woke up with a loud scream of fright. Byron's face was only inches from mine in the tiny room and it had caught me off guard considering the things I had seen with my eyes closed.

"Hey! Calm down," his voice was loving and gentle as it usually was, "it's just me."

"Byron," my breathing was erratic, "they will be coming for me!"

"Just calm down please, Ana, nobody is coming for you. Not here, not yet."

"I hate the way it is. And to tell you the truth Byron, it's killing me and it's killing you too."

"We're going to get through this, I promise."

"This isn't your battle Byron. Don't go sticking your nose into places it doesn't belong."

Byron smiled softly at me the way only he could get away with.

"It's a little too late for that, isn't it?" his voice was completely fearless, "And you know Drifter, sometimes you should take your own advice and stop thinking that you're all by yourself and on the hook for everything."

"Well," I began softly after catching my breath, "for the time that we have left we should go see your parents."

I took a shower first while Byron went down in the streets below to grab some breakfast at McDonald's for both of us. I took an exceptionally cold shower to try and get back in touch with myself but it didn't exactly work. I previously had no idea that one's conscious could feel so bad. A million and a half things were spinning around my brain but what really dawned on me the most was the fact that I had gotten absolutely no closure. Sure, it had felt good in the moment, but then you close your eyes and the

moment is gone. I did my best to make myself believe that I had accomplished that I had set out to do and that I had gotten a sense of satisfaction out of it but in reality, I didn't. In reality it was eating me up inside and in reality I had no idea how I was supposed to live with myself.

Byron then jumped in the shower while I force-fed myself the breakfast sandwich trying to get a grip on myself to face the outside world. I had no idea how I was going to do that but I told myself that I'd do it for Byron. I at least owed him that much after the countless times he had sacrificed himself for my sake. There was a part of me that felt guilty for not having gotten closer to him when I had the chance because once it became common knowledge that I had murdered a city councillor, the chances of bonding with Byron would be long gone. It was apparent that he felt the same way and that he always had but I had been too blind to see that all along. My anger had once consumed me and in my present crisis my guilt completely suffocated me. I wasn't seeking forgiveness, I only wanted justice, but I knew too well that there was no justice in crime and certainly not in humanity.

"Are you ready?" Byron asked me cautiously, not knowing how I would react.

"It's now or never," I replied mostly to myself.



# Chapter Twenty

Byron took me by the hand and the two of us checked out of the hotel room. Down in the streets below life went on as usual. People walked passed us with big smiles on their faces and went about their business without a worry in the world. The same couldn't be said for Byron and I. He was about to walk into his father's congregation after five years of seemingly having evaporated off the face of the earth. I was about to blow my cover and go to prison for the rest of my days. I took a deep breath and followed Byron's lead.

"I haven't been here in an eternity," he spoke as he racked his brain, "I might have to ask for directions."  
"Damian Welker has a hideout somewhere around here apparently," I spoke as I looked around the buildings myself, "it seems like both our lives begin and end here."

"We can worry about him later, for now if I don't find my folks in the very near future I might as well back out."

"It's a little too late for that Byron. It's me who's by your side now, don't forget that."

Byron flashed me a smile as he squeezed my hand. After about half an hour of walking or so, Byron spotted the church. It was just a little brown building like any other in the decor of the street. It wasn't some fancy street with stained glass windows and statues of Jesus on the cross made out of pure gold. It was just across the street from where we were yet it seemed to be a world away. Nothing had registered in my mind by that point. I was about to turn myself in yet my mind still felt like it was running away.

"I don't have a clue how I'm going to explain any of this to my folks," Byron's voice was cracking up, "talking to the police is one thing but telling your mom and your dad that you killed somebody is something else."

The cars honked angrily as Byron and I ran across the street pretty much in the middle of the place but as I did so I felt like a burden was lifted off my shoulders. There was a certain aspect of comfort involved in reaching the end of the road.

"I never thought I'd see this day!" Byron exclaimed with a mixture of joy and longing.

"I never thought that this would be my life," I whispered to myself in response.

The two of us barged into the building about an hour before the service was about to begin. A man in his sixties immediately rushed over to us and happily greeted us. The look on Byron's face indicated that his entire world was falling apart. That man was not his father. The pastor had no idea who either one of us were. It wasn't him. I felt like I was about to faint because I was so sure that everything was going to end the moment we walked into that church. But both our suffering was prolonged. Byron looked like he was about to cry. He had been so sure and so ready to see his parents again but he had been disappointed. The man presented himself as Esteban Ravenshaw and invited us to have a seat in the very small church and talk for a while before he was to hold the regular Sunday morning meeting.

"I'm looking for a man named Andrew Davis-Harris," Byron did his best to prevent his voice from cracking as he spoke, "he used to be the leader of this church."

"Sorry son," Esteban replied in a neutral tone, "Andrew hasn't worked here in some four plus years. I can give him a call for you and leave your number with him to call you back however."

"I was hoping to speak to him in person, but that's fine, I'll catch up with him another time."

"Since he lost his oldest son the man has been having some hard time coping but there is no doubt in my mind that he'll be happy to reconnect with you if he used to be your spiritual leader."

The three of us sat down in the chairs arranged in a circle in the small room while Esteban spoke about how he found the Lord some thirty years ago. The room smelled like old mold but it was probably just the dirty carpeting. Crosses and decorations and picture frames with Bible verses adorned the dark paneling walls everywhere. I couldn't sit still so I went and took a look around the place hoping to find a distraction. In the pastor's office there was a picture on the wall of a young Byron with his parents and younger siblings. *Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning* was written underneath the frame. It was such a shame that Byron's father hadn't been there because he would have definitely rejoiced at seeing his son again, especially if he had thought that his son was dead for five years.

"My daughter, your face is troubled," I hadn't noticed Esteban beside me, "is there anything I can help you with?"

"I don't know," I muttered softly under my breath.

I was at a complete crossroads in my mind. That little church wasn't the end of the road, and I no longer knew what to do.

"Let's take a look at a verse in Matthew," the man went on, "come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

"Why is light given to those in misery, and life to the bitter of soul," I muttered out a verse from Job that I'd learned from Byron, "to those who long for death that does not come, who search for it more than for hidden treasure, who are filled with gladness and rejoice when they reach the gate?"

"Job makes some very valid points my dear, but don't forget that although your beginnings will seem humble, so prosperous will your future be."

"Is there really hope for the hopeless?"

"Jesus said that even the hairs on your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows. Tell me what's going on with you and I promise to do everything in my power to help you."

"I've done something so terrible, and it haunts me."

"Good news! There is nothing too terrible or atrocious for God's love, mercy, grace and forgiveness. Confess to Him your sins and you will be washed clean. How about you and your friend stay for the meeting and then all of us can finish this conversation?"

"Sure."

"What did you say your names were?"

"Ana and Byron."

The man's eyes lit up when he heard Byron's name. It was unknown if he made the connection between Byron wanting to see Andrew Davis-Harris and that man having a missing, and presumed dead, son also named Byron. Either way, the man didn't let that distract him from sharing the message Jesus shared to his people that morning.

"You seem to have impressed him with your Bible knowledge," Byron tried to lighten the mood as the pastor was speaking with a group of other people.

"I think he was more impressed at meeting Andrew's son than the few melancholic verses that I know," I muttered in response, "so what are you going to do about this?"

"I don't know. This wasn't what I was expecting."

"I think I'm going to get out of here because I simply can't sit still anymore. I need some air."

The two of us got up and left in a flash. We walked back to where we had parked the car the night before and we both sat in it without saying a single word for the longest time. Byron felt just as empty as I did and I didn't have much more of a clue on what to do next any more than he did.

"Do you want to hide out in another hotel room until we figure out what to do next?" Byron asked me softly just to break the silence, "I'll get us some more food for the rest of the day."

I nodded my head but I didn't speak.

"I'll also make a point to get us a better room for tonight," Byron joked as he started the car, "one with a TV at least. We should be prepared for whatever we're going to see on the news tonight."

What was going to be broadcasted on the news at six was exactly what I was afraid of. Were they onto me? What was the best thing to do? Run and hide or turn myself in? Both of those options had worked out awfully for me in the past. What about the people I cared about still out on the streets? What would happen to them if they caught me?

"I guess there is a time to tear and a time to mend," I muttered to Byron, "but I don't know what time it is now."

"And a few verses after that," Byron spoke gently, "God has made everything beautiful in its time. No one can fathom what he has done from beginning to end."

"And you know Byron, that's exactly what scares me. Some people are tempted to say that what you don't know can't hurt you but what you're not prepared for is what can cut you the deepest."

"In that case maybe the best thing to do at this point is to try and figure out what the authorities know and you can figure out your next move."

Byron grabbed some drive-thru Wendy's before checking into a much nicer hotel room. There were two large beds, a nice big couch, a microwave, a phone, a TV with some 500 channels, a small table with two chairs, room service available around the clock and a beautiful view of the city. I immediately dropped my bag next to the door when I came into the room and flopped down on one bed to tune into some local and national news channels. The navy blue bedsheets were soft and had a floral pattern with a vintage twist. The floorboards were made out of varnished natural wood and one wall made out of beautiful brown bricks. I felt like royalty for a moment even though the room was far from being the king's palace. As I was laying on the bed next to the phone I contemplated prank calling somebody just for the hell of it but first I had to face what I was going to see on the news.

Just as I feared, the first thing I saw on the news was a special report about the gruesome discovery of a city councillor's body on an abandoned factory lot in a little hick town called Cobalt. Byron and I were glued to the screen up to the very last second of that broadcast. The female reporter said that so far the authorities had no suspects but they were investigating the possible links to other recent crimes. The reporter did mention however that the city councillor had received a piece of blackmail telling him to bring a hundred thousand dollars to the factory in exchange for silence. What the TV didn't tell Byron and I was that I was the one who had sent him that, but deep down, I knew that he knew. The broadcast finished with a showing of Damian Welker's mugshot saying that he was wanted for weapon's trafficking and that there might be a link between his weapons and the one used in the murder.

"I gave him ninety thousand dollars but it seems like I've only dug the trenches deeper down," I muttered as that broadcast came to an end, "how long Byron?"

"A day or two," his voice was broken, "somebody's gonna talk and somebody's gonna put you at the crime scene."

"And if I kill myself am I going to hell?"

"Look, Ana, it's not my place to tell you where you'll go. All I can say is that if you've accepted Jesus Christ as your savior, all of your sins are forgotten."

"Seriously? Even murder in cold blood?"

"Isn't that what the pastor said? Yes, even murder in cold blood. I don't recommend suicide though. There's still a life out there for you."

"There is no life behind bars Byron. There's nothing behind bars."

"God has a way of making things work out for the better you know. Sure I've been out here for five years having to make bad choices in order to live another night and to protect the guys but God has given me so much to look forward to. And even when I go to prison, I know that God will use my life to make a difference."

I didn't speak.

"If you're such a righteous man," I began apprehensively after a long moment of silent contemplation on my behalf, "why the hell haven't you turned us in? All of us?"

"Because my work here wasn't done," Byron spoke gently, "my life still hadn't served its purpose. But now I have a feeling that my time out here is done."

"Go home to your family Byron, I'll figure out what to do in the few days before the cops find me. I shouldn't be that hard to hunt down."

"I'm staying with you until the very end Drifter! You should know that by now! You saved my life! I know that God put the two of us in that alley that night for a very special purpose."

I took an extended bubble bath and ended up making the bubbles flood the bathroom when I turned on the jacuzzi feature in the tub but I had a good time and a good laugh. I ate more food than I should have all at once and I watched a variety of things on TV. When it was time for the evening news to come on I changed the channel to see what kind of new dirty, if any, the authorities had on me, my people or Damian Welker.

*Tonight we have an update on a story that we brought to you this afternoon. The local police department has established a possible link between the murder of city councillor Dwayne Jackson and the mass grave of bodies discovered over a week ago. Authorities now say that they have a few persons of interest, however, they aren't releasing their identities or their pictures just yet. Now let's go to Jeanine Carling who is in Cobalt tonight reporting on the police's newest findings. Jeanine, it is to my understanding that this crime was premeditated and that the culprit didn't act alone is that right?*

Once again Byron and I stared at the TV screen with the blankest of blank expressions on our faces right to the very last moment of the broadcast.

"It sure looks like you've uncovered something absolutely horrific," Byron's voice was almost filled with fear, "and maybe you've started a chain reaction of events of record proportions."

"I didn't know about any of those things," I choked out with a dry throat, "I only wanted to avenge my brother."

"Do you really think he killed those girls?"

"I don't know. But I do feel like he had something to do with Richard Parker's murder. Just the look on his face before I shot him..."

"He was guilty."

"Oh yeah, caught red-handed. But what disturbs me even more is the fact that he totally hadn't been expecting me. He was prepared for somebody else."

"I guess we'll never know the truth now. I don't think it's okay to kill people but it seems like you did this town a solid."

"Monsters getting rid of other monsters. Why does humanity only bring out the worst in each other?"

"That's why we need God, and oh Lord I've got one heck of a guilty conscience myself. The end looming over your head just makes it so much worse too."

"At least our guilt lets us experience God's forgiveness. I had the corruption and control people do in the name of God though."

"Me too, and I don't blame those who want nothing to do with God or spirituality because of that, but I say just talk to God, seek God, and God will guide you. Forget about organized religion and this and that faith. God is mighty enough to guide you to the truth if you only open your heart."

Byron smiled softly at me. God was really the only hope in such a screwed up situation. What about the rest of my people though? What was going to happen to them? I was guilty for my own actions and I fully understood that but the rest of my people out there had no part in my recent actions. All they had ever wanted was to survive and I did not want to take them down with me. But then again, I should have known better than to think that anything is fair in life. It isn't.

"Do you think that he would have gotten away with this?" I asked Byron after some more contemplation on my behalf, "I mean, they don't even think it's me at this point."

"This is bigger than either one of us at this point," Byron's voice was low and pensive, "some crimes never get solved but one of this magnitude probably won't be unsolved for long."

"What if they frame Damian Welker for this?!"

"That's going to be his mess. He's already wanted for so many other things."

"But I can't just let them blame him for something he didn't do or even know about! That's just not right!"

"And where do you get your morals all of a sudden?"

"From up my ass Byron! That man looked out for me when I was with him! I can't just not look out for him and Connor when they looked out for me in the past. Aren't you paying me back for looking out for you?"

Byron's face fell. He knew that I was right.

"I need to find Damian Welker."



# Chapter Twenty One

*This afternoon there are new developments in the recent discovery of some gruesome crimes in recent weeks. Police have now released the names and pictures of four persons of interest. None of them are considered suspects just yet, but the police would like to question the following individuals regarding other crimes that may be linked to the murder of Washington Heights city councillor Dwayne Jackson and the now 52 identified teenage girls found in a mass grave last month. The first person of interest is a man known to police named Damian Welker, here is his mugshot onscreen right now, he is currently wanted for weapons trafficking and extortion. The second person of interest today is a man named Andrew Murdoch, the reason the police want to question him hasn't been released to us but he has obviously been in trouble with the law before as we have a mugshot from 2002 on file. The two last persons of interest are nineteen-year-old Connor Peterson who is a known associate of Damian Welker and multiple area drug kingpins, and a teenage girl only known as Ana Sims seen on security footage breaking into stores with Peterson as well as dropping off a large sum of money on a doorstep in Croton-On-Hudson. The names of other persons of interest have been released during a press conference as well, however we have no photos of these people.*

They had a very clear image of my face and what I was doing on Robin Crowley's property. In the previous days I had also been wandering around town, somebody was going to track me down sooner or later, it was just a matter of time. The walls were closing in on me alone in my dark hotel room with nothing but the light from the TV screen illuminating the surroundings. I was running out of money to move around and hide in different places too. There was a part of me that so badly didn't want to run anymore, but until I had found Damian and Connor, I had to keep looking and keep a low profile. The last I had heard of Byron, he had managed to contact his mother but he hadn't told her who he was, so I imagined another reason why the authorities would be interested in me. Byron had lied for me and for all of us for so long and his time had come to tell the truth, there was no doubt in my mind that he was going to find a way to do just that without taking all of us down. But I was going down and I knew that very well. All I had do to was wait.

The following morning I got dressed in some new clothes that I had made Byron get for me. I put on some large sunglasses that were way too big for my face and covered my head with the hood of my new red hoodie. I only had a thousand bucks left in my pockets and no weapons, so unless somebody had been monitoring me, I was not Ana Sims and I had nothing to do with her. When I left the hotel room and made my way to Whitehaven, I had a pretty good idea that I would get caught because there was no doubt in my mind that the authorities were monitoring Damian Welker's place and everybody that came and went. But I had to try anyway. My guys had skipped town and I never had the chance to give any of them a proper goodbye before the whole situation blew up. Damian was the only one left, but even before I set out part of me knew that he was already gone.

My entire life I had searched for things and people that were already gone. Part of me wondered if it wasn't me that had always been gone. Nobody had any answers to my questions and none of them mattered anyway. I could only hold on to the faint hope that Damian was still somewhere out there and that I could get to him before anybody else did. On my way to Whitehaven I deliberately took the long way there so I could pass through Cobalt and get a glimpse of what was going on there. The police presence was huge, bigger than anything else I had ever seen in the history of living on the streets and seeing all sorts of things happen right in front of your eyes. News crews were reporting out of Cobalt day and night and finally the small town had been put on the map once and for all. I only prayed that my people had all gotten out of there.

The trip to Whitehaven had gone without a single hiccup. I got dropped off in the outskirts of the small community without incident. It didn't seem like anyone had followed me but I'm sure somebody was watching somewhere. They had to be, the authorities weren't complete idiots, they knew where Damian lived. It was just a matter of catching him in the act. The media presence in Whitehaven was enormous too. You could clearly see the factory off of Old Mill Road down by the river so of course if you had a shot of the crime scene in the background of your news report your ratings were much higher. It was just a ploy to get more viewers and make more money. Nothing in life was about the greater good of the people around you, and if it once was, it wasn't anymore. There's nothing good anymore when you're on the run.

I walked over to Damian's old moldy building and went up the stairs to his floor. As I went up I carefully examined every detail of the building out of paranoia that going over there would just sink the two of us. Nothing seemed to be different except that the place never got cleaner and new disgusting smells seem to come out of it every time I walked in there. As I neared the door of Damian's apartment I became so increasingly nervous that I wanted to faint, throw up and die all at the same time. For a split second I almost turned around and when running back outside but I knew that I only had one chance so I decided to go ahead and take it. The worst thing that was going to happen was a police officer waiting to apprehend me inside. Whether it happened in the apartment building or somewhere down in the streets below, I was going to get caught one day or another. I had nothing to lose.

So I walked right up to the door and looked around me one last time before lifting up my hand to knock. It took me a few seconds but I did it. I knocked gently on the door to not make too much noise but nobody answered. I heard no footsteps coming to the door to open it. It was still just me in the hallway. Nothing had changed. So I knocked louder, knowing that Damian hated people pounding on his door. That would prompt him to open it, or at least that's what I thought. Still nothing. I still stood alone in the hallway in front of a closed door. On a whim I tried the door handle just to see if it was unlocked by chance but I had no luck there either. It seemed like the man wasn't home but I wanted him so badly to be home because I was in trouble and I needed some twisted sense of comfort and peace of mind that I knew he could give me so I pounded on his door with my fist like a person who had gone completely mad.

"Damian! Damian!" I shouted as I relentlessly pounded on the door, "Damian open the door, please!"

The neighbor that lived right across the hall came out of his apartment angrily when I simply wouldn't stop making noise. He loudly let his door slam behind him as he looked at me menacingly.

"Damian obviously ain't here kid! Did you know there's a warrant for that guy's arrest all over the news?" the bald man covered in piercings spoke to me apprehensively, seemingly very annoyed, "What do you want from a convict anyway? Why are you here?"

"Because I'm his daughter!" I choked up on a whim, not knowing what else to say and no longer being able to contain my panic.

The most horrified look I had ever seen with my own eyes swept across the man's face. Behind him in the doorway a woman, probably his wife, holding a Siamese cat in her arms looked just as horrified as he did. I figured that it was common knowledge that he had buried his little girl and then having me show up at the door, resurrected from the grave, it was bound to raise questions somewhere. I ran off crying before the neighbors had the chance to do anything or say something else. I bolted out the door in the lobby faster than I had ever ran before. The worst part wasn't that I was running from monsters, the Ku Klux Klan or Catholic nuns, the worst part was that I was running from myself and what I had done. There weren't many places where I could go before the impending doom looming over my head caught up to me.

I ran a few miles to another small municipality by the side of the river and sat on one of their floating docks in the water. I took off my red hoodie and sat on it. I did all I could do, and that was wait for the police to come and get me. The people in the apartment across the hall from Damian's were going to call the police, there was never any doubt about that, but once again it was a question of *when*. It was still early afternoon out in the land of the living but I felt as good as dead. I prayed that the authorities could just come and pick me up once and for all, but hours and hours went by and nobody came. Eventually the sun began to set in the distance and a cold wind started to blow. Nothing had happened. I was beginning to wonder if anybody was coming for me in the first place. I hadn't dreamed of seeing myself on TV, *wanted*. So where was everyone? One thing I knew for sure, they weren't *here*.

As the sunset was dissipating over the buildings, I heard a single set of footsteps coming from behind me. The pace wasn't slow but it wasn't in a hurry, it was casual, relaxed. I did not turn back to see who it was. It didn't matter to me who it was. All the people I loved were already gone. I had nobody to look back for. The footsteps stopped just a few feet from me on the wooden dock but I still didn't turn around for a single glance. All I could do was look at the waves of the water going back and forth. The person took another step towards me and stopped again, seemingly cautious, so I finally I tilted up my head and looked. The first thing I saw next to me was a dirty leather trench coat. I looked up at the man and saw that it was Damian!

"Oh my goodness!" I shouted as I literally jumped up, "How did you find me?"

I honestly couldn't believe it. It was really him!

"Somebody told me that my *daughter* stopped by," he spoke apprehensively, "I simply couldn't ignore something like that."

I broke down crying at the sight of him and in response he took me into his arms and held me tightly.

"I'm so sorry Damian," I muttered, "but I couldn't live with myself if I didn't give you a proper goodbye."

"I know baby," his voice softened up, "I know what unfinished emotional business is all about."

"Everyone in my life is gone and it's my own fault!"

"Well I'm still here ain't I?"

Damian loosened his tight hold on me and stroked my cheek with his rough hand. The look in his eyes was gentle and he seemed to be on the verge of tears.

"There's nothing under the moon that I wouldn't do for you baby," Damian's voice was nothing but a whisper, "what's going on with you?"

"I am so sorry Damian," I had a hard time containing my emotions, "but it's all over. It's just a matter of time before they find us and I am so sorry that I got you into this mess because I was angry and impulsive. I just need you to know that."

"I was in trouble long before you ever came along, it just a matter of time before they caught me anyway. Don't hold this one against yourself. You've suffered enough. I still have some of the money you gave me, thank you for that sweetheart, so you can still get out of here."

"There's no running anymore. I *want* all of this to be over more than anything Damian. I'm just sorry that I had to drag you down with me, and I want you to know that."

"I know, I always have."

Damian leaned over and kissed me on the cheek.

"I think about all the days of my life when I could've done something more," I muttered, "and I think about all the days of my life when I should've done things differently."

"It ain't too late honey," Damian's voice was shaking, "we can still make it through this I promise you that."

"It's too late to not drink the vodka after you swallowed it. Our pictures are all over the media Damian, I can't understand why they haven't picked us up by now!"

"They've got some of the biggest cases in centuries on their hands right now, we're not wanted for murder either. There's still time."

"I just want it all to end! I really screwed things up for myself and I don't want this life anymore!"

"Then go to the police. They aren't very far. Tell them everything, and tell them that I've done some truly horrific things to you and that I made you do other things. That way the judge will have compassion on you and he'll want to help you instead of condemning you."

"You have so much faith in such a perverted system."

"It'll at least buy you a chance. Otherwise you'll never see the light of day again. You're still so damn young."

"And what about you and Connor? I didn't come back here to sink the Titanic!"

"Connor skipped town. When he left I already never expected to see him again so that's irrelevant now. Right now the pigs want to talk to me about guns that I've sold but once they dig up some more dirt, I'm going away for a very long time."

"Well I guess it's the two of us now."

"At least take twenty thousand bucks and give skipping town a shot. All that money won't be of much good to me in prison."

"No way in hell Damian. I'm staying right here with you."

I put my disguise back on and Damian and I rode back to Bronx in his car to his hideout by the waterfront in the area Byron and I had been a few weeks earlier.

"I had no idea that you were this close all this time," I spoke mostly to myself as Damian parked the car near the alley Byron had parked his in.

"What do you mean?" he asked as he overheard.

"A kid named Byron and I came here just a few days ago while we waited to be caught."

"Well we're both here now."

Damian's hideout was a small office near an old converted industrial compound. There was one large living area containing the living room, dining room, kitchen, everything. At one end there was a single bedroom and next to it was the bathroom. Huge metal bars covered the windows and there was a big stash of guns laying on the pool table in a dirty corner. The man was loaded to say the least. His hideout was about just as bad as his apartment back in Whitehaven but at least it didn't smell like mold and urine. It only smelled like smoke from years of smoking in there. The windows didn't open so there was no getting that nasty smell out of there.

"Until they come," Damian spoke softly as he turned the light on, "this will have to do."

"It's perfect," I smiled softly at him, "do you have cable on that TV?"

He didn't. The two of us spent at least half an hour trying to arrange the rabbit ears in order to get some half-decent reception for the late night news. By the time we got some good reception the newscast had long since ended. On the other hand, we had ended up covering the rabbit ears with aluminum foil and taping them to the wall afterwards in an area where we had the clearest reception. It was still snowy in his old TV but at least you could see and hear everything onscreen.

"Guess we'll have to wait until tomorrow eh," I spoke in a mixture of satisfaction and disappointment, "to see if we're in some more hot water."

"Come to bed and I'll rub your back," Damian proposed as he fixed up his bedroom, "I'll do my best to make this place as comfortable as I can while we're in here."

The following morning, even after a goodnight's sleep in Damian's strong arms, I was completely cracking up. It had gotten to the point that I threw up everything I ate not matter how small or insignificant. I wanted to go running outside with my arms up in air shouting that I had killed Dwayne Jackson and that I wanted God to forgive me. It became increasingly hard for me to focus on the words of encouragement that Byron and Esteban had blessed me with. The only thing looming over my head was what I had done and the unknown; what would be the result of it. At noon Damian and I tuned into the newscast for any updates on the case in order to determine what we were going to do next or if we were just to stay put until further notice. It wasn't long before the two of us knew our fate.

*We have some breaking news this hour regarding the Dwayne Jackson murder case. Police have just released some security footage from inside City Hall clearly showing Anastasia Sims making multiple visits in the days and weeks before the councillor was murdered. On another video, footage from the back parking lot where staff keep their vehicles, the teen girl is seen loitering around seemingly waiting for someone. Towards the end of the clip you clearly see her going to retrieve some paper and writing something before depositing on a car offscreen and leaving the way she came. Authorities now believe that she was either hired by the killer to blackmail the city councillor or she has some sort of other information regarding the crime.*

"Well that didn't take long," Damian spoke with no emotion in his voice.

"Bunch of idiots!" I snapped back angrily, "I killed the jerk! But then again, I had very little motive to do so compared to some other people it seems."

"This might sound crazy honey, but a lot of people out there will hail you as a hero. Sure they won't say that killing the guy was the right way to get rid of him, but if what you say he did is true, the friends and family of all those people he hurt won't be able to hate you."

"You're crazy and I'm out of my mind."

"Seriously, if the person who killed my little girl was to be killed tomorrow, I'd get down on my knees and worship the person who did it."

"So what happens now? They know they want me and after today I don't have much time."

"What happens now is up to you. The minute we'll leave here they'll find us."

"Do you think that we'll go down in history for this? Centuries from now do you think they'll still have our faces and our names in books and movies?"

"Is that what you want to happen?"

"Is there anything else that can happen? People won't give a crap if I go out there, but something will happen if I bring a gun to City Hall."

"You're on your own for a suicide mission though."

"I've been a nobody my entire life. I don't want to go out like a nobody."

"Make sure they remember your name!"

My faith had been short lived. Forgiveness wasn't going to work. At least not in the moment. All that stuff could wait for a later time. For the moment the only thing I wanted was for everything to *end*.



"I'm not bringing a gun to City Hall," I spoke in a very serious tone of voice, "but I will be paying the place a visit. There is a time to plant and a time to uproot."

Damian and I put on some disguises just so we could make it the short distance to Washington Heights before somebody spotted us. I wore my same hoodie and sunglasses while Damian actually put on some clean clothes and a ball cap before we jumped into the car and took a short drive.

"What are you doing to do?" Damian asked me seemingly afraid of what I was plotting, "I don't want the security personnel to shoot you in there."

"If they shoot me they shoot me," I replied apprehensively, "but I'll just be creating a scare in the people at the memorial in there. When the dynamite starts to sweat it becomes very unstable."

"Just don't lose it in there. I'm not going to be able to handle losing you too."

"I love you Damian. Whatever happens from this moment on, I just want to make sure that you know that."

"I love you too Ana. Now make sure that no matter what happens, this all ends with a bang!"

I grinned at him and got out of the vehicle right in front of City Hall as Damian was going around the block to find a parking space. I walked passed the crowds of people and the media into the buildings where a huge makeshift memorial had been erected for the corrupt councillor. It was growing more and more every day. What all of those people didn't know were the things the city councillor had done when nobody was looking. I walked through the crowd and climbed up onto a table and accidentally knocked down some picture frames and made them come crashing to the floor, attracting the attention of everyone who was in there. In that moment I ripped off my hood and ditched my sunglasses, letting everyone know in complete shock and horror who I was.

"My name is revenge and I'm here to make my claim!"

Only a fraction of a second passed before the security guards drew their guns on me and everyone got up against the walls.

"Put your hands behind your head and get down on the ground right now!" an officer shouted at me as I grinned at the expressions on everyone's faces, "Don't make it say it twice!"

"Take it easy popo," I chuckled, "by the way Damian Welker is behind you."

That sure sent everyone into a frenzy. One officer tackled unarmed Damian to the ground and arrested him. Another officer tackled me from behind only a few seconds later as I was watching the scene unfold in front of my face with great delight. Fast forward less than a minute and I was being read my rights while City Hall was being evacuated. Damian and I locked looks for one last time as the two of us were being escorted out and put into the back of two separate police cars.

"You'll all thank me once you find out what Dwayne Jackson did!" I shouted as a media frenzy swarmed Damian Welker and I.

Back at the police station I was booked and put into an interrogation room where one staff member came in and told me a bunch of useless and irrelevant crap and finished with telling me that I could make one phone call before two homicide detectives were going to relentlessly question me, but I was ready to talk. I was ready to tell them everything.

# Commentary

Although this story is a work of fiction, it highlights very real and very important social issues that plague our society. I will not write an essay about all of it because the lessons are there, we only need to pay attention. The first (and quite putrid) version of this story was originally written in 2011 on the advice of my therapist at the time to hopefully help me process my feelings about growing up in poverty, mostly on the streets of run down neighbourhoods ridden with crime and other greatly unfavourable conditions. In 2014 I then decided to revive this project after actually being homeless for a few weeks, and living in a friend's disarranged hunting trailer and it ended up more or less like this story you've just read, minus a few new edits.

Thankfully I never had to witness a murder, and much less committed one, but I've seen many things that left a scar on me to this day. By being the "bad guy" and having control over all events from behind my computer screen I could regain that control I never felt I had. Before, I was vulnerable but now I am victorious. If you enjoyed this story I kindly ask you to please consider supporting my writing career by purchasing one of my paid books. Visit [www.jamilamikhail.com](http://www.jamilamikhail.com) for more information.