

Chapter 14

The car spins.

Clutch in.

The SUV that hit me is out of view, also out of control.

Trees.

The road is in view.

Clutch out, one pump of gas, as light as I can without being able to feel the pedal through the cast. The rear of the Chevelle straightens slightly, but there's no traction.

Clutch in, turn into the turn.

Clutch out, back in. Adjust the wheel to compensate.

Again.

The Chevelle is now in something closer to a skid than a spin.

A glance in the rearview mirror, and it's eyes forward again. Two SUVs on the road and behind

them, a Lincoln Continental I've seen before.

Adjust, clutch out, feel the lack of traction, and in.

The SUVs are not catching up. The road is dry, not that bad to drive on. So they aren't locals.

Where have I seen the Continental?

"Alex, are you okay?"

Adjust, clutch out, no traction, clutch in.

"Are we done spinning?"

The SUVs are getting larger, but not the Continental. They are getting confident.

Adjust, clutch out, some gas. Still no traction, clutch in. Hardly drifting anymore.

"I need you to shoot out their tires. I can't accelerate."

He takes the APX out, checks the magazine, and slides it back in.

Adjust, clutch out. Where is that traction? Clutch in.

He pulls himself out the window. "Fuck it's cold. Try to keep this straight."

Adjust, clutch out, where? Clutch in.

There shots.

A glance in the rearview shows one SUV heading for the ditch. The Continental is drifting further back.

Adjust, clutch out. Traction.

I keep the acceleration gentle.

Two shots.

A glance up. The SUV is still coming.

Alex is inside. “Out of bullets.” He reaches for my holster.

“Don’t.”

“I need it if I’m going to shoot that thing off our tail.” His hand is on the grip.

“I can’t have you drop it at the kickback.” His box shimmers. “Or having you lose your balance.”

“It’s just a gun. I’ll buy you another one.” He isn’t pulling it out. “And I won’t fall.”

“It’s a gun that was involved in a firefight. The bullets it fired are in those bodies, the shells litter the floor. I haven’t sanitized it yet.”

He lets go and closes the window. “Then you have to lose him.” He puts his hands on the vent and I glance at the control to ensure the heat is at the maximum. “Unless you want me to climb over the car to reach the trunk for reloads?”

I glance at him and he rolls his eyes.

I accelerate harder and lose traction. I let go.

“Yes, I saw the magazine boxes in there.”

“Emil?” I didn’t see him in my glances, and he’s being too quiet.

Alex looks over the seat. “Emil? Kid?” he reaches back.

“Don’t,” I order. “Don’t touch him. After what he’s been through, he isn’t ready for a stranger to touch him.”

“He’s curled up on the floor behind you. I can’t tell if he even hears me.”

“Get in the back. There’s a latch behind the headrest. It’ll let you remove that section and give you access to the trunk.”

“Didn’t think this old car had removable back seats.” He’s there. There’s a click.

“It’s the second box on the left, Alex.”

“My man’s Bart,” he replies, annoyed. His voice goes muffled as he slips into the trunk. “You do know that, right?”

“It’s your middle name.”

“It’s the name I use.” His voice is normal. The sound of a magazine pulled out and inserted. The back window goes down.

“I hate that name.” I realize I spoke out loud when he replies.

“It’s just a name. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It means you’re hiding!” I raise my voice so he can hear me over the wind of the lowered window. “You have no business hiding from anyone!” He stares at me in surprise. I’m as surprised. His box caused the outburst. “Get rid of our pursuers.” I had. “Please.”

He pulls himself out. He empties the magazine, and the SUV is out of control, the rubber of the front passenger side tire flying. The Continental is a point on the road in the distance.

Al—Bart—is back in. “I never want to come this far north again.” He closes the window. “How does anyone live here?” He changes magazines. “You want the empties back in the box?”

“Flipped.” Without pursuit, I let the Chevelle slow down to the limit.

He sits back in the front. “The kid’s still on the floor. Shouldn’t he realize it’s safe now?”

“He will. His name is Emil. Please use it.”

“And mine is Bart.” His tone had borderline angry. His box brightens and triggers a reaction in others.

I ignore it, them, and his tone. “There’s a laptop secured under the seat.” There’s too much going on to let myself be distracted by my poor control over them. I want time to figure out what it means. What his and Emil’s boxes mean.

He’s still looking at me.

“I need you to find me a truck stop or a garage. Something out of the way with a lot of people, so we can go unnoticed.”

He reaches back and puts a slim laptop on his lap. “I’d rather use me.”

“Is it hardened to keep others from listening in on it?”

He stares at me. “It’s got half a dozen encryption programs on it, two of which I wrote. No one’s going to intercept my searches.”

“How about passive listening?”

“That’s not a thing,” he says dismissively, “and we’re moving. Who would even do that?”

I can’t see the Continental anymore. He is an expert in cyber security, but everything I’ve read supports that regardless of the programs he had on his laptop, a non-hardened machine is insecure.

“Please use the laptop under the seat.” His refusal to obey is exacerbating the chaos among the boxes, and I am uncertain how I’ll react if he continues.

Eventually, he shrugs and puts his laptop on the backseat. He pulls the military laptop from under his seat and lets out a whistle.

“Where did you get this? They aren’t in the habit of handing does out to anyone.” He studies the latch, then turns it in my direction. “You need to unlock it.”

I put my thumb on the print lock. “Acquiring them isn’t difficult. It was just a military base,” I

add to his raised eyebrow.

He's typing and the question I wait for doesn't come.

"You need to upgrade your security." He tells me. "And sixteen character isn't secured anymore. But I'll give you props for it being random." He types some more. "You should upgrade the entire thing. This is an antique."

"It's only three years old."

The roll of the eyes tells me what he thinks of that.

"The 95 is fifteen miles south-east. It had services stations along it and a few truckstops off the exits."

"It's a tollway?"

"Feeling cheap?" he asks, sounding amused.

"Not feeling like having my picture be one of those looked at when they're investigating the massacre we left behind. Did you travel along it to get to Portland?"

"I followed your route." He types again. But before I can ask, he's speaking. "If the interstate's off-limits, the closest truckstop is on the 202, in Farmington. Maybe forty-five minutes from here."

"Keep me off the 202, but guide me there." He's typing. "How did you track me to Portland? I avoided the cameras when I left Phoenix."

"You're going to want to stay on this road for fifteen miles, then it's the 35 south."

"Bart, how did you find me?" I ask again.

His eyes are locked on the screen.

"Bart." I put the warning in the tone.

A whimper has me look in the rearview mirror as Bart looks over his shoulder. Our eyes meet when he settled back, and I mouth “talk”.

He deflates. “I hacked your provider to track your phone’s GPS.”

“There were no mentions of it having one.” I would have taken an older model if I’d known.

When he glanced at me, I see the fear in his eyes. “You aren’t in trouble. I never told you not to follow me. I’ll disable the GPS once we’re back.

Curly black hairs appear over my seat.

“Are you okay Emil?” I asked, looking at him in the rearview mirror.

He nods and sits, hugging himself.

“Are you cold?” Bart asks. “There are blankets in the trunk. I can get it for you if you don’t want to move.”

Emil shakes his head.

Bart gives me a worried look, but there’s little I can do to comfort Emil while driving.

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The passenger side lights are cracked and their bulbs broken, but the bumper only had dents where the SUV made contact.”

“How didn’t the SUV destroy the back of your car?” Bart asked, sounding amazed. “It had to be twice as heavy.”

“It’s made of lighter material than the Chevelle, not as much mass.” I stand. Emil is still in the car.

“I offered to have him come in with me to get something to eat, but he won’t move.”

“Get him something warm. Proteins, carbs, some sugar.”

“Not offering him the pemmican you have in the trunk?”

“Right now, he needs comfort as much as nourishment.”

He stares at me. “You know what comfort is? Or that people need it?”

His box glows softly...comfortable and the ease I felt as I held him comes back to me. “I have read enough psychology to know how people work.”

“So a burger, a pop, and a donut?”

“Are those comfort foods?”

He’s amused again. “At his age? I’d say a bag of chips and a dozen donuts. Kids, these days, have no idea how to eat. I’ll get him something decent from the restaurant.”

“Only two coffees for you, Bart.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I head for the store.

The truckstop doesn’t have the light assembly for the Chevelle, but they have bulbs that will fit and repair tape. The fix takes time since I have to work one-handed, and isn’t perfect, but will pass the casual glance from a state trouper.

Bart returns and offers me a hand-size package wrapped in foil. “Bacon cheeseburger with all the trimming for you.”

“I have food.”

“No. You have nutrition. This is food.” He puts it in my hand. “It won’t kill you to eat something tasty.”

I keep my eyes locked on his as I eat it in half a dozen bites.

“Well?” he asks.

“Well, what?”

“Was it good?”

“I doubt it. Something like that can’t have everything that’s needed to survive.”

He rolls his eyes. “I mean the taste.”

I shrug.

“Do you even have taste buds?” he asks suspiciously.

“Yes, but I see no point in paying attention to them. Get in the back. You and Emil need to sleep. You’ll be driving in a few hours.”

I fuel the car, pay cash, and head out.

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I reflexively tighten my hold on Emil as I’m thrown aside in the back seat. Bart curses. It’s dark outside. Emil trembles in my arm.

High beams flash behind us. Bart curses again: reaches out the window, and fires blind.

“Bart?” I place Emil on the floor, and he clings to my arm for a second. His eyes are filled with fear.

“Two cars. No idea the models, but not SUVs. They’re keeping up with me. They came up with their lights off and I barely noticed one in time to avoid getting hit.”

I pull the Desert Eagle and glance ahead, noticing the dash. “Slow down, Bart.”

“Unless you want them to slam into us, you don’t want me doing that.”

“Unless you have training in high-speed driving in winter conditions, you are going to do their jobs for them. Slow down.” The look he gives me in the rearview mirror is borderline manic. I will have to address that later. “Do not make me repeat myself.”

Sanity returns to them and he slows.

I open the window, lean out and fire twice. The lights go out but the after images still blind me. I fire between where they were, and the screeching tells me I hit something vital.

I can't see the second car even once the spots diminish. The growl of the engine tells me it's a V6, but the flash of gunfire sends me inside before I can work out its position. Those didn't come from the V6's direction.

There are three cars, not two.

“Stay down,” I tell Emil, even if he hasn't moved. I take out the back of the seat.

“Are the windows bulletproof?” Bart asks.

“No one makes them for this model, and a custom order would have drawn attention to me.”

From the trunk, I take a timer, a brick of C4, duct tape, and the two-gallon gas container. I tape the brick to the container and attach the timer. I hate working one-handed. I set a two-second delay, start it, and throw it back and high. I grab the Desert Eagle and lean out.

It explodes, and in the light of the burning gasoline that rains down, I see the Continental as the driver slams the brakes, letting the mustang pass it. I fire twice at the mustang's driver and it careens into the ditch. Before I can aim at the Continental's driver, it's lost in the dark.

I remember where I saw it now. Parked near the office building. Gregory is who I saw behind the wheel.

I close the window, change the magazine, then pull Emil on my lap. “How are they tracking us?” Quickly, his trembling subsides.

“I don’t know,” Bart answers, eyes constantly going to the rearview mirror.

“How would you do it?”

How would Gregory go about it? He’s older than me and uses dockworkers for muscles. That means old style. The Chevelle was out of sight for hours. Could he have found it? I need to look it over as the first opportunity.

He looks at me in the rearview, his eyes glance to Emil, but he doesn’t voice one of the ways he’d do it. “He has access to a large number of people. With that, I’d leave some outside to watch, and only report, not intervene. That gives me the type of car you’re leaving in. We were focused on the cameras so we could have missed someone following us, or since he’s more familiar with the city than we are, he had the ways out watched. Once we’re on the secondary roads and with enough influence, he can have people ahead keep an eye out and report.”

That could be how Gregory did it if he didn’t have assistance. “Could someone hack the satellites and track us that way?”

“They’d need the kind of skill very few hackers have.” He pauses. “Or contacts. You’re thinking about the Mexico angle. If they know the right people within the military, they could do that, but that would depend on what’s over us right now. The kind of satellites that can be moved can’t do so quickly. It would make more sense if they’re using people, or hacking into the cameras of every town in the state.”

“Then, this will be a question of how many men Gregory has access to, which means how far his

mysterious partner is willing to go to eliminate us.”

“That means how much money they’re willing to spend on this. I don’t see the Mexico angle limiting this to just the men they and Gregory employ.”

“How much gas?”

“A bit under half.”

“Once you hit a quarter stop at the next gas station and we’ll switch.”

“That isn’t going to be busy.”

“At night, it’s going to take too much work to find such a place.”

He looks at me, hesitates. “Is Emil going to be in a state to drive?”

I feel him nod.

“He will.” I tighten my arm around him and close my eyes.

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