

CHAPTER 23

A half-mile up the curving incline of the San Diego-Coronado Bay Bridge, Mercy asks me to change lanes.

“Sure. But I thought you might enjoy the view from up here.”

The concrete guardrails are low—less than three feet high—but so is the Mustang, and she won’t be able to see the downtown skyline or all the sailboats in the water below if another vehicle pulls abreast of us on the passenger side.

“Thanks, but I’m a little scared of heights.”

Traffic’s light so I sneak a peek over at her: one hand gripping the shoulder restraint, the other white-knuckling the side of her seat, eyes riveted to the center divider—shallow breaths; no color in her face.

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More than a little scared.

As a therapist, she must know the best way to get over a phobia is through repeated exposure to that which you fear (easy for me to say; in 9,000-plus years, the odds are you'll confront a bunch of frightening situations more than once). But I'm not the kind of asshole who gets a kick out of scaring people, and I need her to trust me. I cruise into the passing lane.

"Is that better?"

"Much. Thank-you."

She doesn't say anything the rest of the way across, and I pass the time counting the number of suicide-hotline signs mounted to light posts every couple hundred yards or so. Thirty-six of them on this side unless I missed one.

At its highest point, an empty aircraft carrier can pass through underneath, between two of the thirty mission-style concrete arches reaching some two-hundred feet up to the road bed. It's not a straight-shot to get across the bridge. It arcs ninety-degrees to the North as we head to the namesake island it connects with the rest of the city. In fact, as we make our way off the bridge on Southbound Highway 75, we're actually traveling due North for a time, before taking a left onto Orange Avenue which leads west into the exclusive shops and eateries of downtown Coronado.

"So where are we headed?" she asks.

"I need to take care of some business at the Hotel Del."

"I love the Del. It's beautiful. I go there for the Sunday brunch buffet in the Crown room whenever I have friends visiting. It's really something."

"I'm surprised you're willing to suffer the bridge so frequently."

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“I don’t. I take highway-75 up from Imperial Beach through the Strand. It’s a little out of the way, but it’s still a pretty drive. And I don’t have to worry about having a panic attack.”

I nod. “Yeah, that’s probably for the best.”

“I don’t suppose you’re going to tell me what sort of business you have at the hotel?”

“Nope.”

“But it’s related to Cindy’s kidnapping, right?”

“Yes.”

“So why can’t you tell me?”

“Like I said, it’s classified.” This time it’s even harder not to laugh.

“Well then how am I supposed to help you if you keep me in the dark about what’s going on?”

“By staying in the car with the engine running. I might need to leave in a hurry, so valet parking isn’t going to cut it. I’ll need you to circle, preferably with the top down.”

“Look, I don’t want to be involved with anything illegal.”

“*Really?* So what would you call the lie you told to police about Cindy’s age? Law abiding?” I can’t do that one-eyebrow-up thing she does, but my sideways smile is pretty good at amplifying the sarcasm.

“OK. Guess you have a point. But if I’m in so much ‘danger’ I had to ride with you over here, then isn’t it too dangerous to *weev-da-widdle-woman-alone-awe-by-hur-self?*” She did the eyebrow thing *and* a perfect impression of my naughty boy grin—with simultaneous air quotes around ‘danger,’ followed by that *sick* baby-voice beat down. Behold: the new smartass champion, ending my centuries-long reign.

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“It’s liable to be much more dangerous in the hotel. Please, can you just trust me on this?”

“Sure,” she says. “I’ll trust you.”

Wow. That was—

But before I can think *easy*, she whistles a few bars of Tammy Wynette’s *Stand By Your Man*.

“Mercy! Please!”

“I will give you *no mercy!* For I am invincible! The deflator of men!”

Despite the circumstances, it’s hard not to laugh. Guess I’m a sucker for a girl with a good sense of humor. I just hope she can keep smiling if people start shooting at us.

With a mile or so to go before we get to the Del, I pull the Mustang into a bank parking lot so she can take over behind the wheel.

“When we get there, drive right up to the main entrance and drop me off. Then pull a U-ey and hang a right out of the driveway. Your first chance to turn around will be at the second light down, across from a condominium complex. Just keep turning around there and circling back in front of the hotel.”

“If anyone hassles you, give them the finger and say something to let them know you’re a spoiled, entitled trophy wife waiting on her wealthy, powerful husband to emerge from the inside the bar. If they keep hassling you, lay on the horn two long blasts. I’ll hear it, and I’ll try to wrap up my business as quickly as possible and come back to the car.”

“If I’m not back here in fifteen minutes you can stop circling, at which point your next stop should be the airport, followed by a medium-sized city in the Midwest you’ve never visited,

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that no one but the ticket agent knows you're going to—though I know full well you'd stay here to look for Cindy. At least you've been warned.

“So, any questions?”

“Only about a thousand I know you're not going to answer.”

“Thanks for trusting me.”

“Do I have a choice?”

“For the time being.”

“But not if I want to see Cindy alive?”

“You'd be betting the long shot.”

“And my odds if I keep betting on you?”

“Higher.”

“How much higher?”

“Well I don't want to frighten you, you're scared of heights.”

“That good?”

“Everything's relative.”

“Not everything,” she said.

As two of the hotels distinctive red-shingled turrets come into view I'm content to let her have the last word as I start scanning the grounds for SOJ lookouts.

No easy task.

Completed in 1888, the Hotel Del Coronado is a massive white-painted all-wood beach resort—one of the few remaining—and it still stands as the largest beach hotel on the North American Pacific Coast. Of the six-hundred-plus rooms, a hundred or more have windows facing

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our approach. Too many to peer into in search of binoculars as we cruise past. Nor is the Del's size my only obstacle. Its sprawling asymmetrical architecture offers endless opportunities for surveillance on the sly: Dormers circumnavigating cupolas, pediment protected porticos...archways, bay windows, balconies...architecture buffs call the style "Queen Anne Victorian." I call it *ornate chaos*.

New beachfront construction adds to the sensory overload. As do the sidewalks brimming with sightseers and fat-cat hotel guests waddling back from the shops and restaurants we passed on our way in. Any of one of them could be an undercover sentry scouting for a thirsty Naphil.

My only consolation is that we stopped for disguises before we left PB and our appearance is so different now, that if there are lookouts, they probably won't recognize us. For Mercy, a platinum blonde wig, hot-pink lipstick, and wraparound sunglasses did the trick—and hell—she looks like she could turn one (but in a good way); likewise, a dozen rolled-up beach towels, three rolls of athletic tape to hold them in place, and a triple-XL nylon track suit combine to turn me into a lard ass. Add to that a curly black wig, fake mustache and goatee, mirrored lens aviators, and a fake gold chain, and *bada-bing, bada-boom*: 'fat *guido* and his gold digging *goomah*.'

We turn into the driveway and join the line of vehicles slowly idling their way to the ill-designed *port-cochere*. For all the Del's elegance and style, this car-clogged threshold disappoints, running contrary to the air of leisure one would expect from a four-star resort. Another casualty of paved roads and the automobile.

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Mercy wishes me luck and I get out, waving off the valet and the bellhops before they can add to the congestion. As she pulls away I stride into the narrow vestibule which leads inside to the lobby, dodging piles of luggage as if this were an airport instead of a historic landmark. A cautious approach isn't an option. If I stop, so does everyone behind me.

Once inside the lobby, however, the foot-traffic situation improves. As does the vibe. The *torchiere* sconce and chandelier-lit space is all that and a cup of Earl Grey tea. Framed by hand-carved railings of a second floor mezzanine, and paneled in rich, dark mahogany (not unlike the library of a Basque castle I once owned), it instills a craving for single-malt scotch and pipes filled with the finest Stoved Virginia tobacco.

I'll miss it.

The draw of establishing a safe house in a world renown property like the Del, the Algonquin, or the George V in Paris, owes as much to common sense and convenience as it does to our centuries-refined good taste: We seduce those from whom we feed. Ecstasy in exchange for life everlasting. Although the proportion of O-neg visitors to the hotel is no greater than the general population's immune base, the relative number of delicious young women in search of no-strings romance is *much* higher than you'd find at, say, a Holiday Inn Express. And since we integrated our donor databases with the computerized hotel registration systems, it freed us from wasting so much time merely identifying the O-neg guests. Not that licking sweat from nubile flesh, and tasting for A or B antigens isn't appealing—it is—but with Veingel quotas to adhere to, entertaining so many pretty young things before finding a donor got to be work. Now (before we got hacked, that is) we simply check in to the perpetually reserved (and purportedly haunted)

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room 3327, and read over the special addendum to the room service menu--replete with age, height, and headshots--updated daily by a Veingel 'cleaning lady.'

Nice while it lasted, but I don't have time to keep indulging my nostalgia.

I let the eager beavers behind me peel off for the front desk or the courtyard beyond. Pretend to admire the flower arrangement establishing the geometric center of the room as I scan for SOJ operatives posing as hotel employees or guests. No one looks suspicious.

I'm burning up underneath all this physique-blurring bulk. I wipe away the sweat from my brow before it beads up and drips into my eyes. The fact my people can no longer savor the pleasures of this place infuriates me. The fact I look like a Thanksgiving turkey dressed in a parachute infuriates me. And the fact I can't even take a deep breath with this tape cinched so tight around my waist also infuriates me.

My pulse pounds a cannibal's drumbeat. I'm here to warn my people and their Veingels and all I can think about suddenly is killing—killing every oblivious smiling face in the building just to make sure at least one among the dead is SOJ.

A fire would do it: Disable the retrofit sprinkler system. Barricade the doors...all this wood? Oh *how* it would burn. Like my waiting hell. But that's just the vengeance talking and I am not my vengeance. Not yet. Killing innocents isn't an option I'm willing to consider outside of a dark fantasy.

The usual procedure would be to request an extra key for room 3327 from the front desk, but that's out because I haven't checked the bulletin boards for the name the reservation is under this week. Wouldn't matter if I had, since the SOJ probably has control of the hotel computers, same as they do our databases. Still, there are other protocols I can rely on.

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I make my way up the stairs leading from the lobby, ignoring a sign that announces only hotel guests are allowed beyond this point. I meet no one in the halls. I see no cameras. Undetected and un-harassed, I arrive in front of 3327, the infamous room where Kate Morgan spent her final night among the living, and where, according to superstition, her spirit still haunts. It's no accident this is the room we selected to keep reserved for our exclusive use. The legend of Kate's haunting provides a convenient explanation for why the room is booked years in advance: "*Why, we're ghost hunters,*" or, "*we're mediums trying to make contact with Kate,*" is what we say if anyone asks. The shit people believe. As for the strange noises which hundreds of guests have reported emanating from the room? Well, the giddy women responsible might not classify their sighs and moans as 'natural,' but they aren't *super*-natural, either.

Strange. The door handle is bare. The door is locked. No self-respecting Naphil would occupy a safe house room without hanging the "Do Not Disturb" placard on the outside door handle as a courtesy to other Nephilim and Veingels who might be visiting the hotel. Whether or not the SOJ operatives know of this custom I have no idea, but my guess is they don't. Our databases are just that: places to store data. Essential, useful data. They're not an encyclopedia of Nephilim etiquette and culture—most of which, thank our fathers in darkness, is still an oral tradition.

So the room is either empty, or occupied by SOJ assassins.

I flatten myself against the wall adjacent to the door just in case someone inside heard footsteps and gets curious. The hallway's clear, but I could still be spotted through the peephole.

I ease in to the edge of the door jamb where the hinges and the door butt up against the frame. Inhale deep and slow and quiet, sampling the air for traces of human scent seeping out

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through the joints. A lot of good a heightened sense of smell does me when a dirty room service tray sitting in front of the adjacent room overpowers any telltale whiffs of cologne, or halitosis, or hard-to-hide foot odor. Likewise on the sound front, as their blaring TV masks the meat-moist thud of a hidden heartbeat, or an eye-blink's precious percussion.

Decision time.

I usually gage intervals of time by my pulse. A second per. But now it feels like I'm counting down instead of keeping track. The longer I stand here thinking about it, the longer nothing useful gets done. This isn't like me. It's a simple choice: bust in like a badass, break in like a burglar, or walk the fuck away. And yet here I stand, sweating it out like a prize fighter worried about making weight.

What is wrong with you, Jequon? Have you forgotten your father?

The pep talk's not working. Any second now, hotel staff could appear in the hallway and demand to see a key. Any second now SOJ hit men could appear in the hallway and shoot me.

One heartbeat. Two heartbeats. Three heartbeats.

I'm still glued to the wall.

I wipe the sweat from my forehead a second time. I can feel the towels taped around my upper arms begin to sag as they grow heavy with wicked-up perspiration.

Fifteen heartbeats.

Damn't Jequon. Kick it, pick it, or the hell with it.

Thump-thump. Thump-thump. Thump-thump.

I wasn't even nervous on the way over here. All I could think about was saving someone—anyone. Like a hitter trying to end a slump, I just wanted to make contact with the

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ball...I didn't need a homerun...prevent just one Naphil from walking into an ambush, have him start warning the others while I stay on the attack. I felt like I knew the next pitch, like I could sit on it, assured of a base hit. It's not ambush if you know it's coming, I told myself. And I knew I'd blend in with this disguise; knew they'd have to do any killing in private to avoid a media frenzy and homicide investigation, which meant quick-and-dirty in one of the rooms, and plenty of time to clean up. Otherwise why go through the trouble of clearing Whitmore and discrediting Mercy? Best case: the SOJ didn't have the necessary manpower to setup at *all* our safe houses, and the Del wasn't yet a deathtrap; even if no Naphil happened to be feeding, I could leave a note in the room service menu and alert them of the danger when they did arrive. Worst case: I ambush the ambush. Vent a little. Yeah, I had it all figured out...

Except I didn't. Still don't.

Because if I get all Dark Ages on an (un)welcoming party stationed in the room, I give up the only true advantage I have: my location (and easily inferred from that) and my presumed ignorance of their translator's identity. They'll know I'm on to Whitmore. Just as bad, they'd know I'm in San Diego, and since I'm the only Naphil alive even aware of their new threat, the SOJ would be able to concentrate their forces here to hunt me down. Hell, I already identified these risks before boarding the plane in St. Louis on the way here. It's not Alzheimer's, so I must be suffering from selective memory loss. It's like my brain and my gut are doing battle. Instincts vs. intellect. Reason vs. rage. One of them has to win out or I'm not going anywhere.

And if I go?

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It's not that I'm afraid of dying—I'm afraid of *all of us* dying. I'm afraid of a world free from reminders that God's not perfect after all. We were His first mistake. I don't want us to be his last.

So *that's* what has me immobile. The enormity of what's at stake here. The question is, am I going to choke now that the pressure's on? *What if?* my way out of an opportunity for retribution? A chance to save someone? All these centuries I ignored the Council and killed the enemy whenever they killed one of us, Codes be damned. What? now that they're all dead I'm suddenly going to abide by their don't-make-waves approach?

No way. If I was right then, then I'm right now, and *right now* is always the most important time in life. I need to work with that. Stop thinking, start doing.

I retrieve a fork from the discarded room service tray. I break off three of the four curved tines, and bend the remaining tine until it's no longer curved, straight with respect to the handle like a dagger or prison yard shank. Using my molars as a vice, I bite down near the tip of the pointy end and bend only the last sixteenth of an inch to form a right angle. Now I have a crude torque wrench, one-half the toolset needed to pick a lock. The narrow, flexible wire-frame of my aviators completes the package. I break off the left earpiece at the hinge and remove the plastic cover from the curved end. A couple adjustments and I'm good to go.

This isn't a completely silent operation like in the movies, but it beats knocking. I'll just have to go slow and hope no one has their ear up to the door. For most locks, the tumblers are on top of the barrel, and raking the up out of the way into their chambers isn't much different than gesturing 'come-hither' on a lover's G-spot. By dexterity, or experience, I can't say, but the process goes more quickly than I expected.

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I slowly rotate all the slack out of the knob. Feel the ___ slide cleanly free of the ___ in the doorframe. The moment of truth. I throw the door wide open and dive into the room headfirst, tucking and rolling into a somersault so the door clears my legs as it slams shut behind me on the rebound, finish in a low crouch. Ready to spring, to strike, to slide under the bed.

Nobody's in here. I check the closet. Clear. The bathroom. Clear. Balcony? Empty. All the things we worry about that never happen... The emptiness gnawing at my stomach could be the sushi I resisted in PB, or it could be the paradoxical regret I sometimes feel when impending violence calls in sick.

I made good use of the room last time I visited San Diego. Since then the interior's been upgraded. The bedspread used to be a practical red. Now it's an aqua-hued floral pattern. But other than the decorative touches, the room's how I remember it. A king bed. An easy chair. A media center hiding a TV made to look like a wardrobe. A writing desk I suppose I should make use of before Mercy gets impatient.

Realistically though, it could be weeks before a Naphil or Veingel checks into the Del. We have almost a thousand safe houses around the world. Nor is there any law in the Codes which requires we feed at one of them. They are (were) merely a convenience. The only way a written warning will do any good is if the SOJ don't set up shop in the hotel before the next Naphil checks in...

And now it hits me, like a crate of Elvis records: The SOJ kill squad doesn't *need* to be waiting in the room before one of us arrives. With our database telling them where to look, they can simply monitor the individual reservation systems for each safe house *remotely*, wait 'til a

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reservation goes through for one of our special rooms, and then, at their leisure, send a team to take us out when we're suitably 'distracted' and at our most vulnerable.

Bottom line, they don't need to be 'everywhere all at once' as I previously imagined. With a limited number of known (and unsuspecting) targets, 'anywhere on short notice' is good enough. They could cover the globe with as few as three or four, four-to-five-man units standing ready near major international airports.

Bottom line, I'm an idiot.

The only shot I had at warning anyone here is if they happened to have checked in already—and if they had, then the SOJ would have most likely beaten me to the punch.

At least I don't need to keep *looking* like an idiot. No sentries, so no need to keep wearing this disguise. The wig is my first casualty. I throw it and everything else except the track suit into a plastic laundry bag I find in the closet. Tie it off and set it against the door so I don't forget it on my way out.

I suppose leaving a note—just in case—is better than doing nothing. But dammit I wish there was something else I could do. The enemy perpetrates genocide against us, and so far my response is to write a letter. Fucking pen to a gunfight...

It's the memories that keep me from going pyro on this wooden wedding cake of a building, not the architecture. The good times. And for the record, yeah, I'm the one who shot Kate Morgan. My Veingel, my responsibility. I don't care how depressed you are, or how good looking, poaching sailors when you've already reached your quota, then killing them—but only halfway, so the bodies don't pile up and give you away—*fuhgidabowdit*. Took me three weeks to

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finish off all the vampires she created. As for the legend of her haunting this room after she died? It was a good cover story to explain why it's always reserved.

Speaking of cover stories, Mercy's probably getting anxious for her 'secret agent' to wrap this up. If turning on my cell phone was at all prudent, I'd call hers and tell her to park. I haven't slept much save for the tranquilizer induced coma on Air France and this mattress is first-rate. Maybe she'd like to cuddle. Am I still a 'dirty old man' if I don't *look* a day over thirty?

I take a seat at the desk and use the complimentary pen and hotel stationary to write the letter. Very similar to the warning that got intercepted in New York, a little less wordy. I stash it in front of the room service wine list. As I'm browsing the Del's selection of Napa Valley cabs, I hear footsteps out in the hallway.

Big, heavy steps. Confident, sober strides. Either a sumo wrestler, or three men walking in lockstep. Getting closer.

I get up and shuffle over to the door leading to the balcony, never taking my eyes off the front door. Reach behind my back and undo the deadbolt in case I have to leave in a hurry.

The footsteps in the hallway are very close now. They stop.

Knock-knock-knockety-knock-knock.

Add: 'never underestimate the enemy' to the list of sound advice I've ignored lately.

"Room service."

As in *service revolver* barrel-to-glass on the peephole.

Still facing the front door, I slowly turn the knob on the door behind me. Pull it towards me, slowly, carefully, aiming for total silence. But the hinges could use some oil and they

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screech *exactly* like door hinges inevitably do when a little stealth might save your ass or your marriage. Real subtle. About as subtle as the explosion of wood splinters ushering in the red polyester clad bellhops packing suppressed pistols.

Thanks, Dad, for my blinding speed, and I'm hurdling the balcony rail. The guy on point must've tripped over my *guido*-bag just as he was squeezing the trigger; his first three shots miss.

I land hard on the red shingled roof, so steep it makes all comparisons to vertical academic. My feet shoot out from underneath me as two more bullets *pfft* past overhead. I start sliding toward the gutters, fast enough to melt a hole in the nylon of my ADIDAS pants. *Yes All Day, I Dream About*—surviving three-story falls—and just before I run out of roof (which my sandpapered ass definitely thinks is on fire) I pull my knees into my chest for leverage and spring into the air superman style toward a palm tree, avoiding three more slugs which tap dance harmlessly in my wake. I slam into the trunk with all the grace of a one-eyed flying squirrel with no depth perception. Maneuver to the opposite side to put wood between me and the shooters; eventually these assholes might get lucky. Note to self: *where a cup next time you decide to shimmy down a Royal Palm.* Half way down now. A bullet grazes my forearm. Too close. Fuck it. Sliding down poles is for strippers. I back-flip away from the tree. Bust a half-twist midflight because I'm cool like that and hit the ground running.

Mercy is just pulling into the driveway for another pass as I round the corner and streak past the recently completed day spa. She waves and I signal for her to pull a U-ey. I remind myself no one runs this fast and deliberately slow down to a jog the rest of the way to the

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Mustang. Hopefully the inhuman blur of pumping arms and piston-like strides didn't just blow my cover.

“Go! Go! Go! U-turn it!”

“What's going on?”

“Later. Just drive.”