

Hunt You Down

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Also by Christopher Farnsworth

Killfile
The Eternal World
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Red, White, and Blood
The President's Vampire
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Hunt You Down

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ZAFFRE



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For Bryon

Blunt Knuckles and Shaved Heads

It's not easy to find a nice, quiet spot to torture someone in L.A.

Most of the apartments are cheaply built, with thin walls and neighbors stacked right on top of each other, so the noise carries and there are always plenty of people around to complain. Same goes for the hotels, and even the worst rent-by-the-hour dives have security cameras and require credit cards, which leaves a nice trail for the police when the bodies turn up. Storage units have thick concrete walls and 24-7 access, but random witnesses could show up at any moment.

But L.A. does have a regular supply of people falling off the treadmill of the California dream, failing to make it big and make their payments. This means a lot of foreclosures and vacant homes. A smart psychopath will keep a list of ones out in the canyons, or way off the main roads in the Valley, where the neighbors are likely to think that the screams are just a funny echo from someone's TV.

This is why I'm on my knees in the bottom of an empty pool somewhere up in the hills while a Russian carefully unpacks a red toolbox.

He takes out a cordless power drill and tests the trigger. He frowns at the noise it makes and slaps in a fresh battery. Then he tries it again and smiles, and begins laying out a selection of drill bits, starting with one that looks like it's meant to carve a hole in concrete.



I don't know for sure. I'm not much of a DIY guy.

My client is next to me. Nik. Short for Nikolai. Like me, he's on his knees, hands tied behind his back.

His dad is a Russian billionaire, with interests in oil and gas and commodities and finance. His youngest child, Nikolai, however, wants to be in the movies. So his father tucked a couple million for milk money into Nik's black leather jacket and sent him to Los Angeles. And then he got on the phone and hired me to look after him.

You could argue I'm not doing a great job.

Before tonight, I escorted Nik to a few meetings, mostly with a few indie producers who look at him and see dollar signs dancing around him. (Seriously. It's like in a cartoon.) But Nik has spent more time chasing women than making deals. During a peek inside his head, I saw that he's actually got a list of famous targets in a file on his laptop, with pictures of his favorites. We spent most of his time and his father's money in clubs, looking for Scarlett Johansson. He never met her, but he was able to find plenty of acceptable replacements. Most of the time, I just stood nearby as he sat at a VIP table, dry-humping the leg of any actress/model/whatever willing to put up with him.

He liked to play the hard man. He thickened his accent whenever anyone asked about the Russian *Mafiya*. In reality, Nik had never actually seen a gangster outside of a movie.

Until tonight, that is.

To be honest, babysitting Nik is beneath my skill set. But I'm just back from an extended vacation, and I need to remind the One Percent that they can depend on me to clean up after them again. I thought Nik would be an easy job, unchallenging and uneventful.

Maybe that's why I made a rookie mistake and left him alone in the back room of a strip club with the two dancers earlier. They were both Russian as well, talking a mile a minute in their native tongue, and Nik



seemed happy. He told me to fuck off, and I was all too happy to comply. I scanned both of the women and they had nothing but indecent intentions toward him. Visions of a threesome were dancing in his brain. Seemed safe enough if he wore a condom.

I stood outside for a good long while, listening to the thumping bass of the strip club and the thoughts of the people nearby—dull lust from the patrons, mostly boredom from the dancers. Nik and the women were out of my range. I thought I was giving him his privacy. I also didn't really want the image of a strip-club hand job in my head.

After about thirty minutes, Nik hadn't emerged from the VIP area. Neither had the dancers. That was much longer than Nik had lasted in the past.

I went looking for them, but it was already too late. The bouncer stationed at the back door told me they'd left almost immediately.

Little bastard had ditched me. He probably felt pretty smart, getting away from his nanny. But I was fine with calling it an early night. I planned to get some sleep and then find him again in the morning.

I was halfway back to my hotel when my phone rang.

It was a voice with a Russian accent, but it wasn't Nik.

I got an address and instructions to bring a substantial amount of cash in a duffel bag.

I didn't have the cash, and I wasn't about to call Nik's dad and tell him I lost his son. I went to the address anyway.

A bunch of men with blunt knuckles and shaved heads grabbed me as soon as I pulled up in my car. They looked me up and down, checked out my suit and my shoes. They searched me for weapons. Found none. One called me a *suka*, and they all laughed. I smiled and pretended not to know what it meant.

They asked for the money. I told them I didn't have it. So they tied me up and put me in the empty pool with Nik.



I picked up the events of the last couple of hours from his memory easily. One of the strippers suggested they meet up with friends at a bar. Her friends turned out to be these guys. Nik thought they were cool. He finally got to meet real gangsters. He paid for their drinks, listened to their stories of murder and dismemberment with wide eyes, and talked about making a movie about them.

Then they walked out to the parking lot, where Nik's new friends clubbed him with pistols and threw him into the back of a black Range Rover.

I can see the mistake like neon, blazing in the front of Nik's head.

He mentioned his father's name.

His dad is an authentic Russian tyrant: Sergei Denisovich crawled out of the KGB at the end of the Cold War and grabbed whatever he could when Russia collapsed. He moves oil and commodities and currency around the globe now, but there is murder and blood behind him. These guys are fresh enough from the old country to know his story, and stupid enough to figure that he'll pay big money for Nik.

Now every time the goon takes something new from the toolbox, Nik makes a little noise like a dog's squeaky toy. *<ohGodohGodohGodohGodohGodohGod>* is all that goes through his mind, over and over.

Then the alpha male of this little pack shows up.

He walks down the steps into the empty pool slowly, glaring at both of us the entire time. He's milking the moment for all the drama it's worth. It seems to take him an hour.

I read him in a split second. His name is Vasily. He got called out from his cheap rental above West Hollywood by his thugs. At first he was annoyed, but then he heard the name of Nik's dad, and he got excited. He decided he had to be here in person.

Vasily stands in front of us for a long time before he speaks. He's covered in muscle and tattoos, but he's got a weak chin. It looks like he's swallowed



half his neck. Unlike the other thugs, he's wearing an almost-new Hugo Boss. He's been watching a lot of TV lately, and he thinks this makes him look like a real gangster. But he didn't bother to get it tailored after he took it off the rack, so the sleeves come down past his fingers and he's got the pants hiked up almost to his sternum.

All of this makes it difficult to take him seriously, despite the gun in his hand.

"Where's the money?" he asks quietly.

He tries to come across with an air of indifferent menace—he's thinking of De Niro and Pacino in *Heat*—but I can tell that he's dancing inside. Nik's dad should be good for at least 500K. That would be enough to get him out of his crappy apartment. Maybe even someplace on the Westside.

He's so far out of his league here, I can't resist messing with him. "Left it in my other pants," I say.

Vasily doesn't take that well. He scowls. That's enough to set Nik babbling in Russian and in English. He promises his father will get the money. He barely knows me, I'm just a stupid bodyguard, Nik can get the money, he swears, just don't hurt him.

Vasily doesn't speak. He kneels down so he's face-to-face with both of us. Nik shuts up. Vasily nods at one of his guys, who starts taking a video with his phone. Then he nods at the other guy, the one with the tools.

"I think we take a few chunks off you," he says to Nik, in Russian, ignoring me now. "We'll send the pictures to your father. And then we see how much you are worth to him."

The goon with the tools leans forward. He's got a pair of pliers in his hand.

He'll do it too. I can see it in his brain. These guys have all learned the thug's secret of success: always be willing to go too far.

So I have to be a little careful here. I clear my throat and speak directly to Vasily.



“Look. I know what you’ve got planned. You think you just found a winning lottery ticket. A soft kid with a lot of cash. But see, here’s where we have a problem. I’m being paid to keep him alive and in one piece. So I tell you what. You leave now, quietly, and I’ll let you live.”

Vasily cracks a smile as he looks at me, tied up and on my knees, surrounded by big guys with guns. He finds it funny. Or at least it scrapes at the part of him where normal people keep their sense of humor.

He turns his snake-eyed glare on me. “Babysitter. Keep sitting. We’ll get to you.”

I could have ended this long before now. But I figured Nik needed a little lesson: gangsters are cool only on-screen. The truth is, people like this are not actually capable of the kinds of operatic heights of passion and feeling you see on HBO. They muddle around in the midranges, always looking for the shortcut and the easy way out. That’s what makes them dangerous. They will take almost any chance because they never think it through all the way to the end.

Nik is ready to leap out of his own skin, he’s so scared. I think he’s over his crush on the *Mafiya*. And his terror is making my headache even worse. It’s time to earn my ridiculous paycheck.

“Excuse me,” I say loudly. “Did any of you wonder how much you were going to get from Vasily for this? Or is he going to screw you all like he did on the pot shop?”

It’s like a needle drag in the middle of a song. Everyone stops, thrown off the rhythm for a moment.

This is a sore spot. They hit a medical marijuana dispensary a few months ago—those places are full of cash, since no credit-card company or bank will work with them—and it turned into a clusterfuck. They barely got away before the cops arrived, and had to split up. Vasily had the bag with the cash, and he said they managed to steal only a couple thousand.

But I know the truth because I saw it inside Vasily’s skull.



“He took home close to twelve grand. What did he tell you?” I say.

Vasily tells me to shut up, but they all start to talk at once. A lot of Russian begins spitting through the air.

Vasily has to turn away from me and Nik to answer his crew. He tells them I’m lying. But the dynamic in the pool has shifted. Vasily is losing control of the situation.

I decide to help it along.

“Hey, which one of you is Alexei?” I ask, shouting to be heard.

The guy named Alexei thinks, *<How’s he know my name?>* It’s instinctive. He can’t help it.

So I look right at him when I say, “Did you know Vasily here fucked your girlfriend?”

I know he doesn’t. I knew it when I took the fact out of Vasily’s memories.

But the look of surprise on Alexei’s face is so pronounced that it almost makes me laugh.

He turns to Vasily, who’s too shocked to hide his own expression, and that’s all the confirmation he needs. He begins stalking across the pool, murder in his eyes. “*Vy skazali, chto vy byli prosto khoroshimi druzyami!*”

Vasily raises his gun. Again, operating on instinct. He sees the threat, and he responds.

But he’s just pulled a gun on one of his own. The thugs all get quiet then. They watch and they wait. Suddenly it’s not us against them. It’s every man for himself.

Not that it takes much of a push. There’s really no such thing as honor among thieves.

“Don’t feel too special, Alexei. You’re not the only one,” I say.

Vasily turns and looks at me, mouth open wide. He’s still baffled, rather than scared. He has no idea how I know this. But he figures that if he shuts me up, he can still salvage a payoff from this mess.



He pivots to bring the gun around at me.

Playtime is over.

I think hard, and I find a memory of a grandfather who dropped dead of a massive coronary right in front of Vasily when he was five. It left an impression. Vasily doesn't even smoke now. He eats lean meats and spends a lot of time doing cardio.

So I push into his head and light up the amygdala region of his brain. That's the part that controls breathing, heart rate, and the fight-or-flight response. He's suddenly drowning in his own adrenaline. His pulse is hammering behind his ears. His chest tightens. He can't breathe.

He immediately thinks he's dying. He drops the gun and clutches at his heart as he falls to his knees.

The others see this and freeze in place. They're already agitated and angry. Terrified is an easy push from there. I hit them, one by one, fast as I can, with pure fear. Their adrenaline spikes, their limbs feel numb, and their guts turn to water.

They're not sure why, but they all feel like they'd be a lot safer many miles away from me. Only stubbornness and inertia keep them from running for their lives.

So I concentrate and hit Vasily again. I take a memory of being stabbed in the arm—what can I say, I've had an interesting career—and transfer it over to him. It's close enough to the pain of a real heart attack that he screams out loud.

Then I look around the pool, and in the most demonic voice I can manage, I say:

“Run.”

That does it. Vasily's crew starts sprinting. I'm going to pay for all of this later, but it's almost worth it to watch them struggle over the sides of the pool and across the dead lawn.

Vasily is huddled in a ball, trembling. I roll off my knees and onto my



back, then bring my bound hands under my legs to get them in front of me. I pick one of the blades from the toolbox and slice away the ropes on my wrists.

I cut Nik free.

“And this,” I tell him. “is what happens when you wander off on your own. I won’t tell your father if you don’t. Deal?”

He looks almost as scared of me as the guys who just left were.

<holysitholyshit> <what just happened?> <what was that?> “Dude,” Nik says to me, wide-eyed. “How did you do that?”

“Magic,” I tell him. “Come on. Let’s go.”

We walk past Vasily, who’s still in a heap, eyes shut tight, hugging himself like he’s afraid something vital will fall out.

I could kick him while he’s down, but honestly, there’s no point.

He was never really a threat to me. He’s barely even the same species.



///2

Not as Much Fun as You'd Think

Being inside a club in Los Angeles is like wading in a pool of toxic waste, even for someone who doesn't have my particular talent. On the surface, the people are all beautiful and bored, doing their best to keep their pretty faces as blank and still as statues because, in this city, showing emotion really does cost money.

But inside, their minds are churning.

<who's that?> <producer swore he'd call and of course he didn't> <holy shit I saw him on HBO last night now look at him> <never should have blown him> <do I know her? am I supposed to remember her?> <hairline's definitely receding> <fucking manager> <I'm so stupid I can't even fuck my way to the middle> <my god I'm so fat> <I'm too skinny> <got to get to the gym more often I am such a pig> <fucker came right in and took my show away from me> <lying bitch> <goddammit how am I supposed to live on 300K a year?> <I'm supposed to open the restaurant in the morning boss will fire my ass if I'm hungover again> <wasn't she on Nickelodeon a few years ago?> <if I can just get an agent> <might as well live in the Valley> <basic cable trash I'd sooner screw the valet> <why is this guy talking to me?> <who's that?>





It gives me a headache. Everything gives me a headache.

But Nik is in heaven. He needed a drink after his ordeal in the pool, and so I let him drag us to this after-hours place. Then he found two actual porn stars near the bar, and immediately invited them to his table.

Now they are all drinking gold-infused vodka as he describes his favorite scenes with them. It should be graphic and tasteless, but the women find his overwhelming enthusiasm and thick accent genuinely charming. Nik is happier than I've ever seen him. He's finally found people whose work he respects.

Something pings my radar, and I look around. It's not another threat to Nikolai. It doesn't feel like anger or hostile intent. Someone in the club recognizes me. Her focus on me raises thoughts out of the background noise.

<holy crap it is him> <should I say something?> <what are you supposed to say in a situation like this?>

I pick her out of the crowd a second later as she makes her way over to me.

Kira Sadeghi.

A little over a year ago, Kira's father, Armin, hired me to rescue her when she was kidnapped by a couple of amateurs. It was a forty-minute job. I got her home unharmed and alive. The kidnappers didn't do as well.

She'd been drugged out of her skull, and her father packed her off to rehab.

In the time since, Kira has joined the cast of *Tehrangelles*, currently the top-rated reality-TV show on basic cable. It follows the lives of a group of young, spoiled children of Iranian immigrants who fled the revolution and came to America. There are about eight hundred thousand of them in Los Angeles now, the largest community of Iranians anywhere in the world outside of Tehran. The show's named for the section between Westwood and Beverly Hills, where a big part of the community lives. They sometimes prefer to be called Persian, since Americans aren't great at nuance,



and they still take a lot of abuse from people who think that they must be Arabic Muslim terrorist ragheads.

Tehrangelles, admittedly, doesn't do a lot to clear up these misconceptions. Armin sent out a proud-father email when it premiered, and I set my DVR to record a few episodes. The show opened with a muezzin set against Arabian electronic dance music. I lasted about twenty minutes before it became too aggressively stupid.

But the actual background of the people doesn't matter, really. The show is all about who's sleeping with whom, who got fake tits, who got drunk and went home with a stranger after the clubs. The answer, almost every time: Kira.

It's made her the indisputable star of the show, as well as the lead villain. She manages to shove her way to the center of every scene she's in, and if the camera leaves her for a moment, she's liable to throw a drink or a tantrum to get it back. Even when she's not on-screen, the other cast members can't help but talk about her.

(All right. Maybe I watched more than twenty minutes.)

Now she's hated by millions of people who have never met her, and they've made her rich and famous. She's become This Year's Girl, with her photo in *Us Weekly* and on GoFugYourself.com every week.

She reaches me through the crowd. "Hi," she says. "Remember me?"

<stupid, Kira> <real smooth> <very original>

She's nervous, but you'd never know to look at her. A born actress.

I decide to be professional. I smile. "Of course, Ms. Sadeghi."

"I'm not sure that's a good thing," she says. "I mean, I was a complete mess the last time I saw you."

I feel a jolt of embarrassment from her as the memory hits. I hauled her out of a Skid Row hotel room and loaded her into my car. She lolled around on the seat, barely conscious.

Now her eyes shine and her skin is clear. Her time in rehab took. Which



is good. It usually doesn't. People tend to stick to their habits. Just look at me.

"Congratulations on the show," I say. "Your father is very proud."

"Oh, Daddy," she says. "He's just happy I've got a job." She makes a face, but a little burst of pride, like a sudden ray of sunlight, comes through.

A small entourage trails behind her: friends, hangers-on, and a single bodyguard who's mostly there for decoration. Only eight people—not really A-list size, but respectable, all things considered. They're all trying to look bored, but they all want to know why Kira is talking to someone who's clearly hired help.

<who is that guy?> <spooky> <bodyguard> <is he Russian?> <looks like a gangster ohmigod does Kira know a gangster?>

Now she's hesitating. She knows what she wants to say next. She's talked to her father about me. He's said some things to her, and she's asked around. I have a reputation. That's how I get work. So now she wants to know. Everyone who hears about me wants to know.

She moves in closer. "So. I have to know. Is it true?"

Kira makes a good living off being a sideshow, so I don't blame her for asking the question. But there are times when I feel like the geek at the county fair who bites the heads off chickens for a nickel apiece.

At this moment, right now, I don't want to be that guy.

"Is what true?"

She leans back and pouts. It's cuter in person than on TV. "Come on," she says. "You know. If it's true, you already know what I'm asking."

I just look at her.

She immediately remembers some of the other things she's heard her father say. And what happened to the guys who kidnapped her.

<oh god> <he's pissed>

"Oh no, I've offended you," she says, pulling up contrition and sincer-



ity from her library of facial expressions. She's good. She'll be a hell of an actress someday, if she can scramble out of the sink of reality TV.

Then I notice Nik getting up, his arms around both of the women. Having lost him once already tonight, I don't feel like doing it again. I smile at Kira and nod. "Good to see you, Ms. Sadeghi."

She gives me a certain look, half smiling. "Yeah," she says. "You too."

We go back to The Standard on Sunset and I park Nik and his guests in his room. He is fully recovered from his earlier shock, thanks to the vodka. Now he can't stop singing my praises.

"That was off the fucking chain, bro," he says, over and over again, as he grabs me around the shoulders in a big, awkward man-hug. "Whatever we are paying you, it is not enough."

I resist the urge to tell him to pass that along to his dad. Instead I just remind him of the usual protocol. Don't open the door to anyone but me. I'll be around to collect him in the morning.

"Better make it afternoon," he says.

He turns his head and glances at the women, who have already taken off their clothes as they explore the inside of his suite. Looks like he's getting his Christmas wish tonight after all.

"Late afternoon," he says. "I'll call you." He slams the door in my face. I wait and listen to him engage the security bolt.

Then I step across the hall to my own room. This is where I live.

I checked in to The Standard when I came back to L.A. I haven't gotten around to finding anything more permanent yet, and I get a discount for putting clients like Nik in the suite. The couches and chairs all look like something out of the Jetsons' apartment and there's a model who sits all day in a glass box behind the front desk, a piece of living decoration.

It works for me. I never have to do dishes or laundry, and because The Standard caters to the young and rich and beautiful, I never have to deal



with too much pain or worry leaking in around the edges from the other guests' thoughts. A hotel actually spends most of its time empty, except when people come back at night for sex or sleep. I can handle that. And if someone is scared or angry or lonely on the other side of the wall, they're never my neighbor for long.

It's as close as I can get to living in the home of the future I saw in comic books when I was a kid, with robots doing all the domestic work, beeping quietly to themselves without complaint.

I open my door and find Kira waiting, sitting in one of the low-slung chairs.

I knew she was there, of course. I could feel her mischievous grin from out in the hall. I saw the plan hatching in her head when I left the club and she sent one of the minions in her entourage to follow me.

"You know, this is the first time I've ever actually used my fame to get into a guy's room," she says by way of greeting. "It was really surprisingly easy. I just told them you're my boyfriend and they gave me a key. You should probably talk to them about it."

Complain about the beautiful twenty-one-year-old delivering herself like room service? Sure. "I'll get right on that," I tell her. "What can I do for you, Ms. Sadeghi?"

She won't let it go, though. "I mean, aren't you in security? Doesn't it bother you on, like, a professional level?"

"If you were a threat, I never would have opened the door."

She nods. "Right," she says. "Because you're psychic."

I'm tired. And she already knows. So what the hell.

"Yeah. I am."

She's surprised I've admitted it. She expected she'd have to wear me down. "You can read minds?"

I nod.

She's not sure if she should believe me now, despite all she's heard and



seen. I don't blame her. I wouldn't believe it either if I hadn't been living with other people's monkey-chatter echoing in my brain my entire life.

She leans closer, and asks the question everyone asks, once they get past the initial disbelief: "What's it like?"

I can see it in her head. She thinks it would be cool, knowing everyone's secrets. She thinks it might even be fun.

I never tell anyone the truth. I work in a field where people try to kill me on a semiregular basis, so I don't go around advertising my weak spots.

But if I were honest, I'd say that I get a little of everyone's thoughts, just by being close to them. I get a percentage of their frustration, their anger, their loneliness, their fear, and most of all their pain. I can feel their hangovers, their backaches, their arthritis, their tumors. I pick up a dose of their bad memories, their childhood traumas, their lingering nightmares. I feel their heartbreak and their anxiety and their need.

And I can't turn it off.

Imagine sensing all the vermin in the walls of every building you set foot inside. Hearing every mouse as it scurries along, the rats as they squeeze out their droppings, every cockroach and silverfish filling every crack and crevice, every beetle and ant behind the drywall. Knowing you're surrounded all the time. You can almost feel all those tiny little lives crawling over your skin at every moment. And there's nothing you can do about it.

That's what it's like.

But I never tell people this. Instead I just say, "It's not as much fun as you think."

Kira frowns. Boredom and frustration flit across her mind. But she's not done yet. She asks the second question, the other thing people always want to know. Because I am polite, I let her ask the question out loud before I answer.

"So, can you make people—you know, do stuff?"

"Control minds, you mean?"



“Right.”

I call that the Vegas act. Everyone wants to know if I can pull the same cheap stunts as a lounge-room hypnotist. Make someone bark like a dog or cluck like a chicken or talk in a funny voice. Or even—it’s almost always the men who ask this one, usually with a creepy smile—make women take off their clothes on command.

“No. I can’t.”

She’s disappointed and relieved at the same time. “Why not?” she asks.

I smile a little at that. God knows my life would be easier if I could.

I give her the short version of the same speech I always give my clients.

“Think of it this way: If your brain is a computer, I can hack into it. I can read your email and your files, even run some of the programs or rewrite some of the basic code. But I can’t reprogram the whole thing from the command line up. People do what they want. I can push, I can shove, I can shout my thoughts as loud as possible into their heads—and they will still do what they want. People are stubborn. People are messy. And most of all, people do not change. It took you a whole lifetime to become who you are. I can’t rewrite all that in the few moments it takes to peek inside your brain.”

“You seemed to do okay with those guys who kidnapped me.”

She’s a little scared as she says this. I get a flash of some of the things she’s overheard from her father. And she saw the news reports. Both of the men who took her ended up dead on the downtown pavement.

“That was different,” I tell her.

“How?”

“That’s the flip side of my talent. Being able to read someone else’s mind also means I can plant some things there too.”

That’s putting it mildly, but she doesn’t need to know the full menu of options. I can trigger painful memories, dodge punches before they’re thrown, and hide in the cognitive blind spots that lurk inside everyone’s brains.

These are all tricks I picked up after I left high school and went into the



army, where a Special Ops unit found me. My instructors helped me turn my talent into a weapon in the War on Terror. Eventually, I walked away from duty and country and went into business for myself, helping the One Percent clean up their messes and protect their secrets. The pay is a lot better than government work. My special skills mean I can charge more than your average security consultant.

I also don't tell Kira what my ability does to me. I get back a percentage of everything I inflict on another person. I will feel a piece of everything I did tonight, on top of the usual headache of all those other people's thoughts in my skull. I can put it off for a while with concentration and focus—and usually pills and whiskey—but it's just a matter of time before the bill comes due.

So I am not at all sure I want Kira here much longer. It sounds idiotic—kicking a ridiculously hot woman out of my hotel room—but I would really like to get into my Scotch and my Vicodin before the pain becomes more than I can choke back.

And, if I am completely honest, there's more to it than that. She makes me feel old. Maybe it's all the time I've spent playing big brother to Nikolai lately, but I've got barely a decade on Kira, and I still feel used up. Most of my life has been spent doing bad things for people who don't deserve their good fortune.

Kira's mind has no shadows, despite her time in rehab and the incident with the kidnappers. She is one of those people whose thoughts are clear and undimmed by any of the usual grime and squalor that I ordinarily see. She's had a good life, on balance. She sees no reason why it won't stay that way. That kind of optimism is a constant mystery to me.

I admit it: I am envious of her peace of mind.

So I stand up and say, "Thank you for stopping by, Ms. Sadeghi."

She makes no move to get up. Instead she smirks at me from the chair. "You can call me Kira, you know."



“Thank you for stopping by, Kira. Please give my regards to your father.”

She finally stands, still smirking, and moves closer to me.

“You know,” she says, “I never thanked you properly for coming to my rescue.”

“Don’t worry about it. They don’t really make a card for that sort of thing,” I say. She is short, even in her heels. She stands right under my chin. I catch the scent of her perfume. It’s becoming difficult to focus on the Scotch or the pills.

“I should still say thank you.”

“Not necessary.”

“I think it is,” she says. “Now tell me what else I’m thinking.”

Then she imagines something so incredibly detailed and specific it might even make the porn stars blush.

She sees the look on my face, delighted that the trick worked. “So. Still want me to go?”

As an answer, I open my arms to her and lean down, and she places her mouth on mine.

What the hell. Nik won’t be up until late afternoon anyway.

Somewhere around 3:00 A.M. it hits. The panic. The feeling like an iron band clamped around my chest, the hammering of my pulse behind my ears. I am instantly drenched in sweat. I think I can actually feel my heart slamming itself against the walls of my rib cage. And each beat I am totally convinced will be its last.

This is the payback. This is what I get—a tiny percentage of the misery I inflicted on Vasily earlier this evening. Everything I do, every one of my little Jedi mind tricks, has a price. This is it.

I feel like I am going to die. I gasp for air and thrash out of the covers.

Kira wakes. I feel the irritation rise off her as she’s jolted out of sleep. I





prepare to deal with a barrage of curses—she’s got them loaded and ready to go—when she notices what’s happening to me.

“What is it?” she asks, suddenly frightened.

I can’t swallow enough oxygen to speak. I just hold up a hand, trying to tell her that it will pass in a moment.

And it will. I’ve done this before.

All I have to do is endure a few minutes of absolute certainty that I am going to die.

I concentrate and try to focus. To ride out the storm, as I have done before.

Then I feel something unexpected.

Kira’s hand on my back, warm and soft.

“Easy,” she says. “Easy. Try to breathe.”

She pulls me in close to her, and holds me as tight as she can.

“You’re safe,” she says. “You’re safe.”

My pulse stops racing. The pain in my chest subsides, then vanishes completely. I feel light-headed and weak and small.

But she keeps holding me.

“You’re all right,” she says. “Nothing can hurt you. You’re all right now.”

And that’s how we fall asleep again. Her arms around me, me listening to each beat of my heart, waiting every time it pauses, not entirely sure it will start again.

Nik’s phone call wakes me sometime before noon. The porn stars are hungry, so would I please get my ass out of bed and fetch some goddamn breakfast?

Kira is gone. There is not a trace of her in the room.

Two weeks later, I get the invitation to her wedding.

