

If Cadogan's hideout seemed suffocating, the motel incited a deep sense of claustrophobia. The spotlight landed on Lindsey, center stage, with a burner phone in her hand. She shook. All the conversations in the room became muffled. Trinity argued with Cadogan about zip ties and trust. Mercer stared a hole through her in the corner with his arms crossed. Lindsey would strive to conquer the soldier boy in another life—have him Superman that ho.

What happened to her?

Lindsey remembered when she had no fear.

Now, her hands trembled, dreading a single phone call. Lindsey jolted like a jack-in-the-box when Xander dropped his weight onto the bed beside her. His calloused hand landed on her thigh. Warm to the touch. Lindsey dared a peek at the man's face. To her surprise, his light blue eyes soothed her, a waterfall cascading all over her being.

"You got this. You're Lindsey Monroe. There's no obstacle too big," Xander whispered.

"Careful. You'd make me think you actually like me."

"I don't want my star player to have stage fright. We can't afford to choke."

"Act natural," she instructed herself.

"Act natural," Xander echoed. He nodded slowly, his steadiness gifting her confidence. Lindsey realized that Connor had constructed this image of a monster throughout all the therapy sessions, but not once, through her own interactions, did he find a beast. No! While Xander showed trauma, he strived to be a good man. And at times, he even succeeded—with some difficulty.

"I got this."

"You do."

"I'm ready."

"Shut up, everyone. She's making the call. Don't make one sound, or you jeopardize everything we have worked for," Xander roared. An apprehensive silence fell over the room. He turned back to Lindsey and urged her on with another nod. A smile flickered on her face. And out of the blue, Lindsey recalled that once upon a time, a girl wanted to be a Hollywood starlet.

This was as close as she would get to fulfilling that dream.

Lindsey blocked out the audience and gained tunnel vision. She stabbed the keys to the flip phone, dialing Connor's number. Her heart skipped a beat at every buzz of every ring. Pick up, damn it. **He** counted on her to make this mission a success. Lindsey had to atone for the damage she inflicted. And if not for Xander's sake, for her own. Her freedom rode on this.

Click. Lindsey's heart dropped.

"Lindsey."

"Connor," Lindsey responded. Mercer stiffened. Cadogan limped in an attempt to overhear the conversation. Trinity crossed her arms. Lindsey stared blankly at the stained wallpaper, half-expecting Connor to burst through the door and finish the job himself.

"You finally remember who you belong to."

Xander's grip squeezed her thigh. Lindsey snapped back to reality. Adrenaline kicked in. Why was she hesitating? Lindsey had acted her entire life. Manipulation was always her script.

"Babe, I'm sorry. I couldn't—I thought I was—I was strong enough."

"Shush, Lindsey. You got scared, didn't you?"

"Very scared."

"And you couldn't go through with the plan. And you didn't call because you were too afraid I'd be angry at you. Isn't that right?" Connor asked. **If Lindsey didn't know better, she heard sincerity in Connor's voice. Her heart almost ached. Momentary weakness seized her—had she jumped the gun? Misread the situation? Maybe he was never going to kill her after all.**

No... she wasn't the only actor on this stage.

"You're—you're not angry?"

"We're all human. No one's infallible. I almost blame myself for putting myself in such a tough spot. Believe it or not, I fear death sometimes," **Connor's voice dripped with condescension. Lindsey loathed every syllable he produced. Her fingernails dug into Xander's forearm.**

"Here, I thought you wouldn't take me back."

"I know I'm harsh sometimes. But even I have a heart," **Connor said. Xander grunted, and Lindsey shot a nasty look in his direction. He recognized his mistake and bit down on his fist.**

"I even went out and got you a gift. To show you that I'm sorry that I fucked up."

"Babe, you shouldn't have."

"Do you want to know what I got for you?" **Lindsey asked. A lightbulb popped above her head. She waved over Trinity, who jumped at the gesture but followed the direction.**

WHACK!

Lindsey slapped Trinity across the ass with a sound that echoed throughout the motel room. Trinity cried in pain.

"You hear *her*?"

"Who's that?"

"Hey bitch! Say hello to your brother!" **Lindsey demanded sharply. She reached up and yanked Trinity by the ear towards the phone.**

Trinity jerked back, shoving off of Lindsey.

"Get your hands off me, you psycho bitch!" **Humiliation and anger cracked her voice. Xander motioned to intervene; however, Lindsey patted him on his chest.**

"Lin, you didn't."

A pause.

"God, I miss you."

"I'm glad."

"How did you manage that? Framing my father was ideal; however, this is the second-best thing. After I kill that slut, I wouldn't need to put a bullet in his head; he'd probably do it for me." **Connor's voice oozed sinister glee. Lindsey pictured a fly rubbing its front legs over a pile of shit. Lindsey squeezed Xander's shoulder hard, sensing that the conversation had upended him. There it was—that flicker of the monster everyone claimed Xander Valentine used to be. And Lindsey didn't flinch from the monster under her bed.**

"So, how about this? Let's meet up in the morning," **Lindsey tossed the line.**

"Snap a picture. I want to see my dear sister's face right now."

"Oh? Need something to jerk off to?"

"Dirty minds think alike."

"She's your sister," **Lindsey responded playfully, making light of the taboo. More than one jaw dropped in the room at the conversation's direction.**

Lindsey abruptly stood and slipped away from Xander's attempt to reel her in. Trinity narrowed her eyes suspiciously at Lindsey's approach. Confusion withered Trinity's face when Lindsey mouthed, 'I'm sorry.' Lindsey backhanded Trinity across the face. The first blow didn't knock Trinity down, but Lindsey returned her palm for a bigger slap, her hand landing on the ear and forearm across the jaw. Trinity dropped to the floor, and the entire room started towards the altercation.

"Hold still! Fuck!" **Lindsey screamed. She posed for a close-up selfie, pushing her face against Trinity's now scarlet face. Lindsey twirled away, dancing away from Trinity's wild swipes, too furious to aim. To Lindsey's surprise, Xander slid in between the girls, catching Trinity mid-swing before she could land a punch. He locked up as he used to in the boxing ring.**

"I sent it. Did you get it? I never realized how hot your sister is until now," **Lindsey commented. Trinity rolled her eyes, and Xander pulled her head onto his shoulder to silence her.**

"Yes. You did good, Lindsey. I thought I lost you, but you redeemed yourself."

"Did I do good?"

"You did more than good, Lindsey. You made me proud."

Pause.

"Where would you like to meet?"

Lindsey beamed. Hook. Line. Sinker.

"You know the Pine Grove Shopping Center?"

"Let me Google the directions. Don't tell me you wanted me to go on a shopping spree before dumping the cargo," **Connor joked. Lindsey's heart dropped. Something about his**

mannerisms struck a chord in her head. Was he onto them? Did Connor see right through her?

"Alright. I'll meet you in the parking garage—"

"Wait!" **Lindsey caught herself protesting.**

"What? We'll meet on the second-to-last level. It's nice and dark, so we can make the transfer without too many prying eyes. What? Anywhere else would be too public," **Connor paused. Cold sweat formed on Lindsey as she struggled to regain control of her breathing. She scanned the room. Cadogan and Mercer shook their heads. Lindsey shrugged, not knowing how to convince Connor to change their meeting place to the parking lot.**

"It's just—" **Lindsey trailed as she tried to buy more time.**

"What? You are still worried I'm going to hurt you. Is that why you were thinking of making it so public? Fair. That's why I agree to meet you *there* instead of at a rest stop or something," **Connor explained calmly. Relief washed over Lindsey's body as a short laugh disarmed her paranoia. Xander turned and motioned for Lindsey to agree.**

"Sorry, babe. You know me. I am overthinking. But you have to understand, I, too, have to take precautions."

"Understandable, love. We'll meet up. I'll gather the supplies needed for our trip to Mexico. You don't know how happy you have made me."

"Eleven A.M."

"Eleven on the dot."

"I can't wait to see you."

"Likewise—" **Click. Lindsey's legs gave out as she dropped to the floor. She brought her hands—God, her heart thudded against her chest. Xander knelt down before her and placed his hands on her shoulders. Was he angry that things deviated from the plan? He grunted his approval.**

"This wasn't the goddamn plan! We don't have time to rework the whole operation!" **Mercer roared his disgust, throwing his arms out.**

"If she demanded to meet in the parking lot, he'd know this was a trap. That'd be too obvious," **Xander spat back, finding his feet and turning towards Mercer.**

"Really? She fucked up, and you're defending her?" Trinity snapped. In a flash, she spun around and dashed towards the door. Xander groaned but did not hesitate in pursuing her.

As he left through the door, Xander heard Cadogan. "We have no choice. Plus, a Parking Garage probably has fewer exits to worry about."

The cold autumn smacked Xander's face like a sack of bricks. At the far edge of the parking lot, Trinity stood with her fists clenched at her sides. The wind nipped at the locks of her purple hair. She scratched her exposed legs underneath fishnet stockings. Leaves danced by their feet as Xander approached her.

"Trin," Xander called out.

She didn't answer.

Xander closed the gap. His boots crunched long-dead leaves under every foot. A gust of wind greeted his effort as if trying to hold him back, but he pressed on, determined.

"Trin," Xander repeated—softer this time.

"You let her hit me," Trinity finally said. Her voice sounded cold and flat, but the fire of her temper coalesced into something weightier. "Twice."

"I had to."

"Didn't you care how degrading that was?"

"Lindsey had to make it believable. She improvised. I don't think she trusted you to—"

"Again. You're coming to *her* defense," Trinity commented. She swung herself around to look at him with judging eyes. Trinity hugged her arms and continued, "You sat there as she humiliated me. You didn't even flinch."

"It wasn't about humiliation," Xander muttered.

"It was to me," Trinity struck back, her tone razor-sharp. "Christ, Dad, I know you're focused on stopping Connor, but you can't stop being my father when it's convenient for the plan."

Anger flared up at her accusation. Xander went to say something, but muffled his would-be mistake with a frustrated grunt.

"Spill it," Trinity demanded.

"You are acting like I wanted that."

"It's just that—"

"I let that happen because you made me promise to include you. You then went ahead and signed up to be bait," **Xander paused. He pointed towards her and stared her right in the eyes, not allowing for a single blink.** "And most importantly, Trin—you're tough, kid."

"And that makes it alright?" **Trinity said, quieter now.**

Xander scoffed with his mouth agape, searching for an answer to placate his daughter. But he couldn't pamper the cold reality of the situation. This was a war for all intents and purposes, and she chose to be on the front line.

"No. It doesn't make it *okay*. But it was necessary—for our survival, Trin. We're past the point of danger. One misstep—"

"But I don't want to just survive. I want to end this."

They locked eyes. Despite being upset, Xander sensed determination behind her swollen face. His expression softened. Maybe all she needed to know was that he cared.

But *how*?

He simply nodded.

"And tomorrow, it will be all over."

"We're at where we need to be," **Cadogan declared.**

They spent the past forty minutes altering the plan, adapting to the last-minute change of venue. The premise remained the same. Lindsey showed up at the rendezvous point. Once Connor showed, Mercer's men converged to nab. Simple enough. Cadogan's confidence and Mercer's manpower should have been enough to ease Xander's nerves; however, something seemed off. Almost like there were movements in the corner of the eyes, and Xander didn't like that one bit.

Xander slipped out of the room. He leaned up against the exterior of the motel and stared out at the darting lights on the nearby highway. For once, Xander believed he had set the trap that would snarl Connor. But why, on the eve of finishing this chapter, did dread consume him?

"You look jumpy." Mercer's words proved a self-fulfilling prophecy as Xander jolted forward, not sensing the ex-Marine's presence.

"Do you blame me? I'm surprised you're so calm and collected. You were upset that the plan had to be altered."

"I'm on edge. But as a commander, you learn to stow away your worries."

"I never have led shit."

"I can tell," **Mercer jabbed.**

Xander stepped off the wall and turned. To his surprise, Mercer squared up. In any other setting, Xander thought Mercer itched for a fight. His shoulders were pulled back, his spine straight. Fists held at his sides—two guns ready to unload on a target. Mercer lifted his chin slightly, staring at Xander unflinchingly.

"I can't help but notice that you might have a problem with me," Xander commented. Anger swirled within the pressure pot of Xander's conflicted soul. Too much had happened in the past few weeks. Xander didn't shift his weight or raise his guard—no, he only calculated how many steps it would take to drop Mercer if this discussion turned physical. Ex-military or not, Xander knew he'd win out in hand-to-hand combat.

"She asked me to look after you—everything."

"Trin?"

"Sweet girl. But I'm talking about the one you left behind," **Mercer countered.**

Hunter.

Xander's face unraveled. His jaw slackened. He furrowed his eyebrows. A slight flush represented the flames of anger that flared up from his core. Xander became afraid to speak; the words would flow, and that would be harsh towards everyone around. He needed Mercer for tomorrow.

"That's what I thought," **Mercer commented.**

Xander tilted his head up, coughing up a sardonic laugh as he thrust his thumb into his cheek. He wanted to ask Mercer why he cared so much about his failed romance.

"She should focus on herself."

"She's a good woman."

"You don't think I know that? We might not be together anymore, but I will always love that woman." **Xander lowered his gaze to meet Mercer's eagle eyes. Xander sensed the aura of protectiveness that hadn't existed before Xander's exit from Hunter's everyday life.**

"I can understand why you might feel that way towards her. But for her? She shouldn't concern herself with your recklessness. Hunter already took enough strays from your stupidity," **Mercer's words cut deep, a knife across Xander's flesh.**

Rage strangled him. He clenched his jaw to keep from snapping. Mercer knew he held leverage over Xander. Mercer hadn't laid a hand on him, but it felt like being shoved in the chest in front of a crowd. Mercer was a bully on the playground, and Xander was in no position to fight back.

That made him sick.

"I confused you for a merc. You seem emotionally invested."

"I take pride in my work. And I don't want to see anything happen to anyone under my care—well, most anyone."

"As long as you protect my family, I don't care what happens to me."

"How selfless," **Mercer said, sarcasm laced his words.** "Hunter would be proud."

Something popped in Xander's head. He started towards Mercer but only moved an inch forward when the door opened. Trinity stepped in between the two men, oblivious to the pending duel between them. Trinity glanced at them both, and intrigue dawned on her face.

"Am I interrupting something, guys?" **Trinity probed. Her face challenged Xander as if she suspected him.**

"Not at all. Just guy talk," **Mercer lied. Mercer straightened his jacket but didn't take his eyes off Xander.**

"I find that hard to believe," **Trinity said.**

Xander managed a smile on his face. Unlike his counterpart, Xander couldn't conjure up a perfect white lie.

"It's late. We have to get up early tomorrow. I think we should head home," **Trinity decided.**

"Wait, you're not coming along," Xander objected. All the anger directed towards Mercer dissipated in a second. He held out his hands. His concern was evident in his pleading eyes and slack jaw.

"Your father is right. You did your part. Now, it's time for us to do ours," Mercer said. Xander clenched his jaw at Mercer's echo of his words. But if the words of the professional kept Trinity out of harm's way, so be it.

"I'm seeing this through to the end. I'm ride-or-die," Trinity replied.

"That's the point. I'd rather not see you die," Xander countered.

"You're acting like I'm going to be in the parking garage. I'll be at your side, Dad. I won't leave your sight." Trinity reached out and patted her father's shoulder.

Xander dropped his arms and grunted at her words.

Xander went to argue, but she cut him off, "Why do you get to be there when I'm not?"

Xander turned towards Mercer for some further assistance.

"I planned on assigning two men to babysit you anyway. It's not like you'd be the only one protecting her," Mercer noted. Xander rolled his eyes, rethinking this momentarily truce between him and Mercer.

Trinity pointed towards Mercer.

"See, it will probably be the safest place. I'll have three bodyguards instead of the usual one," Trinity said.

"I'm bringing out all the big guns for this ops. I'll make sure I assign my best men," Mercer followed. A wave of tiredness washed over Xander. He didn't see any surrender in his daughter's blue eyes. The logic resonated, and Xander knew he wouldn't let anything happen to his daughter.

"You were never supposed to need one, let alone three." Xander grabbed his daughter by the shoulders. He peered deep into her eyes and gripped tightly, never wanting to let her go.

"But this is the world we live in."

"Don't make me regret this any more than I already do."

Trinity nodded, placing her hand over his.

The sky was a cloudless blue expanse, allowing the morning sun to shine without mercy. The increase in temperature prompted a surge in visitors to the Pine Grove Shopping Center. Cars and foot traffic choked the lot. The murmur of the crowd bled through even the walls of the van.

When Xander climbed into the back of the van to greet Cadogan and Mercer, he noticed two unfamiliar faces in the back. As his eyes adjusted in the dim light of the truck, the glow of the monitors revealed a surprise. They dressed more casually than Mercer's men. Light button-ups with denim jeans. Xander noticed their belts—leather, stiff, worn from years of carrying weight. Then he saw the glint. Badges. Holstered guns.

They were fucking cops.

The fury that welled up was instant. Cadogan caught the distortion on Xander's face. His eyebrows angled sharply. He bared his teeth—an ape showing its canines. Cadogan swooped in, hooking Xander and dragging him out before the blast landed. Trinity gave a half-glance, confused at the commotion, but she didn't follow.

"What the fuck is this, Cadogan?" **Xander stepped in closer.**

"Covering our ass."

"This wasn't the plan."

"I made an executive decision. Calling in the Marshals was the only way to get Mercer on board. Plus, it keeps us from looking like a pack of wild vigilantes when the smoke clears."

Cadogan's words landed like a sucker punch. Xander's jaw dropped. The betrayal stung. Maybe Cadogan made the right call—but the fact he did it alone cut deep.

"I would have looped you in... but I figured you were compromised," **Cadogan added.**

"What the hell does that mean?"

Cadogan shrugged, his eyes flickering towards the parking garage. "You got a soft spot for the woman."

Xander followed the detective's eyes.

He didn't answer. Not right away.

"Lindsey."

"You're using her for redemption. A charity case," **Cadogan said.** "You're so set on helping her that I'm starting to think you've lost sight of what matters... stopping your son."

Xander didn't answer. He looked down at the cracked pavement beneath his boots, jaw clenched.

"I made a vow to help her."

"She's a criminal, Xander. A fugitive."

"So, in the end, she's just another fucking pawn."

"I don't sympathize with her one bit. She's not innocent. Lindsey made her choices. But if she plays ball—if she cooperates—we'll put in a good word. Maybe the DA cuts her a deal."

Cadogan stretched his hands out with the offer. Xander saw the reason. The reality. But the compromise landed like a punch to the gut.

Xander could feel—the betrayal bleeding through every pore.

Christ, he promised *her*!

Helping her was supposed to be a way out. Instead, it felt like he had twisted the knife himself.

"Can you live with that? It's too late for us to go back," **Cadogan said. He gave a wry smile.**

"You can sock me one later if it makes you feel better."

The offer appealed to Xander, but he didn't resent him—not really.

"If you need someone to blame, just remind your conscience—the decision was taken out of your hands."

Xander lifted his chin. He narrowed his eyes at Cadogan. Then Xander sighed, staring past at Cadogan. A flash of motion caught Xander's attention. Behind Cadogan, Avery broke into a run, cutting across the side of the garage, staying low and fast towards one of the entrances.

"What's wrong?" **Cadogan asked.**

"Avery—" **Xander started.**

"It's go-time," **Mercer's voice called out from the van.** "Lindsey's in position. Target is approaching."

Cadogan locked eyes with Xander, fishing for the rest of the sentence.

Xander gave him nothing.

Cadogan shook his head, knowing Xander had withheld something from him, but this wasn't the time for an interrogation. Xander followed the limping detective as he struggled to get back into the van, where the monitors buzzed, and the sound of footsteps on cement crackled through the feed.

The green hues and the graininess of the surveillance feed made it challenging to discern the finer details. Lindsey stood beside a parked sedan, her hands buried in the deep pockets of her bomber jacket—roomy enough to hide the wire taped beneath. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail. Aviator sunglasses masked her face.

A man in a hoodie approached her with an uneven gait— a zombie shuffling towards a victim. Yet that seemed almost intentional. Measured. As if he wanted to look casual but wasn't.

Xander sensed something was far off.

"Babel!" Lindsey's voice cracked.

A shaky voice responded, "Lindsey?"

"Is that our man?" one of the Marshalls asked.

"Doesn't walk like it," Cadogan muttered, leaning over, trying to see through the static of the monitor. Xander crowded him, shoulders pressed tightly together. From this vantage point, Xander failed to make out the man's face, but Xander knew.

This wasn't Connor.

"We can't get a visual confirmation," another voice erupted through the feed.

Lindsey tensed. She stepped back, hands half-raised, eyes narrowing on the approaching man.

"Who the fuck are you? What do you want?" Lindsey's tone cut sharp.

"It's not him? Then who the hell is it?" Mercer barked.

"This isn't good! Converge! Converge!" a Marshal ordered— right as the man flashed a knife. Lindsey froze for a split second. She shifted into a guarded stance before glancing over her shoulder. Lindsey weighed flight while bracing for a fight.

"Get in there!" Xander erupted, slamming his fist onto the control console. Immediately, he recognized that they had been played. Connor had set them up! He winced as the man drew closer to Lindsey; the glint of the knife flashed—his heart hammering his chest like a war drum.

Xander had sent Lindsey out there to her own execution.

"Now what?!" another voice cracked over the feed.

In a blur, a shadow tackled the man—the knife clattered underneath the parked car. Over Lindsey's mic, mayhem bled in: cries of pain, ragged grunts, and fists smacking meat. Avery straddled the man, fists bludgeoning his skull. Blood splatted across Avery's face.

"Oh god," Lindsey's voice trembled over the feed. "He's going to kill him."

"Where is everyone!" a Marshal exploded, ripping off his headset and slamming it onto the console. He shoved past Mercer and hurried out of the van. The rest followed. Xander and Trinity remained. He stared at the screen, watching as the police flooded the scene with guns drawn. They barked orders, but they echoed in Xander's mind as he scanned the monitors.

If Connor wasn't there, where was he?

"What's going on? This isn't supposed to happen," Trinity cried, fear seizing her voice.

Xander turned towards his daughter as she backed away from the exit.

"Stay close."

"This is supposed to be over. It wasn't supposed to go down like this."

"Trin, pull it together." Xander stepped towards her. "We're not out of this yet. He's near. I feel it."

He reached for her arm to steady her, but Trinity slipped back, panic in her eyes, itching to flee. Xander cocked his head, a silent warning: don't. She bolted. Xander cursed and gave chase, his thoughts racing and dread clawing up his spine. This wasn't the time for her to be alone.

Xander immediately shielded his eyes from the blinding sunlight. Just a few cars down, he spotted Trinity—hunched over, hands braced on the trunk, gasping for air. Two of Mercer's men hovered nearby, examining her.

Relief washed over him. She hadn't gone far. She wasn't alone.

Xander started towards Trinity. Then, a curiosity caught his eye as Xander glimpsed a glint in the air—cylindrical, small, fast. The canister bounced on the pavement with a metallic ting. A blinding light consumed everything. Xander hit the concrete hard, face-first. His eyes burned, ears rang. He rolled over, blinking the singing brightness.

Above him, the sky twisted and turned. Blurred shapes. Faint shadows. Zero clarity.

Muffled screams replaced the ringing. Clutching his ear, Xander staggered to his feet. He scanned the sea of chaos around him. Everyone ran in every which direction. A child huddled against her mother, crying.

What happened?

"Dad!" Trinity's voice broke through the haze.

Xander turned towards his daughter, ready to rush to her side—but the sight froze him in place. Trinity knelt on the asphalt, legs splayed, her hands unnaturally drawn back behind her. Wide-eyed, terror twisted her face.

Behind her, Connor stood.

Unmasked.

Defiant.

Connor pressed a pistol to her head, the barrel buried in her temple, pushing folds of skin back. A malicious grin carved his face. His icy blue eyes glowed with satisfaction.

He didn't need to speak any words to his father.

Xander heard loud and clear: *check*.

"Don't do it," Xander warned.

"Always trying to be in control. Always wanting to domineer. That's your problem, *Dad*. You live your life like a tyrant, but don't you realize you have lost control of the plot a long time ago?" Connor hooked his free arm around Trinity's throat and wrenched her to her feet. She gasped. Tears welled up in her eyes. Her breath became labored.

"She never done a damn thing to you," Xander's voice dropped, low and trembling at the edges.

"But you love her, don't you?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"Answer me," **Connor snapped. His voice became sharp.** "Do you love her?"

Xander lowered his head. He glanced up at Trinity.

"Without a doubt, I love her."

His eyes darted around, searching for an out. He needed to buy time. Where were Mercer's men? And then Xander's gaze landed on the two fallen men. Pools of blood slowly spread from underneath their skulls. Xander didn't know if they were dead or unconscious; either way, they were out of commission.

No help in sight.

"You had the chance to kill me, why didn't you?" **Xander questioned, realizing he was vulnerable as he recovered from whatever blast had floored him.**

"That would be too easy."

"Don't play with your food. Take your shot now. End this. Just spare your sister." **Xander stepped forward, pulling back on his arms, offering Connor a clear sightline at his chest.**

"Dad, don't!" **Trinity managed, but Connor choked her into silence.**

"Spare her? That would defeat the point!" **Connor lowered himself, pressing his face against his sister's. He kissed her cheek with the corner of his mouth, his eyes never leaving his Dad's. Trinity flinched. An ugly sound escaped her throat.** "Know this, what happens to her is because you do love her."

"Don't you dare hurt her."

"You are never going to redeem yourself as a father. When the day comes I finally pull the trigger; you will know you are an abject failure in every sense of the word," **Connor spat. He yanked Trinity back as he dragged her toward a nearby car with the engine running. Whether he drove it or the driver fled after the blast, it didn't matter. Xander knew Connor's intention, and he needed to stop Trinity's abduction at all costs.**

But how?

"Dad!" **Trinity screamed.**

"Connor, stop!" Xander staggered in pursuit. Connor gestured a threat with the gun, keeping Xander at bay. He knew he couldn't muscle his way to a rescue. Connor wouldn't hesitate. The only thing keeping everyone alive was Connor's insistence to prolong his suffering.

"Wave goodbye. We have to go now," Connor laughed. He glanced towards the parking garage. "We've stayed too long, and any minute now, all those pigs will be back. And between you and me, I don't want the fun to stop."

"Trin. Don't worry. I'm coming after you."

"Dad, please!"

"Oh, stop your crying, sis. You'll be reunited. I swear on it," Connor whispered in her ear. He nipped at her earlobe. Trinity recoiled from her brother's sick intimacy.

Xander watched as Connor tossed his handcuffed daughter into the backseat. He slammed the door and blew Xander's kiss farewell. Without hesitation, Xander leaped in front of the car, but to no prevail. He thudded against the hood, shoulder-first, but the vehicle surged forward, throwing himself aside as if he weighed nothing. As Xander hurried to his feet, hoping to glimpse the license plate number, all he heard was the distant sound of a car peeling out.

Xander dragged his feet as he limped towards the road. The world burned around him—sirens wailing, footsteps thundering, voices shouting. He stretched his hand out towards the fleeing vehicle, and a flight of fantasy bled into his consciousness—superhero telekinesis, saving her with a mere thought.

Xander croaked a bitter laugh.

"Trinity," Xander whispered a soft prayer that no one would answer.

His shoulder struck the back of a parked car, bursting the dam and allowing the torrent of rage to flood his being.

"God damn it!"

Xander slammed his fist down onto the trunk. Pain shot through his knuckles and up his arm. Xander didn't care. He dropped to his knees, draped over the rear end.

He failed her.

A hand gripped his shoulder. Wide-eyed, Xander glanced back with pleading eyes.

"Valentine," Cadogan managed, short of breath, eyes sweeping the scene. Xander eyes followed his gaze and landed on Mercer kneeling beside two bodies. Mercer checked for pulses.

"Dead?" Cadogan stepped forward.

"Down, but not out. They're breathing. We need medical—*now*."

Xander's jaw tightened. He ground his knuckles against the trunk of the car. He labored to his feet and staggered towards Mercer.

"This could have been worse," Mercer evaluated. "We're lucky it was only a flashbang."

"Who knew he'd get his hands on a flashbang?" Cadogan prodded the scorched husk with a pen.

"Where's the girl?" Mercer asked, scanning. He turned—just as realization struck him.

CRACK!

Xander's monstrous hook landed flush on the jaw. Mercer hit the pavement hard. His face twisted with a mix of pain and confusion. Xander stepped over him, snatched his collar, and pulled back for another swing.

"He fucking took her!" Xander hollowed. Spit flew. Rage burned in his eyes. "You *swore* she'd be safe. You swore that—"

Cadogan caught Xander's wrist. "Enough!"

But Cadogan lacked the strength to restrain the giant of a man. Xander ripped free and took aim for a second punch. Before the strike landed, three officers piled on, yanking him off Mercer. Xander thrashed, his arm pulled back at an unnatural angle. Let them break his arm. He didn't care. Nothing could hurt worse than this.

With all their might, they managed to wrestle him down. They pinned his head down—grit bit his cheek. The asphalt burned his skin. Xander gasped for air, nostrils flaring as an animal caught in a trap.

"Pull yourself together, man!" Cadogan demanded.

"Get the fuck off me!"

"Not until you pull your head out of your ass."

Xander eyed Cadogan menacingly, biting his tongue. He wanted to lash out—at Mercer. At Cadogan. At the whole goddamn world. They all failed. They all let her down—just like him.

"We'll post an APB," Cadogan determined, kneeling down next to Xander. He patted his back. "We'll find her, okay? I swear my life on it. But you need to focus. You're no good to her like this."

His sincere expression did little to disarm Xander's rage. He wheezed. Xander flinched at what Connor planned to do to Trinity. Panic clawed at his throat. He couldn't breathe. His chest heaved. Xander wanted to speak but knew nothing but venom would leave his mouth. Xander closed his eyes, wishing to be in some other reality.

One where he hadn't let her down.

One where she was safe.

A frustrated cry jerked Xander out of his spiral. The officers were no longer on his back. He pushed himself up onto his hands and knees. Ten yards out, two Marshals marched Lindsey toward a black SUV. Her head hung low. Her arms were cuffed behind her back. She didn't resist. Her shoulders slumped, showcasing her defeat. They guided her into the back seat.

Xander scrambled to his feet and rushed towards the vehicle. Through the tinted glass, his eyes locked with hers. Lindsey mouthed *I'm sorry*. Cadogan yanked Xander back before he could slam his palm against the glass.

Like that, Lindsey was gone, too.

Xander felt weak. He couldn't lift his arms—not even to defend himself. Xander spun around, looking at the carnage around him. Everyone harbored defeat on their faces. Mercer continued a heated discussion with the paramedics as they readied his men for transport. His hand clutching his jaw. Marshals engaged in a heated argument.

"He's going to hurt her. And it's all my fault," Xander muttered.

"Don't give in to the darkness, Valentine. If you do, he already won."

"He did win."

"But you're still breathing, aren't you? How many times have you been knocked down? You know by now that you have to dust yourself off and stand. You can't back down. You have to keep fighting," Cadogan's words echoed in Xander's head. Xander glanced at him—for a split second, he swore his grandfather spoke to him.

For the first time, Xander didn't know if he had what it took to get back into the fight.

For the first time, Xander didn't know if he could answer the count.

For the first time, Xander knew what true fear was.

There are no heroes in this sport.

And if there were, I wouldn't be considered among their kind.

What? Don't you see these hands?

Bloodstained. Dripping crimson color. Innocence or guilt—never meant a damn to me. When a head fell on the chopping block, I swung my axe with all my weight—separate skull from shoulder, flesh from bone. Fillet my opponents, for I am a prizefighter, through and through—selfish every step of the way.

I fought for my own gain—for the glory of victory.

For the spoils of war.

For the sweet, sweet taste of revenge.

Never altruistic.

Any show of charity was a misconception. Anytime I lifted a finger to help another—an ulterior motive always ran deeper. In this game, I only care about myself. I'm the lone white hunter. I don't have a pack. I'm no king of a pride—and I know no leader. I follow my will. That's the only gospel I know. My desire is God to me. My anger is the scripture for my New Testament.

People kneel and pray.

I lace up my boots, and I swing.

That's my mantra. That's my modus operandi. Always have been. Always will be. And it will be no different in the Thunderdome. And now? Everything has become a lot simpler. Everything will be right in front of me—no attacks from behind. No distractions. No bullshit. Nothing but my two fists. My cash-in served my enemies up on a silver platter. At Taking Hold of the Flame, I feast. I wouldn't want it to be any other way.

And three— three names: Aires, Creek, and Evans.

Three throats to tear apart.

Three flames to extinguish.

Three bodies to add to the mass grave.

They say I'm a fool to take Fall of Man on alone! I've always walked this winding road called life alone. I've fought every battle alone. My solitude is my armor. Don't confuse self-reliance for weakness. My challenge isn't some fool's errand—no folly born from arrogance or wounded pride. Mislabel me desperate at your own peril.

I don't need Light in the darkness.

I don't need David Striker and his bunch of misfits.

I don't need anyone.

It's me against the world— and that's how I like it. I'm at my best when the deck's stacked. An army tried to stop me at my first Rise to Greatness. They went strong. They went low. But no matter the tactics they deployed. The schemes they hatched. No matter how many blows they landed. At the end of the day, I stood strong, and I hoisted that SCW World Championship above my head.

On that day, I towered above everyone in this sport— a monolith for dominance.

And I did it alone.

So call me sentimental. Call me nostalgic. It's time to unleash that savagery once again—the anger that brought the world to its knees. New faces. Different words. But you all are saying the same shit. Boil it down; Fall of Man is nothing novel. It's not a new idea. It's not an original concept. It's simply another attempt at mob rule. Another group is trying to seize control.

But groups in this sport: they come, and they go.

They don't stand the test of time.

But I do. I weather the storm. Always.

Heaven might say you're all on the same page. He might say you're one big happy family! A movement of dedicated soldiers to the cause! But we all see the cracks forming in the foundation. We all know the mixture is separating, reminding us that Fall of Men consists of three combustible elements. Even the master of spin cannot patch over what's bursting at the seams.

And what seems so strong— is really as fragile as glass.

And Heaven made the worst tactical decision, targeting me as this sacrificial lamb to the new age.

I'm no cattle. You're not walking me to the slaughter.

No, I'm the sledgehammer that will tear down this glass house you built. And in the end, everyone's going to get cut by the shards of falling glass. You see, boys, they say nothing is more dangerous than a caged animal. Now, you're locked in with an angry beast. Fangs baring. Knuckles rearing. There's only one way out for Xander Valentine—and that's to gnaw his way through flesh.

I'm not trapped in that cell.

You are.

If you haven't by now, recognize that you've pissed off the most dangerous man in the history of this sport. I surely overestimated the shared intelligence of your lot. We're fighting under my terms. You're stepping into the abyss—and there, I am, the darkness that devours. One-by-one. You will succumb.

Week by week...

Line by line...

I've given you the prophecy of your own destruction. You're not wrong to think that the only option to survive... is to stay together. But in this numbers game, there is this amped-up Prisoner's dilemma at work. And while on the surface, you parrot Heaven's words as best as you can stomach, each and every one of you knows the ugly truth. None of you care for each other. There isn't an unifying vision. All of this is one big lie.

It's a glorified power grab.

And only one of you can stand on top of the pedestal. Only one can realize their true ambition. Only one person can walk out of the Thunderdome as the SCW World Heavyweight Champion. And the question in everyone's head: Who is it going to be? And no matter how hard you try, you can't silence that voice creeping inside your head, saying it should be you!

One champ.

One winner.

The other two have to take a backseat.

And there lies the opening— the Achilles heel in the Fall of Man. You three are the most motivated, driven, spirited assholes in this sport. I can't take that away from any of you. Each has its strong vision for the future. The problem lies. None of you are part of that future. This is a three-legged race. Here I am, free and unbridled by so-called comradery so I can sprint. The moment I take the lead, you'll start jostling, start shoving—and just like that, Fall of Man collapses under its own weight.

It's inevitable.

Heaven might have built this gigantic force of nature, but make a star large enough, and it is doomed to become a black hole. Too many leaders. Too much powder. All I needed to do was add a little pressure, and it's going to explode like the Fourth of July. Thunderdome is going to be a statement win for the Executioner. The sparks are going to fly. By the end, I'll have turned this so-called revolution into a goddamn spectacle.

And deep down, everyone senses it.

It's in the air.

The blood is in the water.

Attack after attack, ambush after ambush, I've exposed the Fall of Man. I was supposed to be put down at Retribution by Waylon Creek, the Xander Valentine of this generation! What happened? I survived. Like Josh Hudson did to me twenty years ago, I did to Creek. I made him human, and still, to this day, he's rattled. Scraping. Grasping. Afraid he's teetering at the edge—about to fall into oblivion.

Those eyes might not shred tears—but his soul is weeping.

James Evans swooped in to save the day. He might have taken the SCW World Championship from around my waist with the help of the hyenas, just like he said he would. Yet, at Rebirth, James Evans ultimately failed when you look at the bigger picture. The title, while ever necessary, was only secondary. Overthrowing me was supposed to usher in the new age. My fall was supposed to be the final nail in the coffin of the old generation.

But they failed to finish the job.

Can you hear it? My heart still beats!

Can you sense it? My soul still resonates!

Can you feel it? My anger still burns!

You've made a martyr out of me! You stripped everything away; now I have nothing to lose. You birthed a vengeful spirit—one that'll haunt your careers forever. SCW World Championship? Secondary. Sure, the title will be a bonus. But I know the crown will always find its way back to me. As long as I keep fighting, it's only a matter of time before the rightful king takes his throne.

No, I have a different mission at Taking Hold of the Flame.

Pulling the plug on this experiment called Fall of Man. That's my primary objective. That's my endgame. You've tried to stamp me out. End my career. Well, gentlemen, I'm going to humiliate you, parade you through the streets, bruised and naked, for the entire world to see what happens when you piss the wrong man off.

The Thunderdome is the devil's playground, and I'm the fallen angel himself. Together, our bodies will be pushed to their limits—battered, bruised, and burned beyond recognition. If you have forgotten what pain was, I will remind you through the poetry of my sadism.

But that's not enough.

Not even close.

That's why I enlisted you three in the Taking Hold of the Flame. So there's nowhere to run. Nowhere to bury your burning shame. You're going to be put on display for everyone to see what happens to my enemies. And that must make you shudder at the thought. To be reduced to table scraps—tossed to the same dogs you've been whipping for the better part of a year!

And the linchpin that holds this all together—this false sense of security propped up by make-believe unity. The one individual that is oft forgotten when we discuss the Fall of Man. The one loose thread that will unravel everything—I know it. It's Giovanni Aires. The man who wants to watch the world burn. He wants to engulf everything in chaos—the modern-day Loki. And like the god of mischief, he's going to betray his siblings. The temptation I have offered him is too much to resist.

Look each other in the eyes!

What do you see?

It's not trust. It's not faith. It's suspicion. It's the anticipation of the knife.

And what do I see?

Ironic desperation. Waylon needs redemption against me. Evans needs to keep his championship. Aires needs to satisfy that thrill. Three men. Three competing motives. There is no righteous cause. There is no unifying ideology. And guess what? There's no happy ending that will satisfy all three.

I don't need to walk away without the championship to win.

I've already won the war.

Ever since the match was announced, I've been questioned—and called stupid. But genius is often unappreciated. You might celebrate on Sunday, but the damage will already be done. The seeds of decay have been planted. During the match, those seeds will take root, and sooner or later—they will rot from the inside. And when everyone looks back, they will know that I'm the one who pulled the trigger. I'm the man who mortally wounded the Fall of Man.

And no one can take that away from me.

Try as you might!

But none of that matters—because I'm not a patient bastard. That's Plan B. That's the alternative. The deadman switch. The fail-safe. The poisoning of the well. Fuck no. I've always liked to be up close and personal with my battles. That's why they call me the Paragon of Violence. I like getting my hands bloody. Surgical. Clean. They call it execution-style for a reason, and the bullet to the skull is going to be exactly the way I put down the Fall of Man.

Call me merciful if you want by ending it quickly.

But don't call me incapable.

Thunderdome is the place where dreams go to die, the courtesy of the Executioner. In time, Fall of Man will be a flash in the pan. All they will remember is when I went against the odds and defeated the three most powerful men in wrestling today, escaping with the SCW World Championship, making even Houdini proud.

This isn't a Hail Mary; this is my magnum opus.

I'm not a dead man walking; I'm a one-man firing squad emptying my clip.

In the Thunderdome, I am going to show why, behind every successful revolution, there are a hundred failed rebellions.

Add Fall of Man to that list.

Fade to black.