Xander sprawled on the back of the rental SUV, where he experienced the fun of every pothole on their way to Redwood Creek. The starry Milky Way danced and reminded Xander of home in the Colorado Rockies. In retirement, he planned on purchasing a telescope and partaking in stargazing to bask in the glory of God's majestic universe. Retirement sounded so far, but Xander knew in his soul that retirement would be there in the blink of an eye. Time moved so fast these days.

"We're almost there. Hide**," Avery spoke from the front of the cab.**

Xander tossed the blanket to conceal himself. With the poor lighting, he doubted anyone would notice him, but they needed to take precautions. Could never be too careful. Avery explained that the security at the facility was woefully lax; to imagine that a place that housed the criminally insane would be guarded so poorly. What a joke. Xander remained on pins and needles, expecting Avery's assessment to fail and for Xander to be caught trying to break into a secure facility. Talk about a scandal. Maybe retirement was already in motion. Avery waved to the sentry at the main gate before flashing his employee ID card.

"Yo, Jas. New wheels?**" The sentry asked.**

Xander muttered a curse.

"Nah, man. My car's in the shop.**"**

"Not surprising that clunker failed you. How about finally coming to the current century and treating yourself with a nice set of wheels. American-made, of course. Not that Japanese shit you push,**" the sentry responded. The guard remained seated at the post with no inclination to leave. Xander couldn't see. All he knew was that he wanted this conversation to end before he was detected.**

"Look, I'm already late. One thing through. Who's on deck tonight with ya?**"**

"Tommy posted up at the dorms. I'm manning the gate and doing the patrols. That's it. Jersey called out again, and Erin is on vacation. Don't worry. The inmates are locked in for the evening. They ain't gonna get you,**" the sentry responded. Two men. That's it? For the whole facility? In his old age, Xander became far more conscious about how much he paid in taxes. If he lived in California, he'd be livid.**

"See you at midnight.**"**

"Yeah, better clock in before you get yelled at.**"**

"Yes, sir.**"**

Much to Xander's relief, the gates cried open, and the vehicle started to rumble up the road to the complex. Xander originally wanted Avery to limit his interactions to a minimum to avoid drawing any suspicion since he doubted Avery possessed any acting skills. Yet Avery's calm composure won out, and he thought that couldn't have gone any better.

Xander tossed off the blanket. Pillars of light shot down from lamp posts, periodically flooding the rental as they drove to the employee parking lot in the rear of the compound. A dense forest crowded the facility. Somewhere farther, the trees gave way to a tall brick wall with barbed wire serving more than decoration. Xander knew because he had checked a few weeks prior. They wanted to disguise the prison as a country retreat, promoting mental health and all that jazz.

The SUV came to a halt in an almost empty lot. A flickering light above a garage door and an adjacent port served as a beacon for night-shift employees to enter the premises. Avery explained they would go through the warehouse and take the maintenance tunnels underneath the compound. The old tunnels connected each building, including the dormitories; however, bars sealed the path to the dormitories. Not that Xander wanted to visit the lunatics in the asylum.

"You sure we won't get caught?**" Xander sat up.**

"My crew is small. No one does shit around here. They will be glued to their phones or napping. We're good. I'm assigned the offices tonight, and I'll take us there, no problem,**" Avery responded. He exited the vehicle and circled around back. Avery popped open the rear door and made way for Xander to leap to his feet.**

"You're worrying too much. Wasn't this your bright idea?**"**

"I look like I'm on my way to rob a bank. A real fucking Pink Panther.**"**

"If you weren't a freak of nature, we could have snagged a janitor's uniform.**"**

"It's going to be impossible to explain my presence if we get caught,**" Xander said. He gave his outfit a once-over—black everything. His shirt clung onto his frame tightly, choking him slightly at the throat, even without a turtleneck. Xander practiced creeping in his sneakers, placing his heel first, and stepping more on the outside edge of his feet. While not perfect, he noted that the strategy was a major improvement over his usual clomping in Timbalands.**

"Are you done admiring yourself?**" Avery snapped Xander back to reality.**

"Yeah, I'm fucking ready.**"**

"Good, your dumb ass made me late.**"**

"Why do you even care? After tonight, if our mission is a success, you can quit this crappy job.**"**

"Revenge don't pay my bills, big guy. I like to eat and all,**" Avery countered. Xander didn't argue that point; however, if they slip up, Avery and Xander might find their food coming from the state penitentiary system. No bills. Just a shit menu and no IPAs. Not a world that Xander wanted to live in.**

The time clock glowed immediately when they entered the building, and the storage room lit up upon their arrival. Avery swiped his card and signaled for Xander to follow. The silence seemed deafening. He heard their breathing and Avery's footsteps. Xander gave Avery some distance to scout ahead, so if Xander needed to backtrack and hide, he could.

To Xander's astonishment, they entered the office area in the main building with complete ease. The office administrator's desk sat vacant at the front of a room of cubicles. Offices lined the parameters of the room. Darkness resided in most of the offices. Avery motioned towards the secretary's desk, where he dropped down and kicked up his feet. He didn't seem to care that his mud-caked boots dropped speckles of filth onto the desk. Avery would keep an eye out while Xander made his way to Raymond's office.

Xander cautiously passed by lit offices. They were thankfully empty. Xander found the meeting room cast in darkness; however, beyond the room, Raymond's office lights burned brightly. Xander placed his face at the door, looking in through the blinds to see if there were any signs that Raymond was working late. No shadows. No movement. Not a single sound. Xander quietly opened the door and slipped in. He tiptoed around the couches and coffee table that dominated the center of the meeting room.

Raymond claimed the coveted corner office, his right given that he was the institute's head doctor. Curtains blocked out what would have been a perfect view of the forest surrounding the campus. Raymond's mahogany desk formed a U-shape and boasted a granite top on the arm facing the entrance. A monitor and desktop rested on the side adjacent to the windowed wall. Xander slid into the cushy leather chair. He slipped the USB drive that Robertson gifted him into the computer and popped the device into the computer.

And bingo, Xander gained access to Raymond's computer. Xander froze. He had access. Now what? Xander never considered himself tech-savvy. If anything, he was computer illiterate. Xander went with his instincts; he went to Raymond's internet browser. Nothing stood out in the browser history. Xander typed in Instagram, hoping that Raymond logged into the Mike Christopher account on this computer. Again, no cigar. Xander

kicked the desk restlessly as he thought hard about the next shot. There had to be something.

Xander smiled when his eyes landed on a folder on Raymond's desktop simply named Sessions. Upon clicking the icon, the directory expanded into folders organized by patient name. He selected Connor's name, and a list of videos titled by date flooded the screen. Hundreds of clips. Xander clicked on one of the earlier dates, and a media player popped open.

"Good morning, Connor. Have you adjusted to Redwood Creek yet?**" Raymond's voice said from behind the camera.**

"It's boring as fuck. But I guess the food is better than the jail's cafeteria shit,**" Connor responded. To Xander's surprise, Connor looked comfortable. He donned a baggy grey sweatshirt and baggy navy blue trousers. His son's gaunt face was the same day he was sentenced to the facility in the courtroom. Connor's icy blue eyes blazoned on his face over his smug smile. After all, he only just got away with murder.**

"I've heard you haven't taken to group therapy yet.**"**

"Look, doc. I'm not interested in hearing about others and their ruined childhood.

"They are your peers.**"**

"I beg to differ. Those sick fucks are going to be here for a very long time.**"**

"And you think you're different. I'm going to be real here, Connor. Not many leave this facility, especially if they murdered someone. We will spend many years together unless we make a miraculous breakthrough,**" Raymond explained in a cold, monotonous voice. Xander knew what *miracle* transpired that freed Connor. Connor's face betrayed no emotions at Raymond's grave warning.**

"Maybe God will give me a second chance.**"**

"Do you deserve a second chance?**"**

"Everyone deserves a second chance. Isn't it your job to see that I become worthy of one?**"**

"Of course. I heal ailing minds. I mend them. I cure them of their afflictions, and through my work, I seek to enable you to become a functioning member of society. It doesn't happen overnight. And if you work with me, Connor, maybe we can do something about your predicament,**" Raymond said. While Raymond used the right words, Xander sensed the lack of sincerity in Raymond's voice. He didn't care to reform Connor. Raymond saw the bodies in this institute as cash cows. The state paid his facility to house them.**

"Oh, I'm cooperative, doc. Consider me an open book.**"**

"You know, often I have a hard time tearing down walls. Patients don't like to open up because they are afraid of judgment. I do not judge.**"**

"And I will be a breath of fresh air. I don't care if you judge me.**"**

"Do you care if anyone judges you?**"**

"I hate to admit it. Of course, I say that because I resent the man wholeheartedly, but I care if my pops judged me. That's because of all the people in the existence of humanity, and he is the least worthy to pass judgment on anyone. He's a true monster, you know?**" Connor leaned back into his chair and shoved his hand into his pockets. Connor clicked his tongue against the inside of his cheek. Connor's mention of him made Xander sit up straight as if he was just scolded.**

"That is a good starting point. I always like to take my time and dissect my patient's background, especially their childhood development."

"You see, doc. When I said earlier that I don't want to listen to anyone else's *horrible* childhoods. It's because I'd win in a pissing contest.**"**

"What can you tell me of your childhood? Especially your relationship with your father since he seems to be a source of anguish for you.**"**

"I didn't know my father for the first few years. My earliest memories were of Puerto Rico. My loving mother swept me away from the mainland because she feared what my father had become... but then one day,**" Connor's words trailed off as Xander remembered the critical event.**

Xander tasted the salt in the wind. Anger boiled inside of him. This tropical paradise's cheery sunshine didn't match the burning rage inside. Only the temperature did. He drove up the winding dirt road to the cliff top, not to get a magnificent view of the island's sandy beaches and the rolling waves of the Caribbean but to collect his son. Calli had kept his son from him for too long. This meeting was far overdue.

Only a white picket fence served as fortification for Calli's fortress hideaway. A stone pathway led from the dirt road to the bungalow's front door. An expansive garden of flowers danced in the sea breeze past the fence. Holding a beach ball in both hands, a toddler with bright blonde hair and icy blue eyes stared wide-eyed at Xander. Instantly, Xander knew this child was his.

*"Mom. Big man!***"**

"Come here, kid. I won't hurt you." ***Xander stopped. He knelt down and opened his arms. The boy didn't run to him as Xander envisioned. That only happened on the Hallmark channel. Instead, the boy threw the ball at Xander's face. Of course, that didn't hurt. The gesture still grated Xander. Xander forced a smile to conceal that tempest that warred within this soul. He needed to put on his best act.***

"*Catch!****" Connor said after the fact. Xander swiped the ball and held it before him. Connor waddled forward to collect his belongings, but Xander sat the ball down and swooped the child into his arms. Xander placed him onto his shoulder, giving him an eagle's eye view of his home.***

*"Connor! Get away from that man--- Xander?!****" Calli shrieked. She dropped the dish she was wiping dry onto the pathway. Terror tightened his face, creating dimples in her cheeks. Xander always liked to scare Calli. She had the cutest expression when she was afraid.***

"Hello, Calli. I've come for you and the boy. Let's go be one big happy family."

Xander released a cry, pausing the video for a moment. He pinched his nose. Xander promised Calli but never tried to deliver. His breathing became labored as he felt tightness in his chest, reliving that moment. Did he even feel joy when he first met his son? No, Xander's visit was a power move. All he wanted was to control Calli. He didn't care about the boy. Xander viewed Connor as a pawn in his twisted chess game. Xander resumed the recording.

"--- nothing but play. One moment, I had the ideal childhood. Carefree as fuck. No worries. Then the next, he came into my life and ruined everything**," Connor described. A sardonic laugh escaped from his lips as he folded his hands behind his head. Xander didn't have any defense to Connor's words. They rang true.**

"You really enjoyed being with your mother.**"**

"I loved my mother,**" Connor said.**

"Then why did you fucking kill her?**" Xander bellowed, slamming his fist upon the desk. He regretted the outburst, knowing that it jeopardized his mission. Xander needed to search for evidence but couldn't compel himself to continue his watch. Call him a masochist, but he needed to see this.**

"So tell me, Connor. How did your father ruin everything, as you aptly put it?**"**

"Well, he ruined my mother. She glowed as a person. I remember her being nothing but full of love. Then he came, and she became a husk of what she was. He poisoned her. I don't care what he did to me. I can never forgive him for what he did to her. Especially when he would

come home after drinking a bottle of whiskey,**" Connor answered. Bile came with every word his son spoke to Raymond. Connor bared his teeth, breaking his usual stoic expression. Xander felt the heat of his anger. The story triggered another vivid flashback.**

SMASH! The bottle of Jack shattered against the wall of the living room. Amber liquid oozed down the wall. Connor dropped to his knees, wailing with his hands over his ears. Calli rushed to his side, shielding him from the looming tyrant before them. Xander didn't recall what set him off that night. Had he been struggling with his career? He was no longer considered dominant, and that always ate away at him. When that sense of invincibility perished, all that remained was a void. A hole that needed to be filled. And that sense of helplessness enraged Xander.

*"Quiet, boy!***" Xander yelled. Their appearance added fuel to the fire. They quivered before him as if he were some monster. They treated him as if he was the same as his abusive uncle, and that pissed him off. A tug of wall occurred within him. He knew his behavior was what was wrong, not theirs. Xander understood that as the man of the family, he was supposed to protect them, not scare them. But a voice told him they were in the wrong. That they brought out this side of him!***

"I said, quiet! Damn it!" ***Xander roared. He approached his wife and child as they huddled together. He picked up the lamp on the side table and threw it across the room. Connor's crying intensified.***

*"Xander, stop! You're scaring us!***" Calli finally spoke up. Her words shook as she trembled in fear. Spurred on by her maternal senses, she mustered courage. Calli stood up. Her pink satin pajamas gleamed in the dim light, but her outfit failed to conceal the bruising on her thighs and upper arms. He caused those. The sight of his sins conjured up guilt. The remorse incited a positive feedback loop; instead of grounding Xander, the regret propelled him further.***

*"Then quiet the fucking child!***"**

*"Your yelling makes it impossible!***" Calli said. Her face turned pale as she immediately regretted her words.***

Xander saw defiance in her actions. Words failed to form. He stepped forward instead. Calli braced herself; regardless, Xander's backhand launched her across the room. She crumpled onto the floor. The blow almost knocked her out. Irrespective of her training, the strike landed true, leaving her momentarily dazed. Xander always thought a kind of paralysis overcame her when it came to fighting back against him. Seeing her on the floor, face half-red from his blow, brought a certain peace over him.

That peace only lasted for a few fleeting moments.

"Mom!" ***Connor managed through his sobs. The boy rushed to his mother's side. Cali managed to get onto her hands and knees. She rolled over and rested against the wall as her hand tenderly touched her ruined face.***

Connor turned towards Xander. For the first time, Xander didn't recognize his son. Wrath displaced the usual fear in the boy's eyes. He bared his teeth like a rabid dog, and his heavy breathing caused foaming at his mouth. Connor clenched his fists. Was he really going to try to defend his mother? A short laugh erupted. Connor charged forward. Xander didn't hesitate to take hold of him and throw him aside.
The small boy flew in the air, light as a feather to Xander, but projectile crash-landed through the glass coffee table.

"You monster!" ***Calli erupted. She launched herself towards Connor. Blood dripped from several cuts on their son's body. He lay there, staring up at the ceiling, stunned. Despite years of verbal abuse, Xander never laid hands on the boy. The physical abuse only targeted Calli. Crossing that red line triggered something in Xander. For that night only, Xander retreated in almost a sulking matter. Shame burned his skin.***

Xander shook his head violently, trying to get the memory out of his head. Once more, he paused the video. Xander sucked in a deep breath, trying to dispel the sickness that overcame him. He almost wanted to vomit as the gravity of the guilt overwhelmed him. Xander always knew he made Connor into the monster he became. To survive, Xander shoved that realization to the back burner. How convenient? He never paid for his crimes. Calli and Connor never received justice. Xander got away scot-free with no tangible repercussions.

Xander didn't know why he felt the need to continue this torture. This served as purgatory for him. At long last, he could face his past. Hunter told him to forgive himself; however, he didn't have the right to. Instead of forgiveness, Xander ignored. For too long, he ignored the trauma he inflicted on this world. With much dread, Xander pressed play.

"So, when did you start resenting your mother?**" Raymond asked.**

"I don't know what age. Eventually, I recognized her weakness. For too long, my mother held onto this belief she could fix him. She didn't care how much punishment we endured at his hands--- no, she kept excusing him. She blamed herself. Secretly, I suspected she blamed me,**" Connor spat. The vitriol in his voice remains present. The emotions seeped through his facial expressions. Xander had never seen Connor so uninhibited.**

"Eventually, she had enough. From my research, your mother divorced your father. The court rewarded her full custody, and you two were fully free from that abuse. You must have felt relieved to be away from your father's cruelty, right?**" Raymond asked.**

"By the time we got away from him, it was too late. The damage was done.**"**

"What do you mean?**"**

"Kids can get jealous very quickly, don't you think?**"**

"Everyone gets jealous.**"**

"But as a child, you are even more sensitive. You know when you are one of the *have-nots.* All around me, my classmates frolic, ignorant of this bastard world. I witnessed their indulgence at recess--- at birthday parties. I glimpsed at the love pouring out of their parents even at the mundane occasions such as after school pick up,**" Connor explained. He shifted in his chair as this exposition dredged up memories. His body language became stiff.**

"And you weren't receiving such affection from your mother?**"**

"My mother became hollowed out. She took care of me out of a sense of responsibility. The light inside of her flickered out. I felt alone, doc. And that was some bullshit."

"Sounds like you have a chip on your shoulder.**"**

"I hold a grudge. More than anyone. And that grudge is against this world.**"**

"Do you think that grudge contributed to your actions?**"**

"Of course, it did. I used to pretend to be bullied at school. Tricked the teachers I was fighting back. In all reality, doc. I bullied the shit out of everyone--- some directly, others indirectly. I wanted to share my anguish with everyone.**" Connor's words sent a chill down Xander's spine. Not because Xander found the behavior disgusting; no, the actions resonated with Xander. For so long, Xander imparted his abuse onto others. Even the wretched want company.**

"Your mother was obviously important to you. How did you react to her passing?**"**

"She was already dead. Maybe not physically, but her soul perished long before she drowned.**"**

"You weren't sad. Not one bit?**"**

"Not an ounce of grief,**" Connor answered. The emotions evaporated from his voice, and Connor returned to being the cold, apparent serpent that he knew his son to be. He relaxed in his chair, leaning back again so the front legs left the floor.**

"Interesting. And then your father regained custody over you.**"**

"Ten years might have passed. I grew up. I was too big to push around without any consequences. Smarter too. He didn't abuse me, though I suspected a part of him wanted to have another go at it,**" Connor paused. He turned away from the camera and glanced out the window in the room. Connor continued, "**Like my mother before him, my father provided. Not out of fatherly affection but a sense of obligation. If I had to guess, doc, I bet my dear ol' Dad probably thought he was paying me back for all the heinous shit he pulled when I was a kid**."**

"And then Abigail came into your life. Your father hired her to be your nanny despite being the age that you probably could take care of yourself."

"He and his bitch was never around. Always on the road. Abby was his answer. He didn't want to fucking parent, so he shifted all that to Abby. Abby was only a few years older than me,**" Connor said. Xander hated that Connor's testimony proved to be mostly accurate. Connor only excluded the fact he murdered his mother so as not to incriminate himself in another serious crime. Still, Xander realized he didn't do any favors to the kid. Maybe there was an opportunity to step in as a father figure and redeem himself. Perhaps if he had taken on that responsibility hands-on, Connor wouldn't have killed Abby in the Mojave Desert.**

The video ended shortly after that point, leaving Xander emotionally exhausted. Xander felt as if he had his first real conversation with his son. While Raymond's tone remained stony throughout, Xander applauded his ability to bring out Connor's story with a certain ease. Xander conceded there was a reason why the criminal psychologist was considered a top expert in his field; however, it was unfortunate that the man's baggage compromised his work.

"You found anything yet?**"**

Xander jumped.

"The big bad Xander Valentine gets spooked easily. Fascinating? But seriously, the patrol tends to come around midnight, and I want to be long gone,**" Avery said. Xander spun the chair to face Avery. He didn't want to reveal that he had spent so far watching Connor's interviews with Raymond. Avery thought Xander sought clues for Connor's whereabouts when, in actuality, Xander searched for the smoking gun that proved Raymond was Mike Christopher.**

"There's so much stuff on here. It's like looking for a needle in the haystack. I need more time.**"**

"Time is of the essence.**"**

"Go back out there and keep an eye on the clock.**"**

"Keep an ear out too. I can only make small talk for so long if the patrol stops by,**" Avery warned.**

"It's not like I want to get caught.**"**

"We can't stop Connor if we're both locked up.**"**

"Like I said, I'm looking. The longer we talk, the less time I'll have,**" Xander said. The two men exchanged stares. Avery's face bore a grave expression. Xander turned to the computer as Avery sank back into the darkness.**

Xander chose a video file from the middle of the list. Again, Connor sat before the camera. The short sleeves of the white tee that Connor donned and the greenery of the environment outside the room suggested the interview took place during summer. Connor sipped from a glass of water. An unnatural grin formed on his face. Connor even possessed color in his cheeks, a far cry from the paleness that afflicted Connor when he lived with Xander.

"So doc's letting you drive today, eh? So tell me, what did you do to get this opportunity?**" Connor asked. He gestured a blowjob, with his tongue pushing against his cheek and his hand jerking the thin air. Connor laughed at the interviewer's response.**

"Let's behave, Connor. Doctor Raymond has faith in my abilities. He has to leave town for a conference, and I was more than happy to fill in for him,**" Lindsey's voice called out from behind the camera.**

"You got sick of sitting off the side as a silent observer. Now, you want to be in the driver's seat. Good on you.**"**

"Thank you.**"**

"Relax, babe. I'll play nice. But tell me. What's really going on with you and the doc? Trust me, I won't tell anyone. I'm good at keeping secrets.**" Connor winked. Xander was embarrassed at the manner in which his sons spoke to Lindsey, even though he bore an inkling of Lindsey's toxic personality. Xander really didn't raise his son to be anything. Why was he surprised Connor's treatment of women was untoward?**

"Connor, please. I only possess a great deal of admiration towards the doctor. He's been a good mentor to me.**"**

"There's more than regard in your interaction. The light touching. The giggles of a schoolgirl. The way you bat your eyes. You're seducing him--- and he's eating it all up. You can't lie to me, Lindsey,**" Connor asserted. Xander observed Connor's lack of shame. His son possessed**

sheer confidence. Xander never witnessed his interchanges with the opposite sex. Connor acted as if Hunter didn't even exist.

"We're not here to talk gossip. We're here to discuss you.**"**

"I'm not judging. I applaud you.**"**

"What are you talking about?**"**

"Your manipulation of Raymond.**"**

"I beg your pardon."

"You're a girl in a man's world. Instead of accepting the uphill battle of sexism and all, you're using your God-given talents to get ahead. Us men only need to be men; what's wrong with a woman like you using her sexuality as a weapon,**" Connor paused. If Xander hadn't met Lindsey, he would have expected a slap. Maybe he gambled on that. Or perhaps Connor read that Lindsey brilliantly.**

"I don't know if I should take that as an insult or a compliment.**"**

"It's a compliment. If I was Raymond, I would be beside myself that a captivating woman like you would be interested in me. Especially if I was at his age. I wouldn't even care if I was being used,**" Connor said. He leaned forward with that shit-eating grin. Both hands gripped his knees.**

"Well, thank you.**"**

"Now tell me, do you find your beauty empowering? I bet you do. As you should.**"**

"You're going to get me in trouble.**"**

"The doctor needs to know something called discretion. I'm not the only one who has noticed that your relationship isn't merely professional. For both your sakes. I say that again in a non-judgmental way. There's nothing wrong with getting something extra out of work.**" Connor shrugged. Xander heard Lindsey shifting in her seat behind the camera. The implication might have unsettled Lindsey. Xander didn't know if Connor was bluffing about their affair being a rumor.**

"What are you insinuating?**"**

"If it gets out there that the doc is fucking his assistant, things can get messy.**"**

"Connor, stop.**"**

"I would hate to lose those who have helped me grow as an individual. I feel like I've made a lot of progress here.**"**

"Doctor Raymond definitely has found interest in your case. That's for sure,**" Lindsey said. Xander knew she avoided addressing Connor's comment. Connor fished for a status. Ultimately, his goal had been to find a way out of the facility. Xander recognized Connor's efforts in this conversation. He dug for dirt. They would only release him under extraordinary circumstances.**

"You know. Typically, your lab coats always pick the topics. How about I direct the discussion today?**"**

"I feel like you've already driven the conversation today. If we can move on to a different topic, I'm down. What do you want to talk about?**"**

"Women.**"**

"Are you going to behave?**"**

"I admit. I'm a little sexually frustrated in here. Someone my age shouldn't be deprived of a woman's touch,**" Conor paused. He let that thought linger in the air for a moment before he continued,** "But I killed a woman. Shouldn't we talk about my thoughts on women? Lindsey, I think this is something we need to explore. It might be very revealing.**"**

"I'll bite. How do you view women?**"**

"Most women?**"**

"Sure.**"**

"Most women are lesser beings. Don't give me that look. It isn't that they're born to be inferior to men. But they choose to accept a lesser role. They decide to be weak. They lay down on their back and take it,**" Connor explained. The joy that appeared on his face as he shared his opinion. He wanted Lindsey to be slightly offended by the statement. Xander knew he toyed with Lindsey. Xander understood emotional manipulation. He once was a master practitioner. Connor learned the trade from Xander.**

"Sadly, many men hold such views.**"**

"My mother convinced me of this reality. She kowtowed to my father.**"**

"Is that why you resent her?**"**

"I knew she could be strong. I saw glimpses of her strength. She chose to be feeble.**"**

"Okay, Connor. What about Abigail? Did you feel the same way about her? You know some men have the natural tendency to protect those they deem vulnerable? Maybe a little misguided, but at least their heart is in a good place,**" Lindsey questioned. Xander sensed that Lindsey harbored a feminist spirit. Connor's talking points so far butted against her sensibilities.**

"Abigail was weak, too.**"**

"Why did you murder her? She loved you.**"**

"Because she wasn't worthy of my love. I can only truly love an assertive woman. Someone like you. It's only natural. When the scales are unbalanced in a relationship, one will ultimately be devoured. Their individual identity will cease to exist. When it comes to me, if she's not my equal, I will destroy her,**" Conor explained. He enjoyed giving his view. His eyes watched Lindsey's reaction, which remained hidden from Xander's view.**

"Why do you feel that way?**"**

"I hate to admit it. But I am my father's son. His current bitch keeps him in line. In fact, she might actually have neutered him. Props for her to saddling that asshole. With his money, she's set for life.**"**

"So the scales are unbalanced. This time in reverse. According to your philosophy, your father is at risk of losing his identity?"

"And I couldn't care less. Serves him fucking right.**"**

The pause after the statement gave Xander time to reflect. Connor watched how his mother devolved under his father's abuse. In the earlier session, Connor stated that it concluded Calli died long before she drowned. Everything clicked. Connor was a copycat. Monkey see. Monkey do. Once more, Xander's stomach turned. Xander's sinking suspicion that he was responsible for Abby's murder was confirmed by Connor's words.

"Do you regret killing Abigail?**"**

"No. Why should I?**"**

"You took someone's life.**"**

"Abby made that decision for me. She put her life in my hands. I extinguished it. It's more than a suitable ending for her.**"**

"You do realize that lying might be in your best interest here. Of course, we want you to be open and honest. Yet you've stated you wanted to leave Redwood Creek one day. That won't happen until you show remorse for your crime,**" Lindsey explained. Her voice betrayed a sense of bewilderment. Xander didn't hear any notes of disgust. Connor fascinated her. Where Raymond gave Connor scientific indifference, Lindsey sounded more in awe.**

"Then we could never get to know each other. I believe you're a woman who cherishes transparency. You're interested in me. Aren't you, Lindsey?**"**

"I admit. I find you intriguing. From an academic sense, of course.**"**

"Of course. And Lindsey, the feeling is mutual.**"**

"What do you mean?**"**

"You are a case study for me. You're what a woman should strive to be.**"**

"Now that's outright flattery on your part.**" Lindsey laughed.**

Xander heard jostling around the camera, and the video clip ended short. He didn't know what to make of Lindsey's reaction. Knowing her, Lindsey might also have engaged in manipulation. What he witnessed could have been a chess game between two scheming minds. Lindsey wanted a feather in her cap, while Connor desired an escape from prison. Raymond's involvement still wasn't apparent. At some point, Connor gained the leverage he needed to leave Redwood Creek. Xander needed to search more.

Commotion came from beyond the doorway. Xander heard a muffled conversation. He instinctively touched the monitor's power button. With some struggle, Xander crawled into the cramped confines of the space beneath the desk. He cursed his size. Footsteps grew louder. Xander's heartbeat couldn't be any louder. Goosebumps raised. Someone entered the room. The tapping of boots against the hardwood floors ceased. Avery? The midnight patrolman?

With a snap, the lights switched off, casting darkness. The lamps outside filtered through the curtains. With a loud sigh, the footsteps resumed. They faded away. Xander expelled the air he intaked. He struggled to climb from his hiding spot. Avery would have made his presence known. How close was Xander to being caught? Still, the escape from detection brought him more time to investigate Raymond's computer.

The monitor flashed on. Xander chose the final recording in the library. Connor appeared once more in the interview chair. This time, he wore a white dress shirt, the top few buttons undone to expose a tuff of chest hair. He also wore some slacks, a far cry from

his earlier outfits. Connor seemed more ready for some downtown nightlife than psychological analysis.

"You must be proud of yourself, Connor. You get to be free this afternoon.**" Raymond's voice finally possessed emotion. That of disdain. Connor's release didn't please.**

"I couldn't have done it without your good evaluation.**"**

"And you even manage to persuade a judge. You've proven to be a competent young man."

"I must have had an impact on you, doc. You brought out the camera. One last time for our teary farewell.**" Connor snickered. He left his chair and drifted towards the windows. Connor shoved his hands into his jeans. After a moment, he flashed a sinister smile towards Raymond behind the camera.**

"Of course, Connor. I will remember you. You are the one who got away.**"**

"You make it sound like this was a failed romance.**"**

"It was a failure of some kind.**"**

"Don't incriminate yourself, doc. Smile! You're on candid camera.**"**

"I, of course, meant that with your departure. I have lost the ability to learn more from you. I could write a whole thesis on you,**" Raymond said. They flirted around the topic of blackmail; however, Raymond became compromised. Xander gathered that someone Connor got to the presiding judge on his case as well. Xander only wished his son would use his intellect to do good.**

"So, where is Lindsey these days? I was hoping to say goodbye to her. After all, she was crucial in my... development.**"**

"Such a shame. Lindsey has been assigned other--- more pressing cases."

"Kiss her goodbye for me, doc.**"**

"Your wordplay is clever, boy. But I simply didn't ask you to join me again for such games. We do exit interviews for the departures. Typically, it is for cases that we deem unsolvable--- but fortunately for us, you will be onto new things,**" Raymond said. The inflection in his voice betrayed his sentiment towards his patient. Sacarasm painted the picture clearly. Raymond was relieved to see Connor leaving Redwood Creek. Xander still didn't sense an enraged man as he expected. While unpleased with Connor, Raymond seemed capable of holding it all together.**

"Yes, I look forward to sunnier days. We all have causes, don't we, doc? I look forward to finally being free to pursue mine.**"**

"And what dreams are you pursuing?**"**

"Oh? It's not much of a dream. But I do plan on reconnecting with my dear father. It's been too long, and I feel a void that needs to be filled inside my soul.**"**

"I thought you would avoid your father.**"**

"Why would you think that?**"**

"Don't insult my intelligence, Connor. You've made it clear that you despise him. Don't you think you should start fresh with your life? Far from the influence of your bastard father?**" Raymond asked. The questioning sounded like the first sincere thing Xander heard from the doctor's voice during the recording.**

"We can't choose family, doc.**"**

"It's not as uncommon as you think nowadays for people to have estranged parents. Many children who are abused have no contact later on in life. It's healthy.**"**

"A psychologist until the end, aren't you?**"**

"Regardless of my personal feelings, I will always offer my professional opinion.**"**

"I want contact. I want intimacy. For me to feel complete, my Dad must experience this darkness inside of me,**" Connor's cheery voice dropped to a baritone. The bass sent shivers down Xander's spine as Connor's icy blue cameras peered into the camera as if he knew Xander was watching. Xander shook himself, knowing that was his imagination at play.**

"What are you implying, Connor?**"**

"It's a family union. Whatever are you suggesting?**"**

"Connor---**"**

"Please, doc. Don't stress. Don't let my history of violence play to your imagination. My intentions are as pure as they can be. Everyone wants a strong relationship with their father. I'm no different.**" Connor's voice returned to high notes. Connor stepped back from the window and approached the camera to cut the distance between him and Raymond. His hands remained in his pockets.**

"Consider this your second chance, Connor. Don't let the past ruin this opportunity.**"**

"We can't escape our past, doc. We are the product of it. Everything comes back around.**"**

"This conversation has run its course. Good luck to you, Connor. I hope our paths never cross again,**" Raymond said. The callousness returned to Raymond's voice. The chair behind the camera screeched.**

Connor stretched his hand out. "Don't worry, doc. We will see each other soon.**"**

Raymond rejected the gesture. The camera jolted before the clip ended. Xander leaned back in the chair, reflecting on the final recording. The journey through the sessions didn't provide any answers, and what he found spooked him like a chill of a fever. Connor stated an interest in pursuing a relationship, which never arose during their meeting after his release. Connor took the bribe and ran. There has been no word from his son since.

Did he just say that for the cameras?

Xander shook his head, but Connor's words remained in his head. On the camera, the still image of Connor staring into the camera became etched into Xander's consciousness. Xander sensed he was looking at his son for the very first time. Up to this point, Xander looked away at the monster he created.

But he wasn't there for introspection. Xander came for answers. Where was the evidence that Raymond conspired against Xander and carried out a campaign of revenge against Xander? He couldn't afford to spend any more time going down this rabbit hole of his son's escape from Redwood Creek. While insightful, they did not bring him closer to the justice that he sought.

"Have you found what you're looking for?**"**

"Not yet---**" Xander went to answer Avery, but his brain finally registered a woman's soprano voice.**

Xander almost leaped out of the chair as he turned. Lindsey Monroe leaned against the door frame. Her wavy golden hair framed her face, and her cherry-red lips contorted into a smile. The scarlet bows of her white corset-style vest locked in her chest tightly. A black backpack swung over her shoulder, but she discarded the bag onto the floor. Lindsey circled around the desk, her legs constrained by the denim of her jeans. The musk of wine reached Xander's nostrils as she closed the distance. Xander clenched his fists. He remembered the stunt she pulled the last time.

"Are you surprised to see me? You probably are wondering what I'm doing here in the middle of the night," **Lindsey said. She stabbed his chest with her fingernail. Xander caught her index finger and whipped it aside.**

"You made an enemy out of me, bitch.**"**

"You're upset about the photos?**"**

"Of course I am.**"**

"Raymond put me up to it. You have to believe me. He is a monster,**" Lindsey claimed. She leaned forward, placing both hands on Xander's chest this time. Lindsey batted her azure eyes, feigning innocence. Xander pictured smashing her skull against the mahogany desk.**

"Bullshit.**"**

"He wants to ruin your life. Like you have ruined his.**"**

"I'm starting to doubt that.**"**

"Connor still blackmails Raymond to this day. Raymond keeps having to funnel money to Connor. And that wouldn't been the case if you didn't drag a dead woman's body across state lines,**" Lindsey said. Her statement froze Xander's anger. Dread settled in. How did she know? Did Connor reveal that information in one of those taped sessions? No, if that information came out in such a fashion, an investigation would have been launched.**

"But wouldn't going on a crime spree threaten his career? His marriage?**"**

"You expect people to be rational? Most everyone falls victim to emotions if their presence is strong enough.**"**

"Let's say I do believe you. That doesn't mean you're not a willing accomplice.**"**

"I thought I told you that I'm being trapped.**"**

"You strike me as being the one that has seduced the man for your own gain. You can't fool me, bitch,**" Xander said. Lindsey hopped up onto the desk. She started swinging her legs as her eyes concentrated. Lindsey reached forward and grasped his hand, began to hold it in hers.**

"I hate to admit it. You're absolutely right. I used my natural charm to get this position. I willingly fucked Raymond for career advancement. But now he's outgrown his usefulness. I want to move on; however, he refuses to. He is blackmailing me. How ironic, isn't it?**" Lindsey explained. She placed Xander's hand on her cheek. Xander's weathered palm contrasted with the softness of her skin. Xander yanked back her hand, evoking a laugh.**

"Poor you. Tell someone who cares."

"I know empathy isn't your strong point."

"I don't dispense with sympathy with those that wrong me. You destroyed my relationship with the mother of my child. So keep giving your sob story; it's going to fall on deaf fucking ears," **Xander said. He backstepped to put more distance between Lindsey and himself. Xander searched for cameras to tell him he had fallen into another trap. Hunter already kicked him out of the house.**

"Don't worry. There are no cameras in here. We have much-needed privacy."

"You still dead set on seducing me? What's the point? More blackmail?"

"I don't like being refused. That's the point. You lie when you say that you don't feel the temptation. I hate liars. Especially when the lie messes with my self-esteem," **Lindsey said. The sweetness dissipated in her voice. Xander knew a crazy chick when he saw one. He didn't need a psychology degree to diagnose her problems, but she had plenty.**

"The answer is still a 'fuck no'."

"But I have a proposal. This time, I don't think you can refuse."

"There's nothing you can say or do for me."

"That's where you're woefully wrong. First of all, what is stopping me from calling the guards? You'll be arrested for trespassing and more. But that's the stick. The carrot? I'll help you get Raymond. I'll make sure he is alone and far from help so you can do whatever you please to the man," **Lindsey paused. She licked her lips as Xander processed the proposal. Lindsey hopped off the desk and pressed her body against Xander's.** "What's there to lose? You're separated. Hell, you can have some fun. It's a win-win."

"Being coerced to have sex isn't my definition of fun."

"The ball is in your court, Daddy."

Xander shivered at the pet name Lindsey dispensed.

"I take your silence as a 'yes'."

"You're messed up."

"That's rich coming from you." **Lindsey giggled. She sucked in a sharp breath before biting her bottom lip. Lindsey leaned up on her tiptoes and forced her lips onto Xander's,**

driving her tongue into his mouth. Xander gripped her waist, stopping his entire being from ejecting her across the room.

He felt sick.

Lindsey reeled back, a string of saliva connecting their mouths. Xander watched her triumphant grin as she unbuttoned her jeans to expose her white g-string. Was he really going through with this? Xander reached into his pocket. He ran his thumb over Hunter's engagement ring. Xander recognized this as a shortcut. He could strike again if he failed to stop Mike Christopher in time.

"Come on. You know you want this.**"**

"I don't want to hear you talk,**" Xander fired back.**

"Pretend all you want.**"**

Lindsey forced his hand out of his pocket and placed it against her crotch. She slid her thong aside, and Xander experienced her heat. Lindsey herded him towards the desk, where she reclaimed her seat. With both hands, Lindsey guided him down onto his knees. She positioned her legs over his shoulders. Xander stared at his fate. Disgust overwhelmed him. He couldn't protect his family behind bars. Xander would have Raymond where he wanted him. All he had to do was to submit to Lindsey's domineering lust.

"Give in.**"**

Lindsey placed her hand on the back of her head. Xander didn't resist. He sank slowly down and gave Lindsey her conquest. Xander knew he would never forget the sour taste. Her stench suffocated him. Lindsey started to grind against his face to assist his lackluster efforts. When she was satisfied, Xander became the embodiment of self-hate. Lindsey quickly slid herself back into her jeans.

Would Xander ever be able to look in the mirror?

Or worse, into the eyes of Hunter?

"I'll call you tomorrow. We'll execute the plan then. Aren't you glad you have me as your accomplice now?**"**

"Go fuck yourself,**" Xander responded.**

"You've already satisfied me quite well. I can't wait for us to take down Raymond together,**" Lindsey said. Lindsey hurried out of the office, swiping her bookbag as she left the office. Before she left the room, Lindsey blew him a mocking kiss.**

Xander remained sitting on the floor, battling the hollowness inside him. He knew he should be angry at the turn of events. But Xander ultimately experienced the sensation of defeat. What had he sacrificed? He gave up all the goodness he found in the past four years. Xander comforted himself by saying that this brings him closer to his objective. If this was the price to save his family, it was worth the cost. After all, this was all his fault.

"We need to get going,**" Avery said.**

"Where the fuck were you? I just got caught. I thought you were keeping watch?**"**

"She snuck up on me!**"**

"I couldn't find anything; however, I managed to get her to cooperate. I'm going to corner Raymond and get some answers,**" Xander decided. He collected himself, standing to his feet. Xander freed the USB drive from the computer. He approached Avery and the exit. Avery seemed relieved at the news.**

"Who cares about Raymond? I thought we were on the same page. It's Connor. It's been Connor all along.**"**

"Raymond must know where Connor is. According to her, Connor is still blackmailing Raymond. I plan on getting that information out of Raymond, one way or another,**" Xander offered Avery the half-truth. He didn't need Avery anymore. The computer turned out to be a bust. From here on out, Avery wouldn't be a variable anymore.**

"You trust that chick?**"**

"Not completely. But this is the only lead that I have.**"**

"I'll come too.**"**

"Let me handle this alone. I can't have you going off the handle and killing our lead,**" Xander said. In truth, he didn't want any more witnesses. Xander really didn't know what he was going to do to Raymond. Xander pictured a thousand scenarios in his head. The ultraviolent montage concerned Xander.**

"You better not leave me out to dry. We're partners.**"**

"The moment I find out where Connor is. You'll be the first to know.**"**

"Right..."

"We're in this together," **Xander lied.**