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.

"Babe!**" 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 read 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.

Here lies Xander Valentine.

Arms stretched wide. Nails driven through my palms. Crucified—dying not for your sins, but for mine.

Greed. Pride. Wrath.

Fall of Man didn't just defeat me. They propped me up on this cross, up high for the entire world to see my downfall. Romans, sending a warning to the company: this is the dawning of a new day—a new empire has emerged.

And that would be the case if I just left things there.

My back lies on the canvas. My eyes are wide open to this brutal reality. The spotlights sear my eyes, but they don't burn as much as this defeat. Why? I thought I braced myself for this possibility. I steeled myself deep down. Where is my belief that my acts were not in vain? Where is my conviction that the Thunderdome cracked the foundation of Fall of Man? Why do I feel nothing but this doubt chewing my insides apart?

Was I wrong all along?

*I can hear **her** laughing. That blonde bitch.*

Telling me she will always be right.

Telling me I will always fail.

I can't shut her out. She's living in my head—rent-free, dressing me down, always exposing me to these insecurities I can't seem to shake off.

There is a fine line between existential dread and ego death. One cripples you. The other sets you free.

But what if you're too proud to let go?

My identity isn't bent. It's broken and shattered. Wrestling crowned me young. The sheer dominance of my rookie year spoiled me—and poisoned me with expectations that I never felt I lived up to. In my head, this disappointment brewed—I chased after dreams but could never escape this feeling. I was stuck on a treadmill, never going the distance that I should have. That I never lived up to my full potential, that I won't go down as the greatest of all time. I will be second to the likes of Selena Frost and Syren. And that eats at me.

Some wrestlers age with grace. They accept that their time is up—some continue in this sport, complacent with the accolades and unbothered by the fact that they have lost a step. Some leave quietly. Some fade away.

Not me.

Inside, I'm screaming. I'm clawing. I'm raging. I don't know how to exist without winning. I'm not just the standard-bearer—I am the standard. Always have been. Always will be. And what's that standard? It all starts with winning. Every time I fall short, I rot from the inside. The void eats at me. Self-loathing sickens me. If I'm the Paragon of Violence... then I'm also the Paragon of sore losers.

Pettiness. Envious. All these ugly emotions swirl around me. This ache bothers me more than these bruises, these cuts, these burns. No matter how much I readied myself to leave the Thunderdome without the SCW World Championship, knowing that the belt isn't around my waist is leaving me empty inside. I feel hollow.

That void is a cancer spreading.

What stage is it?

Do I have a chance to survive?

I'm spiraling. I'm in a free fall. I'm crashing down to reality. I look around, and for the first time, I wonder if I'm one in the crowd. For the past three years, dread has gnawed at me. When I was told that I was one good hit away from retirement, panic swept over and has never left. Ever since then, I've been in a survival mood. I've been desperately holding onto this life.

Every hard blow to the head—my soul flinches.

Fear seizes me. I ask myself, is this the end?

Is this how my career is going to die?

Most importantly, will I be remembered as the second best?

But then I remember who I am.

I am Xander fucking Valentine. On paper, Selena Frost, Syren, Josh Hudson—heck, even James Evans—have more impressive resumes. More accolades. More accomplishment. But we all know if we go back and watch the tape. If we study the film. If we were actual students of the game and were honest with ourselves, no one was as dominant and as good as I was.

*As I **still** am.*

Losses are an outlier.

And when I lose, it's a headline.

And that speaks volumes. No one is held to the same standard that I am. And you know what? I wouldn't have it any other way.

And there's a reason why they place me on a pedestal.

Earlier tonight, I died for my sins. And common, lesser men would roll over. They would wave the white flag. They would limp into the Taking Hold of the Flame battle royal, wallowing in a sea of self-pity with their tails in between their legs. But that's not me. That's never going to be me. This loss hurts. Every loss does. But each loss compels me to be better. To do better. To fight harder.

I don't give up.

*I **never** fucking surrender. I know that. You know that. We all know that.*

Every time you knock me down, I get back up.

Because I know if I stay down, it's all over. I refuse to die.

Taking Hold of the Flame is my resurrection. I'm not going to save the world; I'm going to save myself. Tonight, despite all the odds, despite all the damage this body has sustained, despite all the demons clawing inside of me— I'm going to rise again and do one thing that eluded me my entire wrestling career— win the damn battle royal.

Tonight—I'm going to pull ahead of Selena and Syren.

Tonight—I'm going to do what they never could.

Tonight—my victory in the battle royal will be my declaration that I'm better than them… and better than everyone who ever stepped foot in this ring.

And by doing so, I'll deny them the one accolade that still haunts them. This holy grail has eluded all three of us. We've all tasted it. But none of us have ever held it. Not until tonight—when I dump the last bastard over the top rope and stake my claim to the SCW World Championship… and the Rise to Greatness main event.

Selena, when I win—not if, but when—I will thank you for giving me purpose—thank you for those motivational words you shared with me this week. And Selena, no matter how you are going to pretend to be unbothered by my victory at your expense, I know deep down inside you will be fuming, tasting the humiliation that I've experienced. The self-loathing that I've endured. The void will seize you. You will be chasing me.

Mark my words, Selena.

Tonight, I will tear the Face of SCW right off.

And all because you couldn't help yourself but taunt me. And you said I have an ego...

At Rise to Greatness, you will be looking from the outside in.

You lit the fire, Selena.

But I'm going to be the man to take down Fall of Man. All by myself.

At Rise to Greatness, I'm firing my next volley. Fuck it, let 'em revel in their victory tonight. But their celebration? It's short-lived. Once again, they failed to finish the job. Failed to end me. They haven't learned their lesson. And that's their fatal mistake. Hold onto that SCW World Championship tight. But I'm still here—that vengeful spirit that will be haunting your careers forever. I'm right on your heels, boys. I'm coming in for the kill.

They fail to realize.

I'm not the hunted—I'm the hunter.

Just because I missed my shot doesn't mean this is over.

There are still bullets left in the chamber, my friends.

And I never miss twice!

And I don't care how many I have to fight through. Be it thirty-nine. Or just one. I'm going to toss as many assholes as I have to so I can be there, waiting for Fall of Man in the main event of Rise to Greatness. On the biggest stage of them all, I'm going to erect the gallows— and Fall of Man? They will be swinging by their necks, their feet dancing on thin air.

Heaven's dream is going to come crashing down.

Right now might be my darkest hour, but this is my story, and I'm going to prevail.

I'm going to snatch victory in the jaws of defeat.

And I'm going to give them one more reason to remember my name. In my current shape and condition, no one is giving me a chance. They forget who I am. They are too fascinated with the fresh faces. Their imagination is telling them that maybe a Ryan LeCavalier will pull off the heist. Perhaps their logic is telling them that Josh Hudson is going to repeat.

But they're going to be reminded of who I am.

What I am capable of!

I might have lost the battle tonight, but I haven't lost the war.

I might have stumbled, but I'm still on my feet.

And as long as I draw breath into these lungs— as long as this heart beats— as long as I have the strength to swing these fists! I'm capable of anything.

*Some might call it **inevitable**!*

*Some might ask you to **believe it**!*

*Me? I don't ask. **I prove it.***

All I can say is steer clear or get crushed by my resolve.

Move or be destroyed.

There is not a soul in that ring— on this roster or otherwise— that will stop me from winning the Taking Hold of the Flame.

Not now.

Not ever.

Fade to Black.