

The clouds churned above, mirroring the mess twisting inside Xander's soul. Lightning danced in the sky to the West. The flickers of light carved out the shape of a monstrosity approaching. The rain might not have started yet, but Xander didn't want to get trapped in the downpour. He sensed the electricity in the air—his hair stood on end.

Xander hurried up the cracked sidewalk to Cadogan's front door. He tried the handle, but as he expected, Cadogan kept the door locked. Xander grunted. He turned towards the street while rapping his knuckles against the metal; his icy blue eyes darted, vigilant for any shadows that might make a sudden movement. Blown leaves scraped against concrete. A car zipped down the road. Xander steeled himself for a drive-by; however, the car passed without slowing.

His heart continued to race. Xander couldn't relax.

He cursed under his breath, wishing the old man would hurry the fuck up.

Xander jumped when Cadogan finally cracked open the door. A chain dangled between the gap. Even Cadogan showed signs of caution, knowing damn well that Connor was on the move. His renewed commitment to murderous ways didn't surprise anyone; however, their failure days prior put everyone on high alert. And Cadogan easily made Connor's hit list.

The only reason Xander still breathed was because he hadn't suffered enough.

"Xander, what the hell are you doing here at this time of night?"

"Let me in. We have to talk."

"I've been ignoring your calls for a reason," Cadogan croaked. Before Xander could snap, the door slammed shut. A moment later, it swung open. Cadogan walked away without a word, giving Xander an unspoken invitation to enter.

The only light in the living area came from the overhead in the kitchen. Boxes stacked up to one side of the door. Garbage bags on the other. When Cadogan turned, Xander saw a ghost. The detective's beard seemed more unkempt than usual. The bags underneath his eyes could sink a ship. The stench of scotch and smoke stayed in the air. On the table, a bottle stood sentry—half-empty, no glass in sight. A cigarette burned itself out in the ashtray beside it.

"You look like shit," Xander commented.

"And you don't?"

"You've been ignoring my calls. What the fuck, Cadogan? Things went downhill. We messed up; however, Connor has Trin. This is not the time to go on a bender," **Xander barked. His fists clenched as he posted up on the aging detective. He felt like the last man still in the fight.**

"It's over."

"What do you mean it's over?"

"For me, that is. I'm out, Xander."

"The fuck you are."

"Xander, please don't make this any harder for me," **Cadogan paused, staggering over to the bottle. After a liberal swig, he spun around with a sardonic smile.** "The higher-ups heard of my escapade. They know I went off-script. Tracked everything I did with you. I'm toast. I leave for Denver in the morning to turn in my gun and badge. If I don't bow out now, my career's finished."

"That's it? That's your excuse. I thought you wanted to stop Connor. Something about justice, if I recall."

"I have a family."

"I do, too! And they are not safe until we bring down my son!"

"I bled for the cause, big guy. I went to bat for you. Don't give me that shit—I've put my ass on the line more times than I can count." **Cadogan shoved the bottle into Xander's chest. Xander hesitated. The smell alone made his eyes water. But he knocked back a mouthful as he listened to the old man say the rest:** "California. I bailed you out, didn't I? This past weekend, I gave you the best chance at success. And your little meltdown afterward, I kept you out of joining Lindsey behind bars. Don't you act like I haven't done anything for you and your family."

"But Trinity!"

"Damn it, Xander. You don't think this decision is eating at me."

"Then stay. See this through to the end."

"I can't!"

"You won't."

"Same fucking difference," **Cadogan snapped. His expression softened when he saw Xander's face wilted with desperation.**

Xander stumbled towards the torn-up recliner, handing back the bottle to Cadogan as he passed. He dropped down and placed his hands on his head. Xander took a sharp breath and craned his neck back, eyes locked on the popcorn ceiling.

"What now? She's fucked," **Xander said.**

Cadogan sighed.

"There's a statewide manhunt. He's not getting far."

"There was a small army of Marshals, and he got away scot-free. Do you think I believe your cop buddies are going to save the day? If anything, you've proven that justice ain't going to save anyone," **Xander spat.**

His fist slammed on the tray. The cigarette hopped out of the ashtray onto the floor. Cadogan stepped up, stamping out the smoldering cigarette, mouthing: *there goes my security deposit.*

"Listen here," **the detective wagged his finger at Xander.** "If there's one thing I know about your son, it's that he's a cocky bastard."

"And?"

"The son of a bitch assumes he already won. And in my years on this Earth, I've learned that's when they slip. Xander, he's going to mess up! While you might think he's a boy genius, not one of his plans has succeeded to date," **Cadogan said, his tone low yet sharp. He freed the pack of Malboros from his shirt pocket and hammered out another cigarette.**

"What if it's too late?"

"Connor even says that he wants to suffer. He ain't killing her."

"He plans on making me watch."

"Bingo. And that's one hell of a gamble to take. Right now, he's dragging this out, so you anguish. And the cherry on top? That's when Connor will come out in the open and try to put on the show. That right there, big guy—that's your opening." **Cadogan took a long drag on the cigarette as he watched Xander process his theory. He shoved his free hand into his pocket. The detective prayed he got through to the despairing father.**

Xander glanced up, eyes glassy, jaw clenched. "What? I have to wait around with my thumb up my ass?"

"Christ, you're impatient as ever."

"My whole life, I've been told to avoid the punch."

"Yeah, it sucks. You're waiting for that phone call. Meanwhile, fear's eating you alive. But if you force your hand, Connor might use it to his advantage," **Cadogan started, wagging his finger. Xander groaned in protest, climbing to his feet; however, the detective stepped forward and clamped a hand on his shoulder. "Patient, Xander. Learn from the best and rope-a-dope."**

"I ain't no Mummhad Ali. More of an Iron Mike."

"And you see where Tyson ended up?"

"Alright. Alright. I'll play it your way," **Xander responded, removing Cadogan's hand.**

Cadogan turned to conceal the relief washing over his face. The last thing he needed was Xander to be a loose cannon and make matters worse. As much as he hated to admit it, Cadogan came to care for the man—whether out of pity or that rare kind of respect one earned by surviving hell.

"You're going to miss me, aren't you?" **Xander shrugged his shoulders.**

"As much as a Dad misses wiping shit off his kid's ass."

"Don't remind me of what I'm missing out on."

"She'll come around. Not for you. For the boy. Don't waste it when the opportunity knocks," **Cadogan said. Both men quietly understood that it was less a prediction and more an attempt at being nice. Either way, Xander graciously accepted that message of hope.**

When Cadogan turned, Xander was already standing close. For a moment, they stared each other down with an awkward pause. To Cadogan's surprise, Xander extended his hand. The sleeve of his plaid shirt slid up, revealing the Executioner tattoo inked on Xander's arm amidst a field of skulls.

"If I don't see you again, thank you, old man."

"Bring her home, Xander. Safe, if you can."

"Once again, I'm relying on a puncher's chance," **Xander dryly answered.**

Cadogan's hand gripped Xander's tightly. Xander turned to leave, but the detective jerked back his shoulder.

"I don't know why you'd want to; however, if you want to talk to the girl, she's at the local lockup. This might be the last chance to talk to her before she's transferred out of state," Cadogan revealed. Xander tried to stay stoic, but his brows furrowed anyway. The detective only smiled and patted him on the arm.

"Thanks," Xander said before he headed out into the night.

Maybe it was the brownish hue of aging plexiglass. Maybe it was the lack of makeup. But Lindsey looked rundown—derelict, ten years older. The picturesque valleys of her youthful face bore signs of a war zone. Bags hung from her bloodshot eyes. Her clogged pores became craters, littering her face. Lack of lipstick revealed chapped lips.

When Xander stepped into the visitation room, he almost didn't recognize her.

Xander heard the sound of his Timbaland boots slapping the smooth concrete beneath him over the murmuring of the nearby booths. He slid onto the metal stool, barely fitting underneath the small counter. Cramp. Claustrophobic. Still better than a holding cell—but not by much. He was no zoo animal. He never wanted to go back inside.

Lindsey's exasperated sigh crackled over the phone receiver.

Were either ready for this conversation?

Neither broke the silence, allowing for the mechanical ticking of the clock to dominate. Lindsey started, her azure eyes flickered with remorse only to flare into frustration. Xander winced. The shadowless room with its flat fluorescent lighting seemed to be watching his every movement—not to mention the guard standing nearby. What did he come here to say? What did he want to hear? A part of him regretted coming altogether.

Lindsey mouthed something, but the speaker didn't quite pick up her muffled cry.

"What did you say?" Xander strained his eyes to read lips.

"I'm sorry." She flinched at the sound of her own voice. A single tear dropped down her cheek.

"You're sorry?"

"For everything. Most importantly, about your daughter. If you want anyone to blame, blame me—"

"No!" **Xander barked, rising slightly in his seat. A guard glanced over. Xander sank back into his seat, voice lowered,** "I don't blame you for anything."

"It was my plan."

"Fuck it was. We all agreed."

"I led Connor to her."

"And we all failed to stop him. This is on all of us," **Xander decided. He anchored his elbows on the counter. Xander leaned forward, his light eyes peering into hers.** "Don't beat yourself up over this. You got other battles to fight. This is not your war anymore."

"Why did you come here, Xander? If not for an apology."

"I don't know. To see you."

"Once again, you're acting like we're lovers separated by fate."

"I know we're nothing of the sort," **Xander said. He shifted backward to put more distance between them, even if the glass separated them. He glanced away.** "Doesn't change the fact we went through hell together."

"That's comforting to know that you care. But the things I did to you and your family."

"You're not the only one who acted like a piece of shit."

"But—"

"I've done some horrible things. You know that. I sense your regret. If I can't forgive you, then how can I ever forgive myself?" **Xander thought aloud. Her lips curled just slightly. A glimmer of hope bloomed in her eyes. Was that why he came? To forgive her properly.**

Xander clicked his tongue in frustration. He ran his fingers through his jet-black hair, rough and restless, like a dog with fleas. Xander dropped his jaw as he searched for words in the air as if his mouth would whip out its tongue and snatch them like a damn frog.

"You were the catalyst. This whole episode showed me that there is a lot more to do before I can say I'm a good man who is worthy of happiness," **Xander revealed, leveling his eyes with hers again. Lindsey's hands folded over her chest as if his words broke her heart. He**

neither wanted nor needed her sympathy. The devil made his bed, and it was time to lie in it.

"You are a good man. You just don't know it."

"I'm a liar."

"Aren't we all? At least, you admit to it."

"I'm a brute."

"There you go, lying again." **Lindsey stuck out her tongue, indicating playfulness; however, Xander sensed the sincerity beneath. She pressed her palm to the glass—gentle and tentative.** "There's kindness inside of you, Xander. I've seen it. You just have to figure out how to let it out."

Xander gave her a long, lingering look before standing. Lindsey fell back onto her stool to look up at the towering man that she might never see again. They both knew this was goodbye, but neither bid farewell. Xander nodded to the guard on his way out. Moments later, the brisk autumn air slapped him out of whatever heavy thoughts consumed him.

"How is she?" **A voice sliced through the silence like a scalpel.**

Xander turned. McGowan. He stood in the glow of one of the street lamps, one hand shoved in the pocket of his wool overcoat, the other cradling a Starbucks coffee like it was a football.

"Surprised? Not as much as I was to see you paying a visit. If the media caught wind, you'd be the front page of the tabloids, big guy," **McGowan raised his free hand—a finger gun pointed right at Xander's heart. He glanced sideways and released a short laugh as he stepped closer.**

"Let them feast."

"Let them eat cake? That's what she said before she lost her head."

"What are you doing here, McGowan? Didn't expect you to crawl out of your sunny hole in California," **Xander countered as his attorney dropped his arm to his side. He knew that he should trust the insights of the man who had become his fixer. Every rich and powerful man needed someone like McGowan. Xander hated to admit he was no different.**

"You're paying me to represent your new charity case and navigate her through the shitstorm she got herself in."

"Right."

"Unless you changed your mind about funding her defense. I do recall advising you to steer clear of Miss Monroe's legal woes. So it would be a welcome devel—" **McGowan started.**

Xander didn't let him finish. "I made a promise."

McGowan's eyes widened slightly as he raised the coffee to conceal his resigned sigh. Xander saw right through him—something flickered behind his eyes. Uncertainty? Guilt?

"What? Thought you liked it when I made bad decisions. Keeps your pockets full. Good for business. Yeah?" **Xander's gaze bore a hole into McGowan's forehead. The man shifted uncomfortably in his suit.**

"Typically, I'm all for what's best for business."

"But?"

"I've dealt with dangerous people, Xander. You near the top of 'em. But I always felt like I was protected. Safe. Out of the blast radius. Now? I don't know what your son is going to do next, and helping his ex-boo out of a jam might have put a target on my back," **McGowan explained, his usual bravado crashing down into something just shy of a plea. Fear? For all the monsters McGowan had handled in his tenure, he was frightened by Connor.**

Xander blinked in disbelief.

McGowan pulled at his collar, reading Xander's expression of displeasure. "The kid is something else, Xander. You can't deny that."

"He's dangerous, but he's only one man," **Xander spat.**

"One man who embarrassed a small army of Marshals. And yourself. He's a savant in the worst kind of way."

"An idiot savant."

"Don't you see what he's doing here, Xander? His play?" **McGowan shot his hands out, discarding the mostly empty coffee onto the ground as he stepped forward. Xander didn't answer.**

"He's knocking out your pillars of support. First, Hunter. And when you tried to make do with Lindsey... he tried to take her out, too. Cadogan's out. Trinity's taken. The only person left in your corner is me," **McGowan explained. Color flushed the lawyer's face. Xander noticed**

that McGowan's breathing had become erratic. Connor's action rattled McGowan. That didn't sit right with Xander. All this time, Xander trusted the unwavering nature of McGowan to help him out of a bind.

Now?

Now, that safety net was fraying.

"You want out?" Xander barked.

"I didn't say that. I'm here, ain't I? All by myself."

"Then what's all of this?"

"Courage ain't cheap. If I'm gonna stand this close to the flame, I need to know the price is right and the check clears," McGowan's sharp green eyes stared at Xander's boots. He leaned back, a snake mesmerized by the tune of dollar bills. Xander clenched his jaw. He didn't have a flute.

"Do your damn job, McGowan."

"But—"

"Have I ever stiffed you?"

"You haven't."

"You're looking for a damn out. And I ain't giving you one." The corners of Xander's mouth tugged his lips into a tight smile, somewhere between a sneer and a dare.

McGowan went to speak, but Xander silenced him with a shake of his head.

"A scared girl is waiting. She needs your help. We both know she's capable of contributing to this world—some way, somehow. Remember when you first bailed me out of my cage years ago? Maybe it was the money Chad offered. Maybe it wasn't. But you saw something, didn't you?" Xander said. Speaking those thoughts aloud served as words of affirmation. He almost believed his speech. Keyword *almost*.

McGowan shifted uncomfortably, both hands in his pockets now. Somewhere nearby, a car backfired. Neither man flinched. McGowan instead peered down at the broken pavement before whistling a bomb drop. By the time McGowan raised his chin to meet Xander's gaze again, something transpired.

"You've changed, Xander."

"Have I? I don't feel different."

"You no longer need to be saved. You're the savior."

Those words left Xander speechless. McGowan stepped past Xander, heading toward the jail's entrance, clamping a hand on Xander's shoulder as he passed. Both men exchanged glances. They both had jobs today. Messes to clean.

"I'll take care of this, big man. You go save your daughter."

McGowan's words lingered in the breeze long after he disappeared through the jail doors. Xander stood there. Suddenly, he felt very much alone. But with his solitude came strength. He didn't have to worry about anyone holding him back now. No one stood in his way from saving his daughter and stopping his son.

No more restraints.