

Patient Zero

CHAPTER 1

The Smell of Blood Before the Shot

Africa always smells like earth. The heavy, hot air mixes with the scent of dust, burning, and something else—spicy, decaying, alive. I stood with my legs slightly apart, hands in my pockets. A machete hung at my side—my loyal companion for the past ten years. My fingers nervously clutched a lighter inside my jacket pocket.

— The goods arrived yesterday, — Claude told me. He spoke French, but his accent made my skin crawl. I hate these frog-eaters, though Claude is a badass, and I'd barely call him French if not for that damn accent. — You gonna check them?

I let out a loud chuckle, lifting the corner of my lip slightly, then spat to the side, making it clear exactly how I felt about that question. My voice, hoarse and scraped raw by years of smoke, came out like sandpaper:

— Why the hell would I? Your shipments have always been clean. — I turned my face toward him, squinting immediately from the sun. — Or do I have a reason to be worried?

Claude smirked. Slowly, lazily, like a man who knows a little more than he says.

— No reason at all, — he shoved another greasy bite of something into his mouth and narrowed his eyes. — But you look damn suspicious.

I grimaced.

— It's this fucking sun, — I muttered, running my tongue over my dry lips. My throat felt like it was stuffed with sand, and the longer I stood under this African heat, the more it seemed like the air was getting even heavier, denser.

Claude smirked lazily and wiped his greasy fingers on his pants. He reminded me of a hyena—something in his grin, in the way he carried himself, in that ever-narrowed gaze that seemed to be testing me for weakness.

— You're always bitching, Coulter. Maybe you should've been born in Norway?

I chuckled again but didn't answer. Norway, huh? Why the hell not.

My eyes dropped to the wooden table, cracked from the heat and time. Leftover food was scattered across it—a half-gnawed chunk of some strange meat with greasy dough soaked in fat and something else, faint, unpleasant. A crumpled napkin glistened with sauce nearby, and for a second, I thought the grease on it was moving, like it had a life of its own.

A shiver ran through me.

A heavy knot twisted in my stomach. Not sharp, not painful—yet. Just something heavy settling inside me, like lead.

— Disgusting, — I muttered, pushing the plate away.

Claude grinned, wiping his lips with the back of his hand.

— What, getting soft, Coulter? Since when are you so picky?

I gritted my teeth. I wasn't some stuck-up asshole when it came to food, but something about that meat made my stomach turn on instinct. Like my body figured out first that I'd just swallowed something that should never have gone inside me.

Claude and the locals were shoveling this shit down like it was nothing, and I'd never had an issue with African food before—not that I was a fan of it either.

— Shut the fuck up, Jackal, — I barked, feeling something stir inside me. Some would call it “intuition,” but I call it the smell of blood before the shot.

Something was off, but I couldn't put my finger on it. The weapons deal was routine, and I was only here to make sure everything ran smoothly and, more importantly, to remind them who was really in charge.

To make damn sure they didn't forget that Vince “Red” Coulter got that nickname for a reason—and that they'd better not even think about screwing me over.

Ah, fuck it. Time to move. I'd deal with whatever came up on the fly and hope this gut feeling was just the heat and last night's whiskey kicking my ass.

A sharp twist hit my stomach again, and I slammed my fist on the table. Dust rose, tickling my nose, settling on my sleeves, but I barely noticed. The world tilted—just slightly, half a degree off—but enough for me to feel it.

— Shit... — I exhaled, running a hand over my face. My eyes burned.

Claude raised an eyebrow, slow, like he found this whole thing amusing.

— You don't look so good, Coulter, — he clicked his tongue and smirked that damn hyena grin again. — You sure you don't want to check the goods? What if something's off?

I gritted my teeth.

— Stop talking bullshit, Claude. — My voice dropped even lower, raspier, as I pushed myself up from the table. — Get your ass up, let's go.

Claude stretched lazily, making a show of taking his time before finally getting to his feet.

— Whatever you say, Red, — he drawled, licking his greasy fingers. — But you look like you need a doctor more than you need a deal.

I inhaled sharply through my nose, feeling like I'd just sucked in even more sand, and stepped past Claude toward the wooden crates where the rifles were waiting for their future owners. Each step pounded in my skull, a dull thud echoing like someone was beating a drum deep inside my head. The heat, which had been just a backdrop before, now burned under my skin, and I could feel sweat dripping down my back, soaking my shirt.

— Why the fuck is this still here and not in the damn truck?! — I shouted on purpose, knowing the local loaders—or whatever the hell these slackers were—wouldn't understand my English, but I wanted to make sure they got the message.

Claude strolled over lazily, knocking his knuckles against the crate's lid.

— Relax, Red. You know how much they love taking their sweet time around here.

Fuck, this heat. I wiped another drop of sweat from my forehead and glanced down at Claude, feeling how my six-foot-three frame gave me an undeniable edge in any argument. He just flashed that ridiculous grin at me, baring his yellowed teeth.

Why the fuck is he smiling?

— Tick-tock, Jackal. We do the job, we get the fuck out before I melt here, — I growled, feeling my stomach twist again, like someone had shoved a burning coal inside and was slowly turning it, savoring the sound of my teeth grinding together. I flinched slightly from the cramp, and my machete—the one I took off some dumb fuck when I first set foot in Africa ten years ago—clinked at my side. Cold and reliable, just like I used to be on my best days.

Fuck, I knew eating that street market shit was a bad idea. Claude was used to the local food, but he sure as hell could tell I was feeling "a little" off right now. It's just the heat, just this goddamn lack of hygiene. I'll shit it out tomorrow, and it'll be fine.

— The fuck are you staring at?! I told you to move, goddammit! — I barked, feeling anger start to boil over.

Claude smirked and smacked the crate, signaling the locals. A couple of lanky guys in baggy pants moved toward the load, lifting the crates. Yeah, he ran things here, I wouldn't argue. But this was still my business. I needed to come here more often—seemed like they were starting to forget who was actually in charge of all this shit.

I pulled out my lighter, flicked the lid open, and lit a cigarette. Felt better already. Cigarettes always helped—always had. Even as a kid, back in some dusty Texas shithole, I'd sneak behind the barn, sucking on cheap Marlboros stolen from my older brother, feeling the tremble in my hands fade as the bitter taste drowned out my father's shouting from the house.

Later, smoking became a ritual—the flick of my Zippo, the one I bought twenty years ago after my first robbery, inhale, exhale, and just like that, I could keep my shit together, even when the air reeked of blood and smoke. Now, the smoke filled my lungs, pushing out that cursed weight in my stomach, and I exhaled, watching the gray rings dissolve into the scorching air.

Claude stood there, watching the crates get moved, lost in thought. Then he glanced at me, clicked his tongue, squinting lazily, before flashing that signature smirk of his.

— You know, Red, from the right angle, your scar looks a hell of a lot like a map of the Congo. Maybe it's a sign? Maybe fate's telling you to become a local dictator instead of just selling guns.

I didn't answer. Not because I didn't want to—no. Something inside me was still twisting, but not as sharp, not as persistent. Fuck knows, maybe I really was just overheated. I don't remember ever getting sick from anything that wasn't booze mixed with a good dose of drugs.

And as for the scar? I was proud of it.

It wasn't just a mark—it was proof I'd been through hell and walked out breathing. A reminder of some dumbass who thought the guy who pulls the knife first wins the fight. He was wrong. I barely survived that night, but I learned the lesson—if you're gonna cut, you go straight for the throat.

That scar always reminded me that there's no justice in this world—only cold calculation and the ones who strike first.

— Let's move, — I growled, flicking the cigarette to the ground and grinding it under my boot, watching as the last crate got loaded into the truck.

They were quick.

We headed toward the black SUV parked nearby, our boots grinding mercilessly into the scorching ground, kicking up dust with each step like giants stomping through an endless desert. My head was pounding, but the moment I dropped into the passenger seat, it eased up.

The SUV's air conditioning roared like an old beast, but it did its job—the heat that had been suffocating me from the outside finally started to retreat. Sweat, sticky and salty, still trickled down my temples, but inside this metal box on wheels, I could finally breathe. The throbbing in my skull dulled.

"Yeah, just the fucking heat... Or maybe that cursed meat really is trying to finish me off."

I glanced at Claude, who lazily flopped into the driver's seat, slamming the door like he didn't give a shit whether this junkheap fell apart right under us.

— Still alive, Red? — he asked, flashing that damn hyena grin of his—the kind that made me want to either punch him in the face or just look the other way. He twisted the key in the ignition, and the engine growled to life, drowning out the dusty wind rattling against the windows.

— Shut the fuck up, Jackal, — I muttered, feeling that whatever the hell had been messing with me was finally wearing off. Strength came rushing back, even more than before. I leaned back against the seat, closing my eyes for a second.

"Fucking Africa. What the hell made me start doing business here?"

But this place was a goddamn goldmine, and I wasn't about to walk away from a pie that had practically fallen into my lap. The job was simple, just like I'd said—get there, unload, get paid. Everything was planned and polished to perfection over the years, as much as it could be in this kind of business. I'd been running shit here for ten years, and Claude sure as hell wasn't a rookie either.

And yet, goddammit... why was that gnawing feeling still sitting in my chest, whispering that something was off?

CHAPTER 2

Home, Sweet Home

The airplane droned monotonously as its engines tore through the clouds hanging over Texas at high speed. I stared out the window, trying to make out anything in that white-gray mass, which reminded me more of one of those fucked-up paintings they put in modern art museums. Not a damn thing in sight, not even a hint of something resembling land.

I took another drag of my cigarette and exhaled the smoke toward the vent. In business class, you could do pretty much anything, and I'd paid enough for the flight attendants to pretend they didn't notice the smell. Besides, I was flying alone. Alone. Always alone. Fuck extra people, especially when you've got money.

The deal had gone perfectly. Even better than I expected. The crates were gone faster than planned, and the local thugs were so pleased when they saw me that they threw in a bonus on top of the agreed amount. Extra money is never a bad thing. Especially when it's paid for a war happening far from your home.

I should have felt satisfied. The sense that everything had gone right, that money was flowing into my pockets, that the supply chain had expanded. I even locked in new routes. More weapons, more profit. It was a success.

But what I didn't like—what was fucking with me—was this strange feeling of unease lodged in my chest like a rotten splinter. Everything was clean. Clean, for fuck's sake! No ambush, no betrayal. No unexpected variables. And yet...

I ran my finger along my cheek, tracing the scar Claude had called the Congo Map. Bullshit. That damn smell of blood right before a shot. It was there. In Africa. But the shot never came. That's what pissed me off. My gut never failed me—otherwise, I'd already be a corpse, not sitting here in business class, sipping a cigarette.

My hand was shaking... Fuck, what the hell?! What's wrong with me? Everything went perfectly! Even better than I planned. Maybe it was just exhaustion? Overheating? Or maybe that meat I ate back there actually fucked with my brain?

I crushed the cigarette into the ashtray and looked out the window again. The gray shit had been replaced by patches of land. A patchwork quilt of fields, thin threads of roads, scars of dried-up rivers. I could already see highways, rundown hangars, clusters of trucks, and fuel tanks. Houston. Home.

I clenched my teeth. Home? Ha. The last time I felt like I had a home, I was maybe ten. Back when my father wasn't a full-blown drunk, my mother hadn't run off with some trucker, and I didn't yet know what it was like to sleep with a knife under my pillow.

And now... now my "home" was a warehouse on the outskirts, where I kept my cash, weapons, and a few people who knew how to keep their mouths shut. That's my real estate portfolio.

Oh sure, go ahead and cry now, Red! Perfect fucking time to start thinking about how you ended up here.

Ended up where? Being a rich bastard who spits on the rules and can afford anything while my whore of a mother rots somewhere in the dusty past with another trucker who promised her the stars, and my piece-of-shit father, who dumped me on the street at ten, is now eating worms after poisoning himself with cheap booze?

I earned everything myself, goddammit. I tore this life out with my teeth like a wolf chewing off its own leg in a trap.

I remember setting that damn barn on fire in Austin when I was eighteen—with those two dumbasses inside who thought they could screw me over after our first big weed deal. One of them gave me this scar. They screamed as the flames licked their legs, and I stood outside, taking a drag off my cigarette, watching the smoke rise into the sky. Calm. Serene. And most importantly, satisfied with myself.

And now what?! Sitting here in business class, cash in my pocket, whiskey in my throat, and still, it feels like a rat is gnawing at my ribs. Like someone's about to fuck me over—or already has. I knew this feeling, it always worked, always! But now it felt more like paranoia than instinct. Something was off. Shapeless. Without a clear reason.

I sighed, rubbed my neck, feeling the tension creeping under my fingers. I needed to get rid of this feeling. Let it go. Run it through my head a couple of times and convince myself that I was just fucking exhausted these past few months.

— Gotta go to some whores, — I muttered under my breath, staring at my reflection in the porthole. Staring back at me was the same old Red Coulter — tall, grim bastard with a burned-out gaze, a receding hairline with patches of gray showing through, and a scar on my cheek that had long become part of my face, like a damn calling card.

— You really are a dangerous son of a bitch, Red, — I muttered to myself and smirked.

Alright. The plan was simple.

Land, head straight to my "office" — a warehouse on the outskirts of Houston. Check on things, see how business is going. Then... fuck it, maybe hit up some whores if that'll help me unwind. Whiskey, smoke, a couple of hours to shut off — and I'd be back in shape.

I clenched my fist.

Didn't like this feeling.

...

Stepping out of the airport, I took a deep breath. Texas greeted me with a familiar cocktail — gasoline, asphalt, and sunbaked dust, crisp as hell. Heat. Yeah, there was heat here too, but unlike Africa, this one felt like home. Grimacing, I ran a hand down my face. Needed a smoke. Again. Goddamn habit, but I had no plans of quitting, even if it killed me before some dumb fuck's revolver did.

Taking a deep drag, I spotted two goons heading my way. Tom and Billy, aka Grave and Snake, right where they were supposed to be — just outside the crowd, but close enough for me to notice. Both had their own distinct looks: Grave was like an ancient slab of granite, impossible to move, and Snake... well, he lived up to his name. He was like a prairie viper — small, venomous, always squinting like he was sizing up the best moment to go for the throat. But he was my snake, just like Tom.

I exhaled the smoke and walked toward them, feeling solid ground under my feet again after the long flight.

— Welcome back, boss, — Billy grinned, chewing his ever-present gum. His eyes sparkled with mischief. I knew him too well. His brain was always spinning some scheme. Billy never missed a chance to skim off the top. A little cut from a deal here, shady side hustles with local dealers there, playing both sides when it suited him. He was slippery, cunning, patient. For now. He thought I didn't notice. Thought he could juggle words and keep a grin on his face and slip through the cracks.

I looked at him with my usual indifference.

— You look sour, Red. Why so gloomy? You got your money, came back in one piece. Not everyone gets a vacation like that, you know.

I sighed, exhaled smoke.

— Just don't get too happy too soon, Snake, — I said sharply but calmly, my face unreadable. — Your ass is always looking for trouble.

Billy grinned wider, flashing his teeth.

— Aw, boss, why don't you love me? I'm like a loyal dog.

— A loyal dog? — I smirked, shaking my head. — Don't mix yourself up with Grave. At least he's got real fangs.

Billy clutched his chest theatrically, playing up the mock heartbreak.

— Always like this, boss. All these years together, and you still don't believe in my loyalty.

Tom stayed silent, as always. Just stood there in his usual dark sunglasses, watching. Now, if there was anyone who really was a loyal dog, it was him. I'd pulled him off death row once, and he never forgot it. He'd looked like a cornered wolf back then. Broken, but not beaten. And when I walked into that room, reeking of sweat and metal, he just lifted his head and looked at me, already knowing exactly who I was. Grave didn't ask why I was there. Didn't question what I wanted. He just understood. I bought his

freedom. Not cheap, but worth every penny. And in return, I got a man who'd never break, never sell me out, never betray me.

We moved toward the car. Tom behind the wheel, me up front, Billy, of course, in the back.

— Where to? — Tom asked, eyes on the road as I lit another cigarette.

— The office, — I answered shortly, blowing smoke out the cracked window.

Billy, of course, couldn't resist chiming in.

— Oh, good call, boss, — he drawled with a smirk. — Gotta check if our little hens are still laying golden eggs.

There was amusement in his voice, almost carelessness, but I knew Billy too well to fall for it. He never said shit without a reason. There was always something hidden behind his words. Always.

I slowly turned my head toward him, exhaling another cloud of smoke.

— You sure you're not one of the hens yourself, Snake?

He laughed.

— Ah, fuck off, Red, — he grinned. — We're family.

Family. I turned back to the road, biting down on my cigarette. Yeah, family... Except my first family threw me out on the streets, and in my second one, you couldn't afford to get too comfortable — the weak got eaten first.

CHAPTER 3

Whores, Cash, and Whiskey

Sprawled out on the leather couch, I exhaled deeply, releasing tension along with the bitter smoke of my cigarette. The strong, harsh whiskey burned my throat, spreading a cozy warmth through my chest, mixing with the laziness and fatigue after the flight. My head buzzed slightly, but it was a pleasant sensation—warm, dense, like something wrapping around me, stripping away all the built-up stress.

The music pulsed from the speakers, low bass filling the room with muffled vibrations that resonated in my chest. The dim lamp light cast shadows on the velvet curtains, blending with the thick scent of women's perfume, tobacco, and the leather upholstery of the couch.

I closed my eyes, feeling the hot lips of a sultry Latina wrap around my dick, moving slowly, almost lazily, as if savoring every motion. Her tongue slid along, teasing, sending a sweet tension through my stomach that spread deep into my lower back. She knew what she was doing. Her lips were soft, wet, and her hands—warm, hot—gently held my thighs, keeping me in place without forcing, yet not letting me pull away either.

Delicate fingers trailed across my hairy chest. The blonde beside me, Lexi, lazily traced them over my skin as if exploring, testing the texture, then leaned in closer, her lips grazing my shoulder. I could feel their heat even through the intoxicating haze of whiskey and the rare relaxation I allowed myself to indulge in.

— You smell like smoke, — she whispered, softly kissing my earlobe.

— I smell like money, — I replied lazily, sinking deeper into the leather cushions.

Lexi chuckled quietly, biting my neck slightly, as if tasting me.

I just smirked in response, keeping my eyes closed. My fingers tangled in her long hair, lazily gripping the strands as her tits glided over my skin, leaving a warm trail. The girl knew what she was doing. So did the Latina, though unlike Lexi, I was seeing her for the first time. But she was sexy, and that was all I needed. Plus, she was doing a damn good job with her mouth, making those soft, wet sounds that only added to the sleepy, sultry atmosphere.

Yeah, just like it should be. Almost too good.

— You're too tense, Red, — the blonde whispered sensually into my ear, pressing closer, wrapping me in the warmth of her smooth skin.

Tense? I had been, but now? Now I just wanted to let go, though clearly, I wasn't doing a great job of it.

I closed my eyes, tilting my head back against the couch, trying to let myself melt into the sensations. My breathing grew heavier, hotter. My body responded to every touch from the girls, especially when the one below slowly ran her tongue along the inside of my cock.

— Fuck... — I muttered, running a hand through the blonde's hair, gripping her thick, sweet-scented curls.

The Latina's lips wrapped around me again, squeezing tighter, moving deeper, more focused. Her tongue worked with practiced skill, pushing me to the edge, dragging out the moment.

The heat inside flared up, spreading through my whole body. My lower stomach tightened like a stretched wire, ready to snap. The whiskey pulsed through my veins, and I felt like I was drowning in a dizzy, drunken trip, soaked in lust and alcohol, leading straight to the final scene.

— Shit... — I exhaled, feeling the tension inside reach its peak.

My body jerked as the climax hit, muscles tightening in sharp spasms before a wave of warm relief crashed over me.

The blonde giggled, trailing her lips along my cheek, while the Latina lazily brushed a strand of hair from her face, licking her lips with a satisfied smirk.

— There you go, now you look more relaxed, boss, — Lexi purred, running her fingers over my shirt.

I leaned back in silence, running a hand over my face. Fuck, that was... damn good. The perfect way to end a grueling flight and these last few days. I should've just enjoyed the moment, let go, drowned in the heavy relaxation, but that damn rat in my chest started scratching again, gnawing at me, reminding me that something was off.

Sighing, I ran a hand across my face, feeling the rough stubble that had grown over the past few days in Africa and the two-day flight without proper sleep.

Lexi, still lying beside me, purred contentedly, tracing soft fingertips over my chest. The Latina licked her lips lazily, still sitting at my feet, smirking.

— You still don't seem fully relaxed, — she murmured, tilting her head flirtatiously.

— I'm not the type to relax all the way, — I muttered, pushing myself up from the couch.

My cock still ached slightly from the recent pleasure, but overall, I was back together. My body knew the moment had passed. It was time to move on.

I walked over to the bar in the corner of the room, not looking at the girls. They didn't interest me anymore. Fuck this.

Whiskey trickled into the glass with a quiet splash. I wasn't in a hurry, just watching the amber liquid fill the glass, catching the dim light of the night lamp. Slowly, I picked up the glass and took a sip—strong, sharp, with the right bitterness that immediately brought me back to reality.

— Oh... Red, what's up with you tonight? — Lexi stretched out lazily on the couch.

— What? — I asked without turning around.

— Tense. Distant. Like you're not even here, — she sighed, shifting her gaze to the Latina, who was already sitting on the couch and pressing up against her.

I stayed silent, bringing the glass to my lips. The whiskey burned my throat, leaving behind a thick, bitter aftertaste. I wanted to drown in this alcohol—I didn't even know why—but it felt like I didn't need these bitches anymore, let alone their stupid conversations. Like something had clicked after I came in that hot slut's mouth, and it was only getting stronger. And her attempts to get inside my head only made it worse. Fuck them.

— None of your business! — I snapped, downing my drink in one go and slamming the glass onto the table, feeling the heat rise inside me.

Anger is a strange thing. It doesn't always come when it should. Sometimes, you're standing on the street with a gun to your head, and inside—it's ice-cold calm. And sometimes, you're sitting in a cozy office with whiskey in your hand and whores on either side—and suddenly, something inside starts boiling, bubbling, tearing its way out.

The blonde slid off the couch and slowly walked toward me, tilting her head. She was wearing nothing but lace lingerie—red, highlighting a body that had cost me a few hundred dollars for the night. A pricey doll.

— You know, — she drawled, running her fingertip along the edge of my glass, — I've seen a lot of men. And they all think that alcohol and sex will save them from their own thoughts.

I lifted my head sharply, narrowing my eyes.

— What are you, a fucking philosopher, Lexi? Or am I paying you to talk?

She smiled—mysterious, like she knew too much. That pissed me off. Fucking whore, what the hell do you know about me?

— I just recognize that look. — She traced her finger along my scar. I caught her wrist, gripping it a little harder than I should have.

— I'm paying you for something else, — I said coldly.

She didn't pull away. Just leaned in closer, her hot breath brushing against my cheek.

— Maybe. But you're not even looking at me. You're looking through me.

I let go of her hand abruptly and leaned back in the chair. Fucking whore.

— Shut up.

She shrugged, not particularly bothered, and stepped away, taking that damn look with her—too observant, too knowing. As if she understood something. But all she really knew was how much her body was worth and how to move the right way to keep clients happy. Everything else was bullshit.

I poured another glass, took a sip. Then another. The liquid slid down my throat, stoking the fire in my chest. I wanted more. And these whores...

— Get out, — I said calmly, pouring another drink, noticing the bottle was almost empty, already planning to grab another one.

They froze. For a few seconds, silence filled the room, and I could almost hear them exchange glances. The blonde bit her lip, while the Latina raised an eyebrow, as if trying to figure out if I was joking.

— Seriously? — Lexi asked, slowly dragging out the words.

— Does it look like a joke? — I lifted my gaze, looking straight at her. Yeah, I paid them for the whole night, but fuck them.

She scoffed, but not angrily—more like disappointed—as she adjusted her slipping strap.

— Whatever, — she muttered, grabbing her purse. — Men. The second they get what they want, they stop being nice.

The Latina smirked, ran her finger along the inside of her thigh in a slow, deliberate motion, as if debating whether to get up at all. But eventually, she stood, moving gracefully, lazily, following Lexi, who was already at the door.

They left, the rustle of their clothes and the click of heels fading behind them, leaving only the lingering scent of perfume and sex. The door slammed shut, and despite the background music, the silence suddenly felt louder.

I lowered my head, feeling the alcohol start to flow through my veins, making my body heavier but my mind—clearer. Almost. Almost. Fuck, just a little more, a couple more drinks, and I'd be able to forget. To push that filthy fucking rat out of my chest.

The whiskey in my glass swayed. I lifted it to my lips and took a long sip. The warmth spread through me, but it didn't bring the relief I was hoping for. I drank again. And again. The fire in my chest was supposed to drown out this fucked-up anxiety. But it didn't.

Something was off. Like after this sex, the unease hadn't disappeared—it had only grown, stronger, sharper, more real.

Not that this was anything new—I drank when I wanted to and as much as I needed—but this... This wasn't just drinking.

In the end, I got fucking wasted, so drunk I couldn't even stand, and passed out on the same leather couch where, just moments ago, I had been fucking two gorgeous whores.

CHAPTER 4

Hangover?

Consciousness returned slowly, as if I were surfacing from underwater, pushing through a suddenly thickened liquid.

I barely moved—and immediately cursed that impulse. Everything ached—joints, muscles, even bones felt like they were being twisted. Fuck, my body hurt like I'd spent a week stuffed in a trunk wrapped in barbed wire.

I forced my eyes open. Dim light stabbed straight into my pupils, and I groaned, shielding them with my hand. Nearby, I could hear Billy's voice. He was on the phone, speaking loud and cocky enough that I instantly knew—this asshole was acting like he ran the place now.

— ...Yeah, yeah, boss is fine. Just got drunk, blacked out for a couple days, happens. Yeah, I'm handling things. — I could hear him smacking his gum, then snorting. — Everything's under control. Money's coming in, schedule's on track. No, he'll check in soon... Of course.

My teeth clenched automatically. What the fuck do you mean you're handling things?

A wave of anger twisted inside me. Slowly, groaning, I tried pushing myself up on my elbows, feeling like every bone in my body had been shattered. The pain flared in every joint—no part of me felt normal.

— You... — my voice came out a raspy whisper. I coughed and tried again. — Billy.

— Yo, boss! — Billy turned his head instantly, grinning wide. — Finally woke up, huh?

I rubbed my face, feeling something strange—like my stubble was crumbling under my fingers, flaking off like dirt that could just be brushed away. The fuck...?

— What the...

I raised my hand. Tiny hairs were stuck to my palm.

— Slept well, huh? Three days out cold, — Billy smirked, blowing a bubble with his gum and lazily snapping it between his teeth. — We were starting to think you were gone... Turned into a mummy or something.

Three days? Fucking hell, three days? How?

It wasn't like me to black out, not even after a few bottles of whiskey.

I tried to stand up sharply but froze. My legs felt wrong—like two dead fish, slippery, numb, and weak as hell. My whole body ached, and it was even worse now.

— What the fuck... three days, yeah? — I croaked, staring at Billy. — And you didn't wake me up?

— Oh sure, boss, like that was an option. We tried everything—even poured cold water on you, but nothing. You didn't even get up to eat or take a piss, barely moved at all. Grave was about to call a doctor, but I said fuck that, you just drank too much. And you know how it is—we got business, and no one wants people poking around with questions.

I blinked slowly, feeling the heavy pulse pounding in my temples. My head was clear, but my body... Fuck, this was the worst hangover of my life.

Billy leaned in, smirking so wide it made my teeth itch with the urge to punch him.

— Red, you look like the devil himself pissed on you, — he muttered, still chewing that goddamn gum.

— I'll piss on you myself and then bury you where—khh, — I doubled over, choking on a sudden fit of coughing, a bitter taste coating my mouth. My chest tightened. The fuck was this shit?

— Whoa, boss, you good? — Billy whistled, then took a small step back, eyes widening slightly. — Maybe you picked up some nasty shit in that little African trip of yours, huh? Maybe you really do need a doctor? Or at least some whiskey?

I swallowed, forcing down another cough, and clenched my fists, steadying my breathing.

— Shut the fuck up, — I exhaled, grimacing. My voice... It was still mine—raspy, smoke-scarred—but softer somehow. I frowned, trying to stand up, but it was a fucking struggle.

— Fuck... — I gritted my teeth, bracing myself against the back of the couch and barely managing to push myself upright. My whole body resisted.

— Whoa, whoa, boss! — Billy raised his hands in a mock-peace gesture. — I see you're in a mood, but hey, at least you're alive.

Straightening up, I rolled my neck, wincing at the sensation—like something dry and splintered was cracking inside. My eyes narrowed as I looked at Billy.

Something was... off.

Billy looked... taller? Or had I gotten smaller? That was ridiculous. Yeah, I was still looking down at him, but... something wasn't right. I frowned, stepping closer, just to make sure my eyes weren't playing tricks on me. Stupid thought, of course. Maybe I was just standing weird?

— Why the fuck are you staring at me like that, boss? — Billy smirked, blowing another bubble. — Don't recognize me?

I narrowed my eyes.

— What, you been living off vitamins or some shit? — I rasped, frowning as I noticed again—my voice sounded slightly different. — You used to be shorter.

— Hah, boss, you're still tripping. I've always been five-seven. Maybe **you** shrunk a bit, huh?

He laughed, that same snakelike, hyena-ass chuckle of his. But I wasn't pissed off about that. No, what got me was something else. This fucker had been running shit while I was out, and he didn't even think he owed me an explanation. My jaw tightened with rage.

— Shove your jokes up your ass. Tell me what the fuck is going on, Snake? — I snapped, stepping closer, making damn sure he understood his place. — You running things now, huh?

And it worked, as always. Billy instantly hunched his shoulders, like a mangy stray caught stealing a piece of meat. He was downright afraid of me, though he covered it up with his ever-present smirking mug.

— Hey, boss, take it easy, I was just... just joking, — He spread his hands, pulling his usual fake innocence act. — Yeah, you were out for a bit, but everything's running smooth. And who else is gonna handle shit while you're lying around?

I leaned in closer to him, frowning and breathing heavily.

— And who the fuck told you that you get to handle shit while I'm lying around?

He swallowed quickly, his eyes darting around like he was searching for an escape, but there was nowhere to go.

— No offense, boss, just waiting for you to come around... — Billy lifted his hands again, but this time, there was a faint trace of unease in his voice. He clearly realized I wasn't in the mood and didn't want to push his luck. — It's just, well... time's ticking, and we ain't running a charity, right? Mexicans started stirring shit up again.

I frowned, running my tongue over the dry roof of my mouth. There was a weird taste, something like a mix of musty rags and something sour. I needed to smoke this shit away.

— Talk, — I said, grabbing a pack of Marlboros off the table and shaking it to pull out a cigarette. My fingers seemed to tremble. My bones ached. Something inside me crawled, pressed, like it was trying to break out.

Billy chuckled, watching me light up.

— Same old, boss. Those fuckers figured since you were out for a bit, they could start flexing. Hinted that it's time to be a little more generous, you know? Don Salvador, that motherfucker, thinks he can make us bend.

I took a deep drag, feeling the harsh smoke burn through my lungs, and closed my eyes, waiting for that familiar feeling, but I winced immediately. The taste was off. Not the usual bitter hit, not that acrid tobacco bite I'd been used to for twenty years. This was... harsher. Like the first time I snuck a cigarette behind the garages in school. My throat tightened instantly, and a cough started creeping up. I swallowed hard, forcing it back down.

Billy noticed, but this time he kept his mouth shut, just kept rambling about the Mexicans.

— So I figured we gotta put these fucking Mexicans in their place, — Billy flashed his signature grin, shrugging carelessly. — So yeah, I got everything under control.

I narrowed my eyes. Gutierrez—sly bastard. He knew when to bite. Three days I was out, and he was already sending messages? And Billy was right there, too. Fucking life. You let your guard down for a second, and everyone's already trying to push you out of the game.

— Tomorrow we move out to Ciudad Juarez, — I said, taking a deep drag.

Smoke filled my lungs, but instead of the usual bitter burn, something... foreign slid down my throat. Wrong taste, wrong hit. The cough surged again, I swallowed hard, trying to suppress it, but my stomach twisted. A nasty feeling. Like someone was slowly wringing my guts, twisting them into knots.

— But tomorrow... — Billy started but stopped the moment he saw the look on my face.

I was about to snap back, but suddenly, the cigarette nearly slipped from my fingers. Nausea surged, and I grabbed the table, bending over as a sharp pain stabbed through my lower stomach.

— Boss, you good? — Billy's voice was casual, but there was a flicker of concern in it.

I exhaled heavily, straightened up, clenching my fingers around the cigarette pack, which suddenly felt way too light in my hand.

— Shut the fuck up, Snake, — I barked, but my voice, fuck, it cracked, shooting up half a pitch higher than it should've.

Billy blinked.

— What?

I stepped forward, and Billy instinctively took two steps back, shrinking like a scared animal about to get put down.

— I said get the fuck out, asshole! — I shouted, and my voice wavered again, coming out higher than usual.

— Alright, alright, boss, don't blow a fuse. Just try not to drop dead, yeah?

Billy smirked and headed for the door, not waiting for me to snap at him again. Those seconds felt like forever as I struggled to hold back the lump rising in my throat. No fucking way was I letting him see me puke right in front of him. It was bad enough I'd been out for three damn days.

The door finally slammed shut, leaving me alone.

Fuck.

I lurched toward the bathroom so hard I slammed into the doorframe, probably leaving a dent in the metal frame. The door banged loudly, but I didn't give a shit. I staggered inside and practically collapsed to my knees in front of the toilet. My stomach clenched, and I vomited so violently it felt like I was throwing up my insides, not just the contents.

Bile, whiskey, some nasty, viscous sludge that didn't even resemble food. Wave after wave hit me, my fingers gripping the edges of the toilet so tightly they turned white. It felt endless. My gut ached like something inside was clawing at me, trying to rip me apart.

I gasped, choking, wiping my mouth with a shaking hand, hearing my own voice occasionally crack into an unnaturally high pitch, but the nausea wouldn't let go.

It had been at least thirty minutes, maybe more. When the last spasm rolled through my body, I slumped onto the cold tiles, breathing heavily. My throat burned, my mouth was dry, and a disgusting bitterness lingered on my tongue, but inside... inside, I felt lighter.

The pain hadn't completely disappeared, but now it felt more like exhaustion rather than torture. I ran a hand over my face, feeling the sweat-sticky skin.

Fuck. Gotta get up.

Gripping the sink, I pulled myself up with effort. My reflection stared back at me—gaunt, hollowed-out—but something was off. Since when was I this tanned? I'd only been in Africa for two days... Shit, hold on. Screw the tan. My hair... The light brown strands that had been streaked with gray just recently now looked darker, thicker. Something was missing... The gray? Fuck. Did the sun dye it along with my skin? No, that's bullshit.

Shaking my head, I turned on the faucet, letting the cold water run over my hands. Droplets hit my skin, trickling down to my wrists as I splashed my face and nearly moaned in relief. That fucking vomiting had drained all my strength, but at least my stomach was empty now, and my head was a little clearer. I'd have to shove something down my throat if I didn't want to drop dead halfway to Ciudad Juárez.

I ran my hands over my face, rubbing my chin—wait, how the hell did I not notice this before? I hadn't shaved in, what, three days? And yet my face was smooth. No stubble.

— What the... — I muttered, remembering the hairs that had stuck to my palm when I'd first woken up.

No stubble. Not a single rough strand. Just smooth, baby-soft skin. It wasn't exactly terrifying, but it was strange enough to give me chills. Shit, even after a few hours without shaving, I'd usually start feeling the prickle, and now—three full days, and my face was completely clean? And I'd just seen it there a second ago. Did I wash it off with water?!

— What the fuck... — I murmured, glancing back at the mirror, shifting my focus to something else.

My receding hairline. I'd never been too obsessed with my hair, but I still kept track of how that damn bald spot kept spreading, so I noticed it out of habit. And now... I squinted. No, it was still there, but... a faint, dark fuzz was sprouting where nothing had grown for years. I leaned in closer, staring at the reflection. That was impossible. Hair either falls out, or it doesn't. It doesn't just come back.

I ran my palm over the top of my head, not believing what I was seeing, and suddenly felt something else. Right where the bald spot used to start, the skin wasn't as smooth as before. Under my fingers, I could feel the lightest hint of new hair—short, soft, like a teenager's.

— Fuck this... — I breathed out, stepping away from the mirror.

What the hell is going on?

I turned sharply, feeling my body still aching, but now it was a different kind of pain. Not the heaviness of a hangover, not the soreness after a fight. It was more like... my bones were humming from the inside, and my muscles ached like after an exhausting workout.

Exhaling, I tried to pull myself together. At least my head wasn't pounding anymore.

Bullshit. This was just a weird fucking crash and jet lag. Three days knocked out, who knows what could've happened? My body was probably just flushing itself out after that shitty food in this godforsaken hellhole.

Whatever. The main thing now was to get my shit together. I had business waiting for me in Ciudad Juárez, and I didn't have time for this fucking self-analysis.

Business first, body later.

CHAPTER 5

Ciudad Juárez

(Five Days Since the Transformation)

I was lying on a hard mattress, thrown directly onto the concrete floor. My back ached, my muscles throbbed with exhaustion, though I had no idea why—I couldn't remember doing anything that would make me this damn tired. We hadn't done shit for two days since we arrived here, after Gutiérrez said they couldn't meet.

This fucking warehouse, once a drug lab, reeked of chemicals and something sour, like the air itself had been eaten away by the poison they used to cook all that crap.

A great place to hide if you were here for shady business, but a shitty one for anything else. The acrid stench clung to my nose, making me grimace every few seconds. I ran a hand over my face, my fingers gliding over strangely smooth skin.

I hadn't shaved since waking up from that drunken blackout, and yet my skin was still smooth—even though two days had passed. Not even a hint of stubble. Before, I used to shave twice a day sometimes, on the days I needed to look my best.

And the hair... This morning, looking in the mirror, I noticed my receding hairline was gone. In its place, new short hairs had sprouted, barely a centimeter long—dark, unlike my usual light brown strands. Even my existing hair... it was visibly darkening at the roots.

My fingers froze for a second. Maybe I just didn't notice shaving? And the hair... maybe I imagined it? This place *was* a drug lab once, after all. Who the hell knows. The last few days felt like one long, never-ending blur, where nausea and weakness had become my new reality.

I dropped my hand and looked at my fingers. My skin felt softer than before, as if years of roughness had just... dissolved. My knuckles no longer looked so worn. I had lost a lot of weight in these past few days. Though, to be fair, I hadn't really been eating—my stomach could barely handle water, and even that, just barely.

When I sat up, I grimaced again, but this time not from the smell. The rough fabric of my shirt dragged across my chest, and I almost flinched.

A weird, sharp sensation. Like someone had poked my nipples with something dull.

Frowning, I absentmindedly ran my hand over my chest. Under the fabric, right around the nipples—there was *something*. Just a little, but... it was there. The skin felt swollen, a bit more sensitive than usual, and the moment I touched it, I jerked my hand away.

—Fuck... —I exhaled, wincing.

No, I wasn't sensitive. Never had been. I'd been punched, cut, bruised, dealt with shitty hangovers—I was used to pain. But this... This was different.

It was still just withdrawal. Some weird kind of withdrawal from that blackout. Or maybe an infection? Yeah, something like that. And here I was, overthinking shit like some woman.

I swallowed, and immediately winced—my throat burned, like I'd been screaming all day or chain-smoking without a break. Definitely an infection. No way alcohol poisoning could still have me throwing up two days later. And seriously, what the fuck? Where was all this even coming from when I wasn't even eating?

I sat up quickly, then stood—only to freeze in place.

My head swayed, like after a hit—not hard, but unpleasant, like my brain was lagging behind my body. I sat down again. A sudden burst of heat crawled under my skin, starting from the base of my skull, spreading down my spine. Then, just as suddenly, a wave of cold washed over me, and a few seconds later, it passed.

I shook my head, trying to pull myself together. Took a deep breath. Bathroom. Fuck, I needed to piss.

My feet found the cold floor as I reached for my boots. A familiar motion—one, two, laces. But the moment I took a step, I noticed it. The boots didn't *fit* right. Not loose, but... uncomfortably tight. Too stiff, too wide. Like my feet had shrunk just enough to make them feel *off*.

I frowned, wiggled my toes, trying to figure out what the hell was going on. Whatever. It was still just the withdrawal, my body glitching, my brain running slower than I'd like. I needed to find the bastard who sold me that whiskey. Must've had some real shit mixed in.

Pushing open the creaky door, I stepped into the main hall of the warehouse.

Tom stood near the entrance, leaning against the wall, smoking thoughtfully. The smoke curled in the air, barely mixing with the place's usual shitty stench. Our eyes met, and suddenly, I realized—I hadn't smoked all morning. Hadn't even *thought* about it.

Weird. Usually, if I went even a couple hours without a cigarette, my fingers would start searching my pockets on their own. But now? I hadn't even noticed.

I tensed immediately. No, fuck that, I *needed* a smoke. Get back to normal. Maybe that's why my body was freaking out. Then again, I could still remember the taste of that last cigarette yesterday—the one I couldn't even finish. It had tasted... disgusting.

But still—I had to. Fuck, I'd been smoking for thirty years, and now, out of nowhere, I was repulsed by it?

Pulling out the pack, I grabbed a cigarette and lit it. And immediately, everything went *wrong*.

A rush straight to my head.

Fuck.

I winced, feeling my stomach respond with an unpleasant burning sensation, my lungs rejecting all of it. There was a nasty, prickly taste in my mouth, like my body had suddenly said, "Go fuck yourself," and decided that smoking just wasn't for me.

I spat on the concrete, put out the cigarette against the wall, and cursed.

Tom looked at me with a serious gaze, scanning me from head to toe, but said nothing. Good. His silence was exactly what was needed right now. Billy, on the other hand, would've definitely thrown in some dumb joke.

I straightened up, adjusted my T-shirt, and headed where my body had been stubbornly leading me before I decided to give an old bad habit another try. Pushing the door open with my dirty elbow, I stumbled into a tiny restroom. It was filthy, old, with peeling paint on the walls covered in grimy stains and a rusty toilet in the corner. Whatever. People have pissed in worse places.

The moment I unbuckled my belt and pulled down the zipper, everything inside me tightened. I knew what was coming. I had seen it before—several times now—but every time, I hoped it was just my imagination. That it was some kind of dehydration effect, withdrawal symptom, exhaustion. But no.

My dick was even smaller than the last time.

I blinked. A feeling clenched deep in my gut. This wasn't just anxiety. This was something else entirely.

It... hadn't just shrunk. It was three times smaller than it should be. The skin looked thinner, softer. Fuck, it was like... like it wasn't even mine. Like some foreign body part, something that didn't belong in the picture.

I clenched my teeth, shutting down the swarm of thoughts that instantly attacked my brain. Fuck this. Just fuck this.

I needed to piss, but everything inside was so tight, I couldn't even relax my dick enough to get it done. I stood there, hunched over, staring down, feeling my insides boil—irritation, anger, fear, all drowning under a pile of logical explanations. Alcohol poisoning? Some fucked-up African mosquito? A virus? What the fuck?

My hands tensed, fingers digging into the waistband of my jeans. I took a deep breath, trying to pull myself together. Just piss. Turn around, flush, leave, forget. When I get to Texas, I'll see Johnny. He's not the type to ask unnecessary questions. As long as you pay, he treats. No details, no bullshit. And if something needs covering up, he just looks the other way. If I really had some fucked-up shit going on, he'd help me figure it out.

Though, fuck, who was I kidding? I was getting worse by the minute. I didn't just feel like something was wrong—I knew it. I'd known from the start. From the moment that goddamn rat crawled inside my chest back in Africa. Nothing went "just fine" there. Some shit happened to me, and I didn't even know what.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, yanking me out of my thoughts. I grabbed it, glancing at the screen.

Snake:

"Boss. They're here."

I got it instantly. The Mexicans had shown up unannounced. Though what the fuck was Billy doing outside without my order? Whatever, I'd deal with that later.

Bolting out of the shithole restroom, I nearly crashed into the wall but caught myself, slamming a hand against the cracked paint. Fuck, my body still wasn't listening properly—every muscle ached, joints hummed, and my legs... damn, my legs felt different. I couldn't explain exactly how, but the difference was there.

— Get the fuck up, you lazy bastards! — I barked, heading toward my room, throwing a glance at Tom on the way.

— They're here? — Tom's voice came, calm but tense.

— Snake texted, said they are, — I shot back, throwing open the door to my room. — Get dressed. Two minutes, everyone ready.

I grabbed my leather jacket, but the moment I pulled it on, I felt it—something was off. It was... too big. Not enough to fall off me, but it didn't fit as snug as before. The sleeves were longer, the shoulders a little looser.

— Fuck, — I exhaled but put it on anyway.

Jeans. I tightened my belt, had to pull it higher and cinch it harder to keep the damn things from slipping down.

I snatched my gun, checked the mag. Full. But the grip... it felt different in my hand. Wider, somehow.

— Fuck it, — I muttered, shoving the Glock into my waistband.

Enough. Pushing those thoughts aside, I bolted for the exit.

Tom was already by the basement stairs, arms crossed, with two of our guys beside him—Chuck and the new kid, some twenty-five-year-old with a tense look in his eyes. Seemed like a decent guy, had even done time before, though I didn't trust those types. But Tom had recommended him, so maybe this would be his test.

— Move out! — I commanded, forgetting how my voice had changed. The end of my order lifted slightly. The usual roughness and depth weren't there anymore. It sounded smoother, with some strange new tone, almost melodic.

I'd noticed it last night, tried speaking rougher, harsher. But now? Now I fucking forgot.

Tom turned to me, giving me a sharp look, like he'd picked up on something too. But instead of saying anything, he just gave a short nod and turned toward the door, stepping out first—like he was checking the area.

I followed him, my whole body still buzzing and aching, but I was already used to this shitty feeling. But my steps felt... fucking weird. Like my legs weren't quite mine—just a bit shorter, joints a bit softer. And my hips... they ached worse than before, like something was pressing from the inside.

Shit, I didn't like this. Not one fucking bit.

— What do you think? — Tom spoke quietly, but in this concrete bunker, his voice echoed like we were standing in a coffin.

— I think this is a setup. — I shot him a glance. — Gutiérrez isn't a dumbass. He wouldn't just walk in here uninvited, especially knowing that no one had any idea we were hiding out.

Tom nodded in agreement, his narrowed gray eyes cutting right through me.

— Snake?

I gritted my teeth. Everything inside me clenched—not just from anger but from another, nastier realization. I hated being wrong about people. But goddamn it, Billy...

— No one else it could be, — I exhaled, unclenching my fists. — What about your new guy?

Tom turned to me slowly, his gray eyes, sharp like a hunter's, studying me for too long.

— Red, you're talking bullshit, — he said evenly. — The guy's clean. Checked.

I clenched my teeth.

— Everyone's clean until they're neck-deep in shit.

Tom shook his head, slow, like he was rejecting the thought itself.

— That guy's not like that. He's too dumb to sell out. He needs money, not problems.

I shot him a dark look but didn't argue. Tom didn't get people wrong.

By the time we reached the exit, Tom, just like me, had already taken his position by the door. He stood silently, scanning the lab outside, dimly lit by the last rays of the setting sun slipping through the cracks. His hand gripped his gun tightly. He looked broader, more solid than I remembered.

I didn't realize it at first. In the darkness, in this chemical-stinking warehouse, everything felt a little distorted—smells, sounds, even the way my own body felt. But now, it was clear.

Tom... looked taller.

No, not him... I had gotten shorter. And there was no denying it now.

I used to stand a good seven centimeters above him, could rest my arm on his shoulder while looking down. But now... we were nearly the same height. Or, fuck, maybe even the opposite—he was taller than me by a couple of centimeters.

A hot wave ran down my spine, sending cold sweat after it.

This... is impossible.

This just doesn't happen.

I stood there, gritting my teeth, my muscles tight, forcing them not to shake. I wouldn't allow myself that weakness—not in front of him, not in front of the guys, not in front of whoever might already be waiting for us outside with their guns aimed.

Tom said nothing, but his gaze grew heavier. He noticed it too.

I gave him a short nod—"not now"—and shifted my focus to the others.

Snake was gone.

I scanned the room again, making sure he wasn't lurking in some shadowed corner. But no—he wasn't here.

Bad.

Really fucking bad.

— Where's Snake? — I asked, my voice dry, rough... Shit, that voice again. It was still mine, but not mine. I kept slipping.

— He was here half an hour ago, — one of the guys said. He looked tense but not scared. Good.

I clenched my fists. Billy—the son of a bitch.

Everything inside me was howling—there it was, there it fucking was, the setup, the real one, the one I had been feeling creeping up for days.

The smell of blood before the gunshot.

— HEY, BOSS! — Billy's voice crashed against the warehouse's concrete walls, loud, cocky, with that damn smirk of his, even though I couldn't see him. — COME ON OUT! GUTIÉRREZ'S GUYS ARE HERE, EVERYTHING'S FINE!

Those two words: "Everything's fine."

I'd heard them a hundred times. During deals, during fights, during those rotten negotiations that always ended in gunfire. When someone wanted to say things were going as planned—right before blood was added to the plan.

I shot Tom a glance.

He shifted his stance slightly, moving his gun into a more natural position for a quick shot.

— It's a trap, — I said, low, almost a whisper.

Tom nodded while I exhaled, my gaze snapping toward the exit.

— What the fuck? — the new guy muttered, fingers tightening around his pistol.

I glanced at him, then at Tom. He already knew. I didn't have to explain. We'd been through too much shit together not to understand each other without words.

— It's an ambush, — I said flatly, moving closer to the wall to take a better position.

— Yeah, — Tom muttered, checking his mag. — Paranoia will save your ass, Red.

I gritted my teeth.

This wasn't paranoia. This was experience.

Outside, Billy's voice rang louder, cockier.

— COME ON, BOSS! GET OUT HERE! — he hollered. — WE'RE WAITING!

That voice... so fucking smug. Like a mutt who finally got a scrap from the master's table.

I knew he was a rat.

I knew he'd make a move one day.

But what I did know for sure—he wasn't as smart as he thought he was.

— Chuck, new guy, back exit, — I ordered curtly.

The new guy—tall, lanky, red-haired, his eyes darting around. Nervous, but not panicking. That was good. He just gripped his gun tighter, getting ready for the worst. A good sign.

He nodded, glancing between Tom and me.

— Ready? — he asked quietly.

— Yeah, — Tom confirmed, and the others nodded.

I took a deeper breath, suppressing the nausea. That disgusting lump under my ribs again. No way, not now, not this shitty urge to vomit again. I had to hold it back somehow—otherwise, there was a real chance I'd get myself killed.

A new voice spoke outside. Gutiérrez. Smooth, heavy—he spoke with the lazy confidence of a man who knew nothing could threaten him.

— Coulter, come out. — Calm, but firm. — We just want to talk. Settle things.

Talk, yeah. Sure. I silently nodded to Tom, feeling that familiar sensation bubbling up inside—the primal instinct screaming at me to leave. But it was already too late.

Click.

The bolt was pulled back outside. Two seconds—and then a burst of gunfire.

I peeked out from cover—bullets whizzed through the air again. Visibility was shit, but I managed to catch their silhouettes—five, maybe six of them. And Billy, that fucker, stood right next to Gutiérrez, grinning like he'd just won the lottery.

Traitor.

— Rat! — I shouted, and at that moment, the first bullet tore through the air.

It missed my ear by a centimeter, and I lunged back, ducking behind the concrete ledge. Plaster crumbled from the walls, shell casings clattered to the floor. Fuck! Billy didn't just sell us out—he *enjoyed* it.

— Hey, boss, what's with that chick screaming in there? — Billy's nasal voice rang out from outside.

At first, I didn't get it. But then... fuck, fuck, *fuck*. He was talking about *me*. That son of a bitch was talking about *me*.

I clenched my teeth so hard my jaw almost cracked.

— What the fuck did you just say, you little shit?! — I barked, raising my gun.

— Relax, boss, — his voice was slow, lazy, dripping with smugness. — Just listen to yourself scream. You sure that's you? Or did your balls get lost on the way somewhere?

Something inside me flipped in that moment. Adrenaline shot through my veins, my chest tightened—not from rage, no, from something else. That lump in my throat suddenly pushed its way up.

I puked right then and there, barely managing to double over before my stomach twisted in agony. That pathetic excuse for water I'd forced down over the past few hours came up in a violent rush, along with some other disgusting chunks of whatever-the-fuck my body decided to get rid of. I coughed, feeling cold sweat break out on my forehead.

Firing at the approaching enemies, Tom moved fast, shifting positions behind a concrete pillar. Shell casings hit the floor, ringing sharp against the gunpowder-stained warehouse. He glanced my way for a second—and froze.

I was... throwing up. Again. And fuck, it was the worst fucking timing.

My body folded in half, my stomach turning inside out while I braced myself against the rough concrete wall, trying not to collapse to my knees. That nasty acidic taste burned my tongue, and my ears buzzed from the gunfire.

— Fuck... — Tom gritted through his teeth, letting the slide go and reloading his gun.

He moved quickly, smoothly, like every motion was pre-calculated in his head. Meanwhile, I stood there, leaning against the wall, squinting, pressing a hand to my stomach like that would somehow help me pull myself together. My stomach still clenched, that disgusting taste of vomit lingered, but worse than that—I felt weak.

— Red! — Tom shot another glance my way, sharper this time. His voice was tense, but not panicked. — Get your shit together, damn it! We need to move!

I gritted my teeth and finally forced myself to straighten up and grip my gun. My body resisted, like it wasn't even mine anymore. My legs felt like jelly, my gun felt heavy, even my jacket weighed on my shoulders like my muscles were just *gone*. Bullshit. I was just sick, that's all. Lost some weight.

— Fucking Snake, — I exhaled, finally pushing through the aftermath of the episode.

But Tom was right—we had to get the hell out. And it was obvious he had no plan. I did.

I shoved my hand into my jacket pocket, feeling the small rectangle with a button. Explosives. My backup plan. I planted them as soon as we landed here. Didn't tell anyone. Not even Tom.

That scent of blood right before a gunshot—I always smelled it. I always knew.

The crash thundered through the entire warehouse, as if a train had slammed into us. Debris flew into the air, glass shattered into pieces, and the old wooden tables left here caught fire. Dust and smoke filled the space in an instant, clogging my nose and throat. Screams and shouts echoed from outside. Panic. Exactly what I needed.

— Move! — I shouted, grabbing Tom by the shoulder and rushing in the opposite direction.

We moved in bursts, crouching, firing blindly—more at random than with any real aim. The shootout continued, but now we had a chance.

— Boss, boss! — A mocking voice suddenly rang out. Billy.

I spun around sharply, gritting my teeth.

He was hiding behind a couple of containers, grinning, gun in hand, firing at us. Covered, calm. Tom's bullet chipped off a piece of concrete nearby, but the Snake was alive and kicking.

— It's over, Red, — he said, shaking his head like he was lecturing a dumb student. — The old-timers' time is up. You've figured that out by now, haven't you?

— Fucking die, — I snapped and fired at him, hearing bullets whizz past.

Billy ducked behind the container just in time, and I pulled the trigger again, but my bullet only chipped off a chunk of rusty metal, sending tiny shards into the air. Son of a bitch. My eyes burned from the smoke, but I could still see—chaos reigned around us. The flames from the explosion still burned, casting long, flickering shadows on the warehouse walls, and bullets kept whistling overhead. We were trapped, but we weren't dead yet.

— Red! — Tom barked, his voice cutting through the gunfire. — Move your ass, goddammit!

I lunged after him, ducking behind an overturned table. That sickly weakness still throbbed in my chest, sweat streamed down my back, but I held on. Fucking hell, I held on.

Chuck and the new guy took the long way around, but almost immediately, a short, ragged scream rang out. A body hit the concrete, and I knew right away—it was Chuck.

The new guy tried to retreat but took a bullet to the side and dropped to his knees, clutching the wound. His fingers trembled, but he was still alive, painfully alive. I saw it in his eyes.

— Shit, shit! — he gasped, trying to get up, but in the next second, another bullet hit him, snapping his head back. A burst of blood. He slumped to the ground, and I felt something twist in my gut.

Tom growled in rage and peeked out from behind cover.

— Fuck, you son of a bitch, Snake!!! — he roared, his fury boiling over.

— We gotta move before we get fucking torn apart! — I gritted my teeth, reloading my gun and moving toward the exit, but at the last moment, a surge of sudden rage hit me over Billy's kill.

Tom, having emptied his mag, was reloading as he headed for the door, while I took a step forward, aiming at the bastard who killed the new guy—but something went wrong. My hand shook. The gun felt... fucking heavy.

And then—sharp pain shot through my forearm.

A bullet.

— Fuck! — I jerked back, pressing my hand to my body.

A burning pain throbbed in my shoulder, pulsing with every heartbeat. Hot, sticky blood trickled down my wrist, soaking my jacket sleeve. Fuck. My arm was nearly numb, my fingers shaking like some junkie going through withdrawal.

— Hold the fuck on! — Tom grabbed me by the collar, yanking my arm over his shoulder.

I clenched my teeth, wincing.

— Keep moving! — I rasped, bending my wounded arm. I felt the pulsing pain spreading through my body, but fuck it, I'd manage.

We darted forward, weaving between the wall and crates, dodging bullets. Concrete fragments rained down on our shoulders, the air burned our noses with acrid smoke, and the gunfire left our ears ringing. But we were almost at the exit.

Tom suddenly stopped, pressing his back against the wall, and looked at me.

— Where now?

I smirked, though pain twisted in my gut.

— There's a car out back, in that small building, — I exhaled, shoving my hand into my jacket pocket. The keys—cold metal dug into my palm. I quickly handed them to Tom.

I wasn't an idiot. In this state, I wasn't the best driver.

Tom nodded without a word and took off first.

A small building, unremarkable, looking more like a storage box—one of many here. And inside—my insurance. An old but still running Mustang I'd rented. Fuck, like I knew it would come to this.

— Get in the damn car! — Tom barked, shoving me forward and throwing the door open.

I yanked the door open and slumped into the passenger seat. A sharp jolt—pain flared in my shoulder again. I cursed under my breath, squeezing my eyes shut.

The driver's side door slammed shut, and Tom jumped behind the wheel.

— We're getting the fuck outta here!

He slammed on the gas. The engine roared, tires screeched, leaving dark streaks on the floor, and then the Mustang tore forward, smashing through the exit gate with a crash, its engine's growl making the rusted metal crumble under the impact.

I leaned back against the seat, gritting my teeth.

We made it.

For now.

— Tom! — I yelled over the gunfire. He darted toward me, vaulting over a low partition in the warehouse. — I'll distract them. The second shit hits the fan—we run for the car.

— What fucking car?! — He narrowed his eyes, holding his gun in both hands. A stance he knew well—steady, ready to fire at a second's notice.

— We *have* one, — I snapped. — I stashed it when we landed.

— Why the fuck didn't you say anything?!

— Because I didn't even trust myself, — I bit back, yanking out the detonator and locking eyes with him.
— Get ready.

Inhale. Exhale.

Click.

Boom.

CHAPTER 6

Hide and Seek

(8 days since the transformation)

Someone was swearing in Spanish behind the neighboring wall while I stood by the window, peering into the distance through a gap in the curtain, searching for Tom—or maybe something worse, because who the hell knew? We weren't supposed to be found here. Not by that rat Billy, not by Gutierrez's people. And yet, here in Mexico, I didn't feel safe. Especially with the shit that was happening to me.

Shifting my gaze to the lone bed, next to the small mattress spread out on the floor, I let out a sigh, feeling another wave of guilt wash over me—the same guilt that had followed me all the way here while Tom and I sped away from the shootout, from betrayal, from the shit that had nearly buried us.

And while I was passing out in the back seat, suffocating from the heat, the fever, and my own body—which with each day felt less and less like mine—Tom kept dragging us forward.

I closed my eyes and exhaled. Goddamn it. We could've been in the U.S. already. Could've reached this godforsaken Matamoros, where we were now, in a day and a half—if not for me. We kept stopping, pulling off onto deserted roads, killing the engine, shutting off the headlights, just to avoid getting spotted by whoever might be chasing us. And in those moments, I was either shitting, puking, or pissing—a fucking carousel that felt like it would never end.

At first, Tom grumbled. Then he just went silent whenever I tumbled out of the car, bent over to puke by the roadside or crawl into the bushes to take a leak. My legs were shaky, my knees weak. It felt like something inside me was shifting, rearranging, demanding food and water—only to reject it moments later.

I lay in the back seat, gritting my teeth through stomach cramps while Tom shoved sandwiches, chips, and canned meat at me—whatever he could grab from gas stations. I devoured it like a starving animal until my stomach felt like it would burst, only to bolt into the bushes moments later to vomit up acid and half-digested garbage. Sometimes, between the nausea and the hunger, I had brief seconds of clarity—just enough to touch my neck, smooth as a kid's, or run my fingers through my hair, which had turned completely black in three days and grown about two inches longer.

—It's an infection, —I muttered to Tom when he handed me yet another pack of food that I tore into like a madman. —I must've eaten some African shit.

He said nothing. But in his eyes, I saw what I feared more than a bullet to the head: *You're changing, and we both know it.*

Yeah, I knew. I knew, but I didn't want to admit the obvious.

The breasts.

Even now, standing by the window of this shitty motel room, I could feel their weight. The way they moved with every breath, how even this damn cheap T-shirt rubbed uncomfortably against my nipples—so sensitive now, so clearly a full-fledged first size. This was absolute fucking madness.

I glanced at the mattress stretched out on the floor again. Last night, Tom had slept there while I sprawled out on what at least resembled a bed, like a king... or a queen? *Very fucking funny.* I was so exhausted after these eight days since landing in my home state of Texas that I didn't even have the energy to be shocked anymore.

Yesterday, my dick was gone.

Someone else in my place might have panicked, lost their mind. But I was Vince fucking Coulter, not some weak-ass kid who folds at the first sign of the unknown. Otherwise, I'd already be rotting six feet under somewhere.

Still, I couldn't deny that this shit had shaken me.

The moment I saw it, I had been sitting on the toilet, just staring down at... at *it*. At something that shouldn't have been there. At what had replaced everything that made me a man. At the smooth slit between my legs, damp from sweat and *something else*, something that sent an icy knot twisting in my gut.

I couldn't accept it. I *wouldn't*. But the fact remained.

Between my thighs, where my cock used to hang—smaller and smaller each day over the past week—there was now a gap. Neat, wet, slightly swollen. I pressed my finger against it, expecting pain, but instead, a wave of heat spread through my stomach, making my knees tremble.

—Fuck, —I hissed, kicking the floor. My bare feet slapped against the sticky tile. —Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*

Tom muttered something behind the door, but I didn't answer. I didn't want to move from that spot at all. The stench of cheap bleach burned my nose, but I didn't care. I sat there for half an hour, maybe more. I needed to pull myself together, to clear my head. But I *didn't want to*. I couldn't believe it. It was just impossible.

But the truth was cruel—mercilessly staring back at me from the cracked motel mirror.

Narrowed shoulders that made my T-shirt hang loose. Small, rounded mounds pressing against the fabric, small enough to fit in a palm. And black strands of hair falling over my forehead. Even the scar on my cheek was gone, like someone had erased it with a fucking eraser.

My scar. *Fuck.*

I ran a finger over my cheek, but all I felt was smooth, warm skin. Not a trace. As if it had never been there. As if all those years—my whole life—fights, brawls, knives, fists, knocked-out teeth, bullets—had just been a dream. A fucking joke.

—Holy shit... —I hissed, pulling my hand away.

I didn't recognize my own face.

It was me and, at the same time, not me. Someone younger, weaker, softer. Someone who had never seen a single fight, who had never survived, never torn this world apart with their teeth, but just... just existed.

The door to the room opened, and I flinched instinctively, reaching for my Glock on the nightstand—only to feel an unpleasant tug in my chest from the movement. It was Tom.

— Relax, Red, — he muttered, shutting the door with his elbow. — If I wanted you dead, you'd already be six feet under.

I grimaced, letting go of the gun, but almost hissed from the sensation—this damn T-shirt, stretching across my chest, pressed uncomfortably against my nipples. That nasty feeling again. The fabric rubbed like sandpaper, triggering a strange sensitivity that made me grit my teeth. Fucking sensitivity. Just three days ago, it was barely there, and now, the slightest brush against my nipples made me shudder.

— Fuck... — I muttered through my teeth, yanking the shirt away from my skin.

Tom shot me a quick glance but didn't say anything. He just tossed a bag of food onto the table, sat down on a chair, and lit a cigarette, squinting thoughtfully toward the window.

The smell of smoke made my stomach churn, and I couldn't stop myself from coughing as I reached for the window to get some fresh air into the room.

— Fuck you, Grave, — I exhaled, still grimacing, and gestured toward his cigarette. — Could you, for fuck's sake, not blow smoke right in my face?

Tom raised an eyebrow, looking at me like I was some kind of museum exhibit. Then, after taking a drag, he pulled a bottle of water from the bag.

— Drink, — he said flatly, holding it out to me.

I scowled but grabbed it, twisting the cap off with my teeth. I really was thirsty, as always. The lukewarm water, tasting of plastic, flowed down my throat, but the thirst was stronger than the disgust.

Tom was still watching me—carefully, assessing. I could feel it, not with my eyes, but with my skin. It made me tense up.

— What the fuck are you staring at? — I muttered, wiping my lips, which now felt slightly fuller, with the back of my hand.

Tom inhaled, exhaled the smoke forcefully toward the ceiling, and spoke in an even tone:

— There's an interesting animal in Africa... Ever seen a chameleon, Red?

I scowled, pretending not to be interested. But Tom continued, knowing I was listening.

— Only it's not exactly a chameleon, — he went on, not looking at me. — They call it something there... "Amalu" or "sand ghost." Lives in the desert, burrows into the sand, changes color like a chameleon. But not just color... It changes everything. Size, skin texture, body shape. Even... — He paused for a second, as if debating whether to say it. — Even sex.

Tom fell silent on the last word, as if weighing it on his tongue, tasting it. And at that moment, I felt a wave of heat rush over me, sweat breaking out at my hairline. Sex. Fuck.

I held my breath.

And then exhaled sharply, squeezing the bottle in my hand, spitting the words out fast and angry.

— What the fuck are you talking about? — I snapped my head toward him, feeling a tight knot coil inside me. — What's your fucking point? Where the hell do you even get this bullshit from?

I didn't want to ask that. I wanted to act like I didn't care. Like his story was just some random nonsense I could shrug off. But I had already lost before I could stop myself. Because something inside me was already screaming. Like this whole fucking story wasn't just a coincidence.

Tom slowly shifted his gaze to me, his gray eyes gleaming in the dim motel light. He was quiet for a long time. Then he shrugged.

— Discovery... — he answered quietly.

I blinked.

— What?

— The Discovery Channel, Red, — Tom smirked, took a drag, and exhaled smoke lazily. — Locals in Africa tell stories about it, but I saw that shit on TV like ten years ago. Biologists were arguing whether it could really change that much or if it was just a myth, but the locals were sure—hell yeah, it could. There was this case, a hunter once said... — He looked at me and suddenly narrowed his eyes. — Why the hell did you freeze up?

I swallowed. Why the hell did you freeze up?

I didn't even understand why my whole body had tensed. Why my muscles had coiled like springs, why I suddenly wanted to sink into the mattress and say it was all bullshit, nonsense, a fucking lie. But I couldn't. Because Tom... Did he figure it out?

No. No, he didn't know. He couldn't know. He just hit a nerve by accident, right? Just a coincidence. Just—

I wanted to joke it off. Say something like, "Since when the fuck do you even watch Discovery?" But my tongue wouldn't move. Because this conversation didn't feel stupid anymore. It was gripping something deep inside me, digging into my own thoughts, my fears.

I inhaled sharply through my nose. Fuck, he doesn't know, he's just talking, and I'm already ready to fucking shake like... like...

I froze. No, bullshit, it's all bullshit...

And slowly, very slowly, turned my head toward the window.

— ...And how the hell did you even get in? I didn't see you through the window, — the words slipped out as I was trying to find a way to change the subject without making my tension obvious.

— Same as always. Through the front door, — Tom answered calmly, taking a drag from his cigarette.

I pressed my lips into a thin line. Something in his voice, in that relaxed tone, pissed me off. Fuck knows what exactly. Maybe it was the way he just sat there, lazily smoking, while my thoughts were driving me insane. Maybe it was the fact that he, that bastard, so easily shifted the conversation to *Discovery Channel* instead of saying it straight — yeah, I can see you're losing your fucking mind, and yeah, I've already figured out that your dick is gone. But he didn't say it.

— You're lying, — I snapped, leaning against the window again, but this time not trying to peek behind the curtain. Just pressing my forehead against it. It felt disgusting.

— Huh? — Tom exhaled smoke to the side, but there was no surprise or annoyance in his voice. Just curiosity.

— I was standing by the window, Tom, — I breathed out. — I saw the street. You weren't there.

Silence. A long silence. I didn't even turn to look at him, but I knew — he narrowed his eyes now, maybe furrowed his brow a little. Weighing what to say. I've known him long enough.

— You're fucking exhausting, Red, — he finally said and stubbed out his cigarette in a cheap plastic ashtray with a loud tap. — I just walked in. Through the entrance. Like a normal fucking person. You sleep like shit, you look even worse. Maybe you just didn't notice me. And have you even heard your own voice? You sound like... — he paused for a second, taking another drag and scratching the back of his head — well, like a kid, yeah.

I turned sharply, staring at him. He didn't even twitch. Fucking calm. Too calm.

— Go to hell, — I muttered, and goddammit, now I heard it too, and I didn't like it. But yeah, fuck, he was right. My voice, shit. It wasn't mine at all. Like some brat snapping at his older brother. Or not a brat—fuck all of this shit.

— Just eat, Red, — he said, nodding at the bag of groceries on the table.

— Who the fuck put you in charge here?! — I barked, not expecting the conversation to take this turn, or that commanding tone. I was still the boss, sick or not.

Tom didn't flinch, didn't frown, didn't scoff. He just raised an eyebrow, lazily rolling the burning cigarette between his fingers, like he didn't even see the state I was in.

— The fuck do you mean? — he drawled dryly, crossing his arms over his chest. — I bought you food. Even found those damn corn tortillas you like.

— You could paint my ass in gold for all I care! I don't wanna fucking eat! — I snapped, taking a step toward him, sharper than I should have, and immediately feeling how my chest twitched under the T-shirt, aching as the fabric rubbed unpleasantly against my nipples. Fuck!

But then I froze. Tortillas. Corn tortillas. I was silent for a second, then spoke.

— What kind? — I asked cautiously.

— Fucking tacos, — Tom smirked, sliding a plastic container of food toward me. — You gotta eat, or you're gonna die. Look at you, all shriveled up. And I'm not dragging your dead ass across the border.

My eyes flicked to the bag, where, among other things, a plastic container of tacos lay. Wrapped in foil, still giving off a faint but damn appetizing smell. Fuck knows why they suddenly seemed so good to me—maybe because, out of all the shit I'd been eating on the road, this was the only thing that was actually decent.

— What the fuck are you staring at me for? Take it, — Tom grinned, lightly tossing the bag in his palm.

I frowned. Take it? Seriously? After I just made a whole dramatic scene about not eating?

I wanted to say *go fuck yourself*, but... Tacos. This wasn't some shitty gas station snack. This was something that, I just realized, I *actually* fucking wanted. Slowly, as if admitting defeat to myself, I reached out, yanked the container with the tortillas. Opened it. The smell hit me—corn, meat, spices. Hot, savory, with the perfect balance of flavors. Spicy, but not enough to burn, just enough to wrap my tongue in warmth. The meat pulled apart in juicy strands, the corn tortilla crunched slightly under my teeth, and the salsa added that perfect tangy-sweet note.

I didn't even notice how I'd already finished the first bite and was reaching for the second.

Tom watched in silence.

— By the way, you didn't really like tacos before...

— But they're fucking good, you dumbass, — I replied with my mouth full.

Tom smirked, like some puzzle was coming together in his head. Yeah, he wasn't slow, no wonder we'd been side by side for so many years. He kept watching me while I chewed in silence, sinking my teeth into the corn tortilla with appetite, even though I really hadn't been into Mexican food before. Maybe that was weird, but I didn't give a shit. This was seriously fucking delicious.

Tom didn't take his eyes off me. He was smoking, lazily and calmly as always, but that squinted gaze of his—he wasn't just looking, he was studying.

— You even notice your shoulder's healed? — he said, blowing smoke to the side.

I froze for a second, chewing the last bite.

Yeah, no shit. I noticed. Way too fast. But I also noticed something else, something I sure as hell didn't wanna talk about.

I pulled up my T-shirt sleeve, looking at the skin where just three days ago there had been a gaping bullet hole. Three days ago, it was a fucking gunshot wound. Clean through. Bullet in, bullet out, flesh swollen, blood seeping. And now? Now there was just a thin, pinkish scar, barely noticeable, like it wasn't even a fresh wound but an old cut from years ago. Like it hadn't happened three days ago, but a year. Or more. This wasn't normal.

Tom narrowed his eyes at my arm. I saw his gaze slide over my shoulder, assessing, thoughtful. Then he looked at me like he was seeing me for the first time.

— Thinner, — he muttered.

— What? — I snapped, yanking my sleeve down and glaring at him.

— Your shoulders, — he clarified, squinting like he wasn't sure if he should say more. — They're smaller. They used to be different.

— Fuck off, — I hissed, and as if to prove to myself that I didn't give a shit, I took a sharp bite of the taco.

Fuck, why the hell did I even show him that? Set myself up. Gave him a reason to dig. And now he was sitting there, watching, analyzing. I was fucking done with this.

I chewed, staring at my plate, even though my head was buzzing with unwanted thoughts. Tom had seen them, those goddamn things on my chest. Of course, he had. And it seemed like he got it. He wasn't fucking stupid. Maybe he didn't get everything, but judging by the look on his face, he was already putting together some serious fucking theories. He suspected something. I needed to calm down—I was letting this shit get to me way too much.

— You should see a doctor, — Tom suddenly said, still watching me with that same sharp, squinted focus that was starting to get under my skin.

I groaned, rolling my eyes. Fuck, how the hell was I supposed to stay calm like this?!

— Oh yeah? And what the fuck am I supposed to tell him? "Doc, my wound healed faster than fucking Superman, and I think I might be turning into a..."

I cut myself off.

The words stuck in my throat like I'd bitten my tongue. Shit. I shouldn't have said that. Not even hinted at it. Not even as a joke.

Tom watched me carefully. Too carefully.

I clenched my jaw and turned away, grabbing a bottle of water from the bag just to keep my hands busy.

— As soon as we cross the border, — I muttered, — I'll go see Johnny.

Tom nodded slowly.

— Yeah, — he murmured, flicking the ash off his cigarette.

He didn't say anything else. Didn't ask what I almost said, didn't push. But fuck, that "yeah" weighed more than a hundred questions. It hung in the air, pressing on every nerve in my body.

I took another sip of water, trying not to look at him. Not that it mattered—I knew he was still watching me.

Fuck. Why was he pissing me off so much all of a sudden?

CHAPTER 7

Road Adventure.

(Night of the 9th to the 10th day since the transformation)

We were speeding down the night road, cutting through the dusty desert while the Mustang's engine roared, breaking the silence of this place. I sat in the passenger seat, staring ahead into the dark emptiness of the road, where only the occasional road sign appeared. Tom was driving, his left hand resting casually on the wheel. I wondered—do I look like that behind the wheel too?

And only now did I realize one unpleasant detail that hadn't crossed my mind before.

Tom had been driving this whole time.

Tom, for fuck's sake. I understood when we had just bolted from the chase and were racing to get as far away as possible, but now? Why the hell was I in the passenger seat?

I had always been the one driving. Always.

Tom suddenly jerked the wheel, swerving around an unexpected pothole, and I nearly slammed my shoulder against the door. But that wasn't the worst part. My breasts—heavier than yesterday and now fully noticeable by weight—bounced in sync with the movement. The t-shirt instantly slid against my skin, brushing over my nipples. A shudder ran through me. The sensation was disgusting—both ticklish and painful at the same time. My fucking muscles were supposed to tense up from the jolt of the car, not... this.

On instinct, I grabbed my chest, trying to hold it down so it wouldn't move so damn much. My palms immediately sank into the soft flesh—too unfamiliar, too... fuck, real. That made it even worse. I exhaled sharply, gritting my teeth, and yanked my hands away, feeling heat spread across my face from sheer irritation. It wasn't just unnatural—it was humiliating.

Suddenly, the flick of a lighter. The stink of tobacco. Thick, acrid smoke.

A wave of disgust hit me instantly.

— For fuck's sake... — I whipped around to Tom, yanking my sleeve over my nose. — Can you go, like, five fucking minutes without that shit?!

Tom slowly turned his head toward me, squinted, blew out a cloud of smoke—making me feel even worse—and chuckled lazily.

— Since when did you get so delicate, Red? — he took another drag, eyes on the road.

I clenched my teeth, furrowing my brows.

— Since you, asshole, started blowing smoke right in my face, — I snapped, getting pissed again, though for an entirely different reason. Deep down, I knew it wasn't really the cigarette or the gross smoke that was pissing me off, but I refused to acknowledge that and quickly added when he tried to take another drag: — Put that shit out!

Tom slowly shifted his gaze to me, his lips twitching slightly, but he didn't smirk. He just silently flicked the cigarette out the window, snapped the lighter shut, and stuffed it back into his pocket.

— Happy now?

I turned away toward the window angrily, breathing heavily, trying to ignore the weird sensation of these breasts and the empty space between my legs that felt disturbingly noticeable. It pissed me off. Infuriated me.

— You're acting... kinda jumpy today, — Tom said, glancing at me from the corner of his eye. — Or is this still withdrawal?

— Fuck off, — I muttered, sinking into the seat, which suddenly felt uncomfortable. Though, to be fair, it had already seemed too damn stiff before, but at least I could ignore it then.

The worst part was that after just a couple of minutes, the nausea hit again. It came out of nowhere—a wave of heat ran down my spine, twisted my stomach, tightened my muscles. I hunched forward, clutching my gut, as a sick lump rose in my throat.

— Fuck... — I croaked, gritting my teeth.

— Again? — Tom frowned, stealing a quick glance at me. — Been a while since the last time, though.

— What... — I barely managed to get out, trying to swallow down the nausea.

Tom sighed, shaking his head, and abruptly pulled the Mustang over to the side of the road. I barely managed to shove the door open and lean out before everything came up.

The nausea wasn't as violent as before, but it was still disgusting. My fingers clutched the edge of the car door in a tight grip as I forced out whatever was left in my stomach.

Tom remained seated in the chair, just as calm, only giving a slight shake of his head.

— Hasn't made you puke in a while, — he said lazily, as if we were talking about the weather. — Since this morning. Maybe you're getting better?

And yeah, even the nausea felt easier to handle now.

Through the ringing in my ears, I heard the door on his side slam shut. Tom climbed out, let out a loud yawn, and then came the familiar click of a lighter. The smell of tobacco instantly filled the air, making me shudder.

— Fuck, — I hissed, swallowing the bitterness in my mouth and reaching for a bottle of water. — Grave, I fucking asked you...

Tom didn't rush to answer. He just kept silently dragging on his damn cigarette, squinting at the horizon like it held some great secret.

I nervously unscrewed the cap, brought the bottle to my lips, and took a greedy gulp. The water was warm, with that nasty plastic aftertaste, but at least it washed away the sour sting of vomit from my tongue. I swallowed again, breathing heavily, and felt something inside me slowly unclench.

But the cigarette smoke still reached me. And we needed to get moving, not stand here in the middle of the road, waiting for some passing car to spot us—especially if that car belonged to one of Gutierrez's people.

— Put that shit out and get behind the wheel. We need to get the fuck out of here before someone catches us, — I snapped, then immediately gritted my teeth, pissed at how weak that came out. Too soft, too high. Like I hadn't barked an order but fucking whined it.

Tom exhaled smoke, squinting into the darkness, then glanced at me over his cigarette.

— I want to smoke, Red.

My mouth opened, and I froze mid-motion, already ready to snap back, but then—fuck—I felt a sharp, unpleasant pressure in my lower stomach.

I clenched my thighs together instinctively, trying to keep my face neutral, but the feeling was persistent. Like a bucket of ice water dumped over me. A shitty, ordinary thing that used to be solved in two minutes, but now—it wasn't just "taking a piss." Now it meant squatting.

Before, I had the motel or a gas station. Now, it was just empty land, darkness, and fucking Tom.

I gritted my teeth, forcing myself to breathe evenly. Not now. I needed to stay in control. Couldn't let Tom see another crack in my goddamn armor.

— What, why'd you go quiet? — Tom was looking at me with his usual unbothered expression, but in his gray eyes, I saw something. Did he fucking figure it out?! Shit, of course he did! He's not fucking stupid!

— Nothing, — I threw back, turning away, trying to think.

Fuck, if I walk off, it'll confirm his suspicions. If I stay and just unzip, I'm gonna piss all over myself. Fuck, I need to go so bad.

I swallowed hard, the pressure inside only getting worse, and stole a quick glance at Tom. Shit. He could see it. He could see how tense I was, how I was shifting uncomfortably, slightly hunching forward like I was trying to hide something.

— ...You seem like you wanna say something, Red, — he drawled, blowing out another stream of smoke.

Fucking hell. He sees everything.

— I need to... — I shut my mouth abruptly.

— Take a piss?

I swallowed again, refusing to show weakness, but my face in the dim headlights must've said it all.

— Then go, why are you just standing there? — He nodded toward the bushes by the roadside. — I won't look if that's what you're worried about.

I clenched my teeth in silence. Fuck. This was a disaster. He already knew.

Spinning on my heel, I stomped off into the darkness, my boots suddenly feeling a size too big. They slipped, dragged with every step. Fucking height, fucking changes. These shoes weren't made for me anymore.

Calm the fuck down, Vince. Just calm the fuck down. Why the hell are you freaking out over this? He knows, so what? At least he's keeping his mouth shut—not that it helps.

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Okay, starting to feel a little better. Just take a piss. Nothing hard about that, right?

I hesitated for a second when I finally got far enough. Tom's silhouette was still visible near the car. He was still smoking, not looking in my direction. What a fucking gentleman.

Down below, everything was on fire. Every nerve screaming at me to just get it over with. My hands trembled as I fumbled with my belt—fingers, thinner and nimbler than before, struggling with the buckle, forcing me to concentrate just to undo the damn button on my jeans. The denim slid down easily, like it had been waiting for this moment the whole time.

I knew what I'd see. But I still didn't want to look.

I just crouched down, gripping my knees, and immediately felt the cold night air hit my bare ass and between my thighs.

The skin on my legs—it was so smooth. I could feel it under my own hands, clearer than ever before.

The liquid hit the ground with a soft rustle, and I closed my eyes, feeling the heat rush to my cheeks. This was... humiliating. Especially when I realized that even the sound was different—quiet, like a trickle from a kid's watering can. Everything inside me clenched, and I knew I couldn't take it anymore. Tears pricked at my eyelids, and I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to hold them back.

I stayed like that for a few more seconds, squatting there with my bare ass out, trying to calm myself down. And I actually managed to, but the moment I felt the wind brushing between my legs—like a reminder that there was nothing hanging there anymore—I yanked my jeans up. The fabric immediately dug into my widened hips. Now they fit like they belonged to someone else—baggy at the waist but painfully tight below.

Fuck, I need to calm down... I'm getting too worked up. This isn't like me.

— So, feel better? — Tom asked, standing with his back to me as I approached the car.

I took a deep breath, straightening up and wiping my sweaty forehead with my palm.

— Yeah, — I muttered, pulling a mask of indifference over my face, though it was getting harder and harder to hold.

He turned around, flicking his cigarette butt under his boot. His gaze slid over my figure and lingered on my chest, pressing against the wrinkled T-shirt.

— What the fuck are you staring at? — I snapped, but my voice cracked into a slightly high-pitched note of irritation. I clenched my jaw, trying to force out my usual hoarseness. — You've seen it already...

Tom slowly raised a hand and scratched his stubbled chin. His eyes narrowed—that same look he got when lining up a shot before pulling the trigger.

— Your jeans are slipping, — he stated flatly. — I don't give a shit what the hell's happening to you. But if you fall while we're moving, I'm not dragging your ass.

I gritted my teeth, trying to keep at least some composure, and got into the car.

Shit, he's right. My jeans really are slipping. My waist had narrowed, and now the waistband hung loose like I'd stolen someone else's pants. At the same time, they were tight as hell around my hips, squeezing, chafing with every move.

This whole situation wasn't just weird anymore—it was turning fucking humiliating.

The car slipped back into its usual motion, and I exhaled heavily, leaning forward and rubbing my temples. My body ached, but it wasn't the brutal, gut-wrenching pain from before. Now, it felt more like a weird pressure, like something inside was still shifting and, fuck, kept shifting.

The highway lines flickered in the darkness, oncoming headlights rarely breaking through the night, while Tom drove steadily, confidently, never slowing down. There was something infuriating about how unfazed he was. Like nothing had changed for him. Like this wasn't some fucked-up nightmare, just another drive with just another set of problems.

Meanwhile, my problems were really fucking insane.

— How long to the border? — I muttered, trying to keep my voice steady and low so the cracks wouldn't make it sound too damn light.

— An hour, — Tom replied. — Less if we're lucky.

I nodded silently, staring out the window.

An hour. Not that long.

CHAPTER 8

Johnny, Johnny – an Excellent Doctor

(Day 14 of Transformation)

The tension between me and Tom, built up over this whole damn trip, hung in the air as we stood in front of a rusty door with peeling paint. Johnny Muldoon's clinic, in a rundown part of El Paso, looked the same as always—shabby, neglected, with a fake "Auto Repair" sign at the entrance. This was where the doc patched up gunshot wounds with no questions asked, forged medical papers, fitted veterans with prosthetics when the government failed them, and got rid of "unwanted" evidence.

I had known the doc for years, and I had no reason not to trust him, though I fully understood how insane this upcoming conversation was. Sometimes, I even wondered if I should be here at all.

Standing next to Tom, I felt that familiar anger rising again. I used to tower over him like a mountain, but now... Now he was taller, broader, with wider shoulders. Because now I was shorter. I had to tilt my head up just to look him in the face.

— You going in or what? — Tom muttered lazily, knocking on the door with his knuckles.

I swallowed hard, adjusting the hood of my sweatshirt—the one I had to buy on the way here because my old clothes were too uncomfortable and stood out too much. The last thing I needed was extra attention. The bandages were wrapped tight around my chest, but even they couldn't fully hide the curve that pushed out with every breath. It didn't even fit in my damn hand anymore. I had also switched out my jeans for sweatpants, but even those clung to my hips, emphasizing curves that weren't there before. My sneakers (size 9.5 US, Adidas) didn't flop around like my old boots, but it pissed me off how much smaller they were.

But the worst part? The underwear... women's. Black, plain, cotton—but that didn't make it any better. I had no choice. Mine were just unbearable—rubbing against my skin, chafing between my legs, and squeezing my thighs way too damn tight. Standing in the women's underwear section, trying to find something as basic as possible while Tom casually scrolled through his phone, was probably the worst moment of this whole damn ordeal.

Three days on the road. Fourteen since I set foot on American soil, still thinking it was just the heat, just exhaustion... Just anything but this.

— Well? — Tom said again, hands in his pockets, waiting for me to knock myself. He knew by now that I hated this whole situation. But he didn't take over when he didn't have to, showing his loyalty and proving that, to him, I was still his boss. And I appreciated that.

— Yeah... — I muttered, clenching my fist and knocking. My knuckles hit the cracked wood with a dull thud, and I immediately winced as sharp pain shot through my fingers like someone had stabbed them with needles.

— Fuck! — I hissed through gritted teeth, shaking my hand. My joints felt stiff, my skin too sensitive, too soft. I would've hit harder before, but now even something this small fucking hurt.

From inside, a grumbling voice could be heard.

— For fuck's sake... Who the hell is it now... — Johnny's voice was raspy, like he'd just smoked a pack of cigarettes and washed it down with bourbon. There was the sound of footsteps, then a sharper, louder shout.

— Who's there?! — the hoarse voice barked from behind the door.

I flinched but quickly pulled myself together and took a deep breath—though my lungs struggled against the damn bandages wrapped around my chest. It felt like someone had me in a bear hug, squeezing too tight.

— Johnny, open up, — Tom said calmly.

Silence. Then the clink of a door chain, and the door creaked open.

Johnny Muldoon stood in the doorway, pale as a corpse and just as pissed off as always.

— Grave, what the fuck, huh? Out of all people, you dragged me into this shit? — he said with obvious irritation and a clear look of disgust that only deepened when his eyes landed on me.

I felt something tighten inside me. He didn't recognize me.

Of course, he didn't.

Why the fuck would he?

I looked... fuck, like a girl. There was nothing left of Vince Coulter. No height, no broad shoulders, no muscles, not even my voice.

Johnny narrowed his eyes, glancing between me and Tom like he was trying to solve an equation that just wouldn't add up.

— And who the fuck is this chick? You know I don't—

— Johnny, for fuck's sake! It's me, Red! — I cut him off with a shrill outburst, stepping forward and immediately cursing myself for the way my voice sounded.

Doc blinked, frowned, then suddenly narrowed his eyes, scanning me like he was only now actually seeing what was in front of him.

— What? — he snapped dryly, leaning in slightly, as if checking whether he was being fucked with. — She's fucking nuts, huh, Grave? I definitely don't deal with those.

My mouth went dry as I stared into Johnny's narrowed eyes, breathing heavily. My lips twitched slightly, and I bit the inside of my cheek, trying to keep myself together. Johnny was looking at me like I was just some random chick Tom dragged in for no reason. And fuck, he was right. That's exactly how I looked. Shit, this was humiliating.

I clenched my teeth, dropping my gaze, but then lifted it again just as fast, locking eyes with Johnny. Fuck him. I am who I am. I'm Vince fucking Coulter, and I don't give a shit how I look now.

— Johnny, shut up and let us in, — I gritted out, trying to inject even a drop of my old toughness into my voice, but even I could hear it—it just sounded like some pissed-off girl trying to act tough.

He blinked, now looking at me more closely, but his face remained skeptical.

— I'm being fucking nice, Grave, — he turned to Tom, ignoring me like I was just a piece of furniture. — Just turn around and take this hysterical bitch with you.

I clenched my teeth, already opening my mouth to snap something back, but Tom beat me to it. Without a word, he shoved his shoulder forward, slamming Johnny inside. The door crashed into the wall with a loud bang.

— What the fuck, Grave?! — Johnny yelped, nearly stumbling but quickly straightening up, throwing him a pissed-off glare. — The fuck are you doing?!

— Shut the door, — Tom ordered, stepping inside first.

Muttering something under my breath that wasn't even worth translating, I followed right after, immediately feeling the stale, medical stench hit me—overheated chlorine, alcohol, and some sharp bitterness that made my stomach clench. I swallowed hard, forcing myself to ignore the irritation of how Tom just took control of the situation like I wasn't even there.

Johnny, still glaring at him, angrily slammed the door shut, locking it with an old, rusty bolt.

— Alright, Grave, talk. What the fuck is going on? And who the hell is this chick? You know I don't work with new clients.

I narrowed my eyes.

— This 'chick' is me, motherfucker! — I snapped, trying to keep my voice as low as possible. — Vince. Fucking. Coulter.

Johnny blinked again. Then grimaced.

— You're fucking with me.

— Fuck, Johnny, what the hell, — I exhaled, clenching my fists. — You seriously don't recognize me?

He looked me up and down with a long, piercing gaze, like he was seeing right through my clothes. And at that moment, I felt it even more—I didn't just realize I had changed, I fucking felt it in my skin. His gaze lingered on my face, on my figure, on these fucking hips that were already too wide, on my chest, which, fuck, I could still feel even under the tight bandages, and which was still visible beneath my hoodie. I shuddered involuntarily, crossing my arms over my chest, trying to hide what couldn't be hidden anymore.

— It's Red, Johnny, — Tom said calmly, nodding slightly and scanning the room.

Doc frowned, narrowed his eyes, and looked me up and down again, like he was checking for signs of outright psychosis. His expression said it all—skepticism, irritation, and the barely concealed urge to kick us the fuck out.

— Grave, you've either lost your fucking mind, or you're fucking with me, — he growled through gritted teeth, slowly sliding his hand into the pocket of his stained lab coat. — What the fuck do you mean, this is Red? Do you even hear yourself?

I stepped closer, almost pressing right up against Johnny, making sure his eyes were locked on mine. He was starting to piss me off. That skeptical, frowning face like I was some fucking joke.

— Are you fucking deaf? — I hissed, clenching my fists.

Johnny squinted. His hands disappeared into his pockets, and his thin face twisted into pure irritation.

He slowly shifted his gaze to Tom, who, as always, remained silent, but in his eyes, there was something slow and thoughtful, almost interest.

— Grave, — Johnny drawled, not even looking at me. — What the fuck is this?

I inhaled through my nose, forcing myself not to lunge at him and smash my fist into his eternally tired, skeptical fucking face. Except, first of all, my fist was now fucking small and fragile, and second, I wasn't even sure if I could hit like I used to anymore.

— Look at me, Johnny, — I exhaled, barely holding onto my patience.

— I am looking, — he sneered. — And?

— You seriously don't recognize me? — I hissed, unable to hold back.

Johnny silently studied me like I was some kind of riddle he never asked for. I saw his gaze run over my face—lingering on my cheekbones, which were no longer there, on my lips, now soft and full, on my eyes, wider now, slightly hooded. The scar was gone, but my face was still partially mine. My stare, at least, was still mine.

And I saw it—the way his expression began to shift.

— Twenty years ago, you were lying in a pool of your own fucking blood in that shitty “office” of yours when Baxter's guys shot you up. — My voice trembled with irritation, coming out soft, like I wasn't threatening but pleading. Fuck. I clenched my fists, the bitten-down nails pressing into the new, too-smooth skin. — Who got you back on your feet then, huh, Doc? Who dragged your ass to the Mexicans so they could patch up your goddamn gut? Who covered for you with Desoto when he'd already sharpened his knives? Who?!

Johnny froze.

His eyes narrowed. I could see him mentally flipping through old, dusty files in his head. Still trying to deny it.

— Bullshit. — His voice was hoarse, smoked-out, but not as confident anymore. — I knew Colter. Colter was a man. And you, sweetheart, whoever the hell you are, don't look a damn thing like him.

I flinched.

— Bitch, are you serious?

I stepped closer, almost smashing my forehead into his. He was taller than me now. Just a little. I was used to towering over people, and now...

This was humiliating.

I could feel my body reacting to the anger differently than before. If I were myself, I'd have already slammed him into the wall. But now, all I had was this sticky heat in my gut, trembling fingers, and a voice that, no matter how hard I tried, didn't sound the way it should.

Johnny stayed silent.

— You remember “Georgia,” huh? — My voice pitched higher than I wanted. I stopped, took a loud breath, swallowed the damn irritation, and said quieter: — You were deader than dead until I paid triple what your sorry ass was worth. I saved your worthless hide, and you still owe me.

I leaned in closer, my lips almost brushing his ear.

— I’m Vince Colter.

I saw Johnny swallow hard.

— Where’s your scar?

Fuck. He’s pissing me off.

— Same place as my dick! — I blurted out before I could stop myself.

The silence that followed was so thick you could cut it with a knife. I felt something inside me tighten into an icy lump. Shit, shit, shit! Why the hell did I say that?! I hadn’t told anyone about this out loud, not even Tom. Though, if I thought about it, Tom had figured it out ages ago. Just kept quiet. Like always.

But Johnny... His face right then was fucking priceless. He stood there, blinking like he’d just heard a dog start speaking English.

— You... Are you fucking serious right now? — he exhaled, darting a stunned glance at Tom, as if he could confirm I wasn’t some random psycho chick pretending to be Vince Colter.

Tom, as usual, was unfazed. He just nodded.

— Serious, — he said dryly, hands stuffed in his pockets. — This is Red.

— Fuck... — Johnny stepped back, bumping into the beat-up table cluttered with medical tools. — No, wait, no... I don’t fucking get it! You’re telling me that standing in front of me right now is Vince Colter?! The gang leader, the same Red who broke two of my fingers once because I didn’t get him ketamine fast enough?!

I grimaced, remembering that time. Yeah, it happened. Johnny pissed me off back then with his whining, just like he’s doing now, but now I couldn’t pull that trick again. I let out a loud breath, trying to pull myself together.

— Johnny, for fuck’s sake, can you just shut your mouth and use your brain? — I hissed through gritted teeth. — Yes, it’s me. Yes, I look... like this now. And no, I don’t know what the fuck’s going on. That’s why I’m here.

Johnny swallowed, let out a noisy breath, ran a hand over his face, and blinked a few times, like he was trying to shake off a hallucination.

— So... So... — He threw his hands up in the air, like he was surrendering. — Fine. Okay. Let’s say I buy it, even though it’s total bullshit. But... fuck, HOW?! Is this some shit from the feds? An experiment? A new witness protection trick?! Are you fucking spying on me or something? WHAT IS THIS?!

I clenched my fists, rage boiling inside.

— This. Isn’t. The. Fucking. FBI, — I said slowly and clearly, stepping toward him. — This happened to me. I. Don’t. Know. How.

Johnny still looked like he was about to puke. He glanced at Tom again, but Tom just stood there, silent as a statue.

— Bitch... — he hissed, shaking his head like that’d fix everything. — Wait, wait. Let’s figure this out.

He stepped back a couple paces, pinching the bridge of his nose like he could physically squeeze out what he’d just heard. Then he let out a sharp breath, staring at me with a mix of horror and disbelief.

— Let's say I believe you, though it's complete nonsense, — he grabbed a bottle of bourbon off the table, took a swig, winced, and went on. — How'd it happen?

I slowly rubbed my face. Fucking hands. Fucking thin fingers, fucking skin—soft, smooth, not a single callus. Every time I touched my face, it reminded me that my features weren't there anymore.

— Two weeks ago. Maybe a little more. At first, just weakness, then vomiting, fever, muscles aching like after a fight. And then... — I clenched my teeth, disgust rolling over me in waves. — Then all this shit.

I spread my arms, gesturing at my body.

— I think it's still happening, because my body's aching like... — I took a loud breath, biting my lip, trying to find the words. What fucking words? How do you explain this crap without losing it and screaming?

I clenched my teeth and kept going.

— ...It's like something inside me is being fucking reshaped. Every damn day, something changes, and I don't even know when the hell it's gonna stop. Or if it ever will. — I clenched my fists, sharply turning away, sinking into my thoughts so deeply that I didn't even notice Johnny stepping closer. He pulled my hood back, letting my thick, wavy strands spill down softly. My hair was heavy, silky, with a deep black sheen that glistened even in the dim lamp light. It fell along the sides of my face, nearly reaching my shoulders.

— Are you fucking insane, Johnny? — I hissed, jerking my head away. — What the fuck are you doing?

— Just checking something, — Johnny said with a weird expression, stepping back and pulling out a cigarette.

— I think you caught something in Africa, — Tom suddenly said, his voice as calm as ever, without even looking at me.

His tone was fucking steady. He just stood there, leaning against the wall, saying it like we were talking about the damn weather.

— The fuck? — I rasped.

— A virus, — Tom continued, crossing his arms. — Remember when I told you about "Amalu"?

— Again with this shit? — I snapped, glancing at Doc for the first time and seeing something close to actual interest in his eyes. I decided not to make things worse. — Fine. Okay. Don't think you're the only smart one here. You think I haven't fucking thought about it myself? — I scoffed, now turning to Johnny.

— I ate with some bastard there. A French guy. "Jackal" Duval. He gave me some local shit, and I didn't even pay attention to it back then. But what does food have to do with this? And why me? Why not everyone else who ate the same crap?

Johnny rubbed his chin with two fingers, looking from me to Tom, like he was trying to figure out just how deep in this fucked-up mess he'd gotten himself.

— Alright, — he exhaled loudly, staring at me. — This all sounds like...

Johnny hesitated. His eyes, which had been full of skepticism just a second ago, narrowed as he looked at me again.

— Like what? — I growled, straightening up, trying to figure out what the hell was going through his head.

— Like something I sure as fuck don't wanna get involved with, — Johnny finally answered, nervously scratching the back of his head. He took another swig of bourbon, grimaced, and let out a heavy breath.

— Fuck... Alright. Let's go step by step. Shit, Red, or whatever the hell I should call you now... First, I'm taking your blood.

His words made my skin crawl, but I kept my face blank. At least on the outside. Because inside... inside, this whole thing was already fucking eating at me. What the hell was I supposed to be called now?!

— Red, — I muttered, frowning. — Still Vince Coulter.

I couldn't admit I was a woman. I couldn't even stand hearing anyone try to give me a new name. Coulter. I was Coulter. Always had been, always would be, no matter what the fuck this shit had done to me.

— Whatever, — Johnny scoffed, shrugging like he couldn't give less of a shit about my name. He just brushed a stack of papers off a chair and sat down, gesturing for me to come closer.

— Hand, — he said, popping open a plastic container filled with cotton swabs.

CHAPTER 9

You're a chick.

I was sitting on a hard chair in Johnny's makeshift office while he rummaged through some drawer, mumbling to himself. Tom stood silently by the wall, arms crossed over his chest, watching everything with his usual laziness, like we weren't in the middle of a fucking circus but just discussing which whiskey to get for the evening.

— So... — he muttered, sealing a test tube with my blood and placing it in a container. — The blood test will take time. At least a week.

— Fucking great, — I muttered through clenched teeth, leaning back on the old, stinking chair. It reeked of chlorine, alcohol, and something else—maybe cheap antiseptics or whatever Johnny drinks instead of real whiskey.

— And what do you want me to say, huh? — Johnny exhaled loudly and stood up, flicking his lighter. His hands—dry, knotted, with long-yellowed fingers from cigarettes—looked unnaturally steady, but I saw the small twitch at the corners of his eyes. He was nervous. And he was still looking at me like he hadn't fully bought into all this shit. — To check for everything, I need equipment. I don't have it here.

I took a deep breath, feeling the bandages painfully tighten around my chest. Fuck. This shit is really uncomfortable, but without it, these goddamn nipples just burn like hell from every bit of friction.

— Just tell me you know how to stop this shit and how to get me back to normal, — I said, trying to ignore the smell of smoke from the cigarette dangling from the doc's lips, not wanting to look like a completely fucked-up hysterical chick.

Johnny smirked crookedly, tapping his ash into an old tin coffee can.

— Back to normal? — he drawled with obvious skepticism. — I'd first like to understand what the fuck is happening to you and how contagious it is.

Contagious. Fuck, I hadn't even thought about it that way. Though... shit, I didn't even know if it was or not. If Tom had caught it, I'd already be seeing the first symptoms, right? Right?

— You think this is some kind of virus? — I exhaled, standing up from the chair.

— Fuck if I know what this could be, — he muttered, looking at me like I was some kind of freak medical anomaly. — Everything you've described points to it being some new fucked-up virus.

I gritted my teeth and jerked my head toward Tom.

— Then why the fuck is he fine?

Tom raised an eyebrow but didn't react, like this had nothing to do with him at all.

— Not everything spreads through the air, and besides, why the fuck are you bitching? Take your clothes off already. — Johnny lazily waved a hand at me, throwing a quick glance at Tom.

I froze.

Something inside me clenched tight—from... fear? No, goddamn it, why the hell would I feel fear? The doc had seen me a dozen times when he pulled bullets out of my body, and besides—I didn't give a shit. I was still Colter. Red, motherfucking Colter.

But the moment Johnny said, "Take your clothes off," something inside me just snapped.

I didn't move. Just stared at him, at his wrinkled, smoke-stained face, feeling my palms start to sweat. This is bullshit. Complete bullshit. I used to walk around naked while the doc stitched me up or pulled out shrapnel—I didn't give a fuck. But now...

— What, you deaf? — Johnny raised an eyebrow, taking another drag from his cigarette. — I need to examine you completely if you want me to figure out what the fuck is going on with you.

My gaze shifted to Tom automatically.

He was silent. As always. Just standing there, leaning against the wall, watching me, waiting. His face was blank—no surprise, no skepticism, no smugness. Just his gaze—heavy, piercing, like he saw more than he should.

I clenched my teeth.

Why the fuck was I even looking at Tom in moments like this? He wasn't my protector. Not my fucking guardian. He was just there. Because he'd always been there.

— I'm not fucking stripping, — I growled, glaring at Johnny from under my brows.

The doc smirked.

— Oh, come on, baby, what's there to be shy about? — He stubbed his cigarette out in an overflowing ashtray, lazily looking at me. — You're still Red, right? And Red never gave a fuck about shame.

Shy?

A shudder ran through me. Fuck. Yeah. I was shy. Goddamn it, this is a total... a total fucking disaster. Shit. And what the fuck did he just call me?

— I'm not your baby, — I snapped, gripping the bottom of my hoodie. — And I'm not fucking shy, you old bastard.

I felt my hands trembling, not fully understanding why. Or maybe I did understand, but I just didn't want to admit it.

— Jesus fucking Christ, relax, will you? — Johnny barked, exhaling smoke in irritation. — I'm not trying to grab your ass, I need to figure out what's happening to your body. Maybe your insides aren't even yours anymore. Maybe you've got two hearts or a spleen the size of a fist. Or maybe there's nothing fucking human left in you at all.

Johnny smirked, flicking ash into an overflowing ashtray.

Bitch. Alright, fuck it, he's right. Factually right, and there's no point arguing.

So, Vince, shove all that fucking fear up your ass and just do what needs to be done. Don't forget who you are and everything you've been through.

But inside... inside, something still pressed down on me, twisting into a knot, scattering all my thoughts.

I don't want them to look.

Not even so much them, but... Tom.

Fuck... Why the hell do I even care about this?!

I exhaled sharply, gritting my teeth, and without looking at anyone, grabbed the hem of my hoodie. The moment the fabric stretched upward, I felt the bandages I used to bind my chest squeeze even tighter. The sensation was disgusting—like someone had pressed two hot pillows against me. Except these weren't pillows. These were parts of my own body.

The hood got stuck on my hair at first, tugging, and I shuddered at how long it had grown.

— Fuck, — I hissed, but a second later, I was standing there in nothing but a top made of bandages, tightly wrapped around my chest.

— Holy shit... — Johnny froze.

I saw how his eyes narrowed, slowly moving from my neck to my chest, then down to my waist, and even lower. His face, usually cynical and detached, twisted into something I fucking hated.

— Doc, for fuck's sake, quit staring at me like that, yeah? — I forced out, trying to keep my voice steady.

Johnny blinked but didn't look away. The corner of his mouth twitched slightly.

— Well, damn. Turns out you're a hot piece of ass, Red.

Something inside me fucking boiled over.

— WHAT THE FUCK?! — I roared, clenching my fists.

Johnny raised his hands, like he was surrendering, but that smirk didn't go anywhere.

— Relax, relax. It's just nervous laughter, that's all. — He chuckled, scratched his chin, pulled out a cigarette, and stuck it between his teeth. — I'm just trying to wrap my head around what the hell is happening. You sure this ain't some prank? Got a hidden camera somewhere?

I clenched my teeth so hard I nearly cracked them.

— I'm fucking serious. I'm standing right in front of you as I am, and I am NOT in the mood for jokes.

Johnny squinted slightly, his gaze sweeping over me again—this time not like some street pervert but more like a professional. Then, suddenly, he stepped toward me, grabbed my wrist, and before I could jerk away, his cold fingers pressed against my skin.

— Shit... — he muttered. — Thin. The bones, too. The joints. And the skin...

He ran his finger slowly along my wrist, and a shiver ran down my spine.

— HEY, FUCK OFF! — I yanked my hand back, immediately feeling my chest shift slightly from the movement.

— Relax, princess, — Johnny smirked lazily, but the mockery in his eyes had faded. Now he just looked... thoughtful. And I fucking hated it.

— I swear to God, I'm gonna break your fucking face, — I muttered, but just then, Tom let out a quiet chuckle.

I snapped my head toward him, glaring.

He didn't say a word. Just stood there against the wall, arms crossed. His expression was the same— detached, calm. But I didn't like the way he was looking.

— Alright, I think Grave should really leave now.

Tom didn't move.

He was still leaning against the wall, steady, unshaken, which only pissed me off more. Like he didn't need to watch. Like he had already seen everything.

I clenched my fists, feeling my thin fingers twitch from... what? Frustration? Tension? Fuck if I knew.

— Tom, — I hissed, trying to keep my voice low, but fuck, that took way too much effort now. — Get the fuck out.

He blinked slowly, looking at me. Then at Johnny. And finally, without a single word, he pushed off the wall and headed toward the exit.

But the second he passed me, I caught it—that scent. Faint, barely noticeable. A mix of tobacco, gasoline, and something warm. Something undeniably male.

I swallowed hard, stepping back as he walked past, not even sparing me a glance.

The door shut.

Tom was gone.

I exhaled slowly, feeling my shoulders finally loosen.

— What, seriously embarrassed? — Johnny smirked, pulling out another cigarette and flicking his lighter. — I mean, of him? Grave? For real?

The fuck? What the hell is he implying?!

I turned to Johnny sharply, feeling something inside me twist into a tight knot. He took a lazy drag, watching me with an amused smirk, and I already knew what was coming.

— Why you looking at me like that, Red? — He flicked some ash into an overflowing tin can, squinting.

— I just asked. But damn, you flinched real hard.

— Go fuck yourself, — I gritted out, but something still pricked at me from the inside—maybe his tone, maybe the whole situation itself.

Johnny smirked crookedly, and I could tell he didn't believe me for shit.

— Hey, what do I care, — he drawled lazily. — It's just, y'know, I've seen all kinds of shit in my life. Had guys come back from war so fucked up in the head they couldn't even walk into a bar unless there was a "Welcome" sign on the door. Had a buddy I worked with in Iraq—when he got home, he'd start smashing windows in his own house, thinking it was some enemy trap.

I gritted my teeth.

— What are you getting at, Doc?

— That the psyche is a tricky thing... It doesn't break all at once. Bit by bit. At first, you don't even notice, and then... bam! — He snapped his fingers. — And suddenly, you wanna fuck your best friend.

— I swear, I'll knock you out, you asshole!

— Go ahead, kill me if you want, but facts are facts, Red, — Johnny took a drag and exhaled smoke toward the ceiling. — Alright, come on, take all that shit off and get on the table.

I didn't move.

Somewhere deep inside, I already knew this moment was inevitable, but fuck... That damn nausea hit me again. Not from sickness, not from the transformation—just from the sheer realization that I'd have to fucking do this.

Strip.

Expose all this bullshit I had been trying so damn hard to ignore.

Shit, I couldn't even think about it properly.

Johnny must've noticed I had frozen in place because he clicked his tongue in annoyance and tilted his head to the side.

— The fuck's up with you? You're the one who came here. If you want me to understand anything, I need a full examination.

I clenched my fists.

— Yeah, I fucking got it, — I snapped, feeling a thin trickle of sweat run down the back of my neck.

Slowly, I reached for the bandages.

The moment my fingers grabbed onto the rough fabric, I felt just how tightly it was digging into my skin. Shit, I had bound myself so hard I could barely breathe properly, but even that hadn't helped. That fucking weight was still there. I could still feel my breasts moving with every breath, my nipples rubbing uncomfortably against the fabric.

I gritted my teeth.

Yanked the bandages off sharply, unraveling them around myself.

The fabric peeled away with a dry crackle, like I was pulling off some kind of fucking spiderweb.

With every layer that came undone, the painful pressure eased, but along with it...

Fuck.

The second the last strip of bandage hit the floor, I felt my chest surge forward. Freed from the tight wrapping, it dropped slightly before bouncing back up with a faint, barely noticeable jiggle.

I didn't even look down.

I didn't want to see it.

Shit, just feeling it was enough.

Cool air brushed against the now-exposed skin, and my nipples stiffened instantly, as if even the lightest breeze could set them off.

I slowly lifted my gaze and met Johnny's eyes.

He was looking.

Of course, he was fucking looking.

But there was no skepticism in his stare anymore, no mockery. Just a cold, clinical analysis.

— Solid C cup, — he muttered, tilting his head, then casually added, as if stating a fact. — Nice tits.

I instinctively took a step back, but the damn things—my fucking breasts—jerked along with me, bouncing slightly under their own weight. The heaviness of these goddamn sacks of flesh was too real, too unnatural.

— Are you fucking serious? — I growled, almost automatically pressing them down with my right hand, trying to stabilize them somehow. My palm landed on my left breast, and I felt it yield under my fingers, the soft flesh molding beneath my grip. My wrist pressed against the hardened nipple, stiff from the cold air.

— Fuck... — I squeezed my eyes shut, clenching my teeth.

My skin was smooth, soft, unnaturally warm, and my nipples were so fucking sensitive that I nearly flinched when my fingers brushed against them by accident. What the hell?! They reacted to even the slightest touch—twitching, stiffening, like I... Shit, I didn't even want to think of the comparisons.

I yanked my hand away, but the weight remained. I felt it with every breath, every tiny movement. Even standing still was weird now—my center of gravity had shifted, like I was being pulled forward. I could try to ignore it all I wanted, but... it was real.

— Damn... — Johnny mused, tilting his head to the side. — If I didn't know you, I'd think you were just some refugee girl lost somewhere in South Texas.

— What the fuck kind of refugee? — I muttered, not fully understanding what the hell he was implying.

— Just thinking out loud, — he mumbled, lighting another cigarette.

I tensed.

— Can you fucking talk like a normal person?

Johnny blew out a stream of smoke to the side, shook his head slightly, then leaned forward, studying my face carefully.

— Have you even looked at yourself in a mirror, Red?

I exhaled sharply. This was starting to piss me off.

— Yeah, I have! So what?

Johnny smirked, flicking ash into an already overflowing tin can, and lazily explained:

— Just that if I didn't know who you used to be, I'd think you were some runaway Mexican chick who escaped from a brothel.

I clenched my teeth so hard my jaw nearly creaked.

— Are you fucking serious?

— Oh, dead serious, — Johnny smirked, but the usual mockery wasn't in his eyes anymore. He held the cigarette between his fingers and gestured toward me. — Your skin's tanned, smooth, like you've been roasting under the Mexican sun your whole life. Dark eyes, black hair—shiny, wavy, long as hell. Lips?

Full. Cheekbones? Soft. Chin? Delicate. Shit, throw in some earrings and a bit of makeup, and you're a whole damn picture.

— Go fuck yourself, — I spat, clenching my fists.

— Oh, I will, but you... — He paused, looking me over. — By the way, did you know Snake's been spreading rumors that you've lost your mind?

I blinked. A sharp ringing filled my ears.

— The fuck did you just say?

Johnny squinted slyly, his expression making it clear that he already knew everything and that I should've figured it out myself instead of asking dumb questions.

— Well, what did you think, huh? — His voice was mocking, but his eyes held that cold, calculating look I fucking hated. — You disappear, and no one asks questions? — Johnny spread his arms like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

I clenched my teeth. Out of anger, out of helplessness—fuck knows what exactly.

— And what kind of bullshit is he telling?

— Well, like I said, Snake's been running his mouth all over town, saying you've completely lost it. Says you went full psycho before you disappeared. Drinking like a fucking madman, locking yourself up in your office, not coming out. Then you suddenly decided Gutierrez was setting you up, grabbed him, Grave, and two other guys, and took off to Mexico. And there...

He paused, lit a cigarette, took a drag, and looked me dead in the eyes before continuing:

— And there, according to him, you totally fucking snapped. Started shooting at anything that moved. Took out two of your own, then, supposedly, tried to kill Billy too, but of course, he miraculously survived. Says you shot him in the shoulder, but he 'barely managed to escape'—and, of course, cover his own ass. Tom left with you because, well, 'someone had to keep an eye on the psycho.' And after that—nothing. Radio silence. 'Think about it, guys,' Snake goes on, 'you saw it yourselves—he wasn't right those last few days! Spent three days out cold, then lost his fucking mind in Mexico.'

I clenched my teeth. Motherfucker.

— He's really saying all that?

Johnny snorted, flicking ash into an overflowing tin can.

— Yep. Also added that you were probably working with the feds. — He raised an eyebrow, studying me. — Apparently, you found some documents, some records, proof that you were feeding intel to some 'important people.' Basically, your buddy set himself up real nice, and now you're enemy number one to everyone who's ever had a drink with you.

My fingers curled into fists.

— I'll fucking kill him, — I hissed.

— A little late for that, baby, — Johnny smirked, leaning in, but jerked back just as fast when I shot him a murderous glare.

Baby.

That shit pissed me off now. Pissed me off so fucking much.

I let out a sharp breath, feeling my chest ache weirdly as I moved. Fuck, I couldn't even get properly angry without feeling this damn weight, this fucking burden that was now part of me. Skin too sensitive, lines too soft, changing me into someone I wasn't.

— Okay. Let's say your ex-buddy spread rumors that you're either dead, a rat, or fucking insane. The question now, Red... — Johnny took another drag and exhaled smoke. — What are you gonna do?

I gritted my teeth.

— I'm going back to Houston and gutting him.

Johnny smirked.

— Like this?

I jerked my head toward him but froze immediately.

Like this, what the fuck?

But I knew damn well what he meant.

I took a sharp breath, looking away, cursing the stench of cheap antiseptic mixed with tobacco smoke that filled the air around me.

— Fuck... — I finally hissed.

Johnny grimaced, looking at me.

— Alright, fuck it. That's for later. But right now — strip down completely and get on the table.

I stiffened.

— The fuck?

— Red, cut the theatrics, — he sighed, exhausted. — I'm a doctor, and I don't give a shit if you've got balls or not. You came to me, which means you need help. So do me a favor and let me do my damn job.

Johnny chuckled, tilting his head as he put out his cigarette.

— Though, I can already give you a diagnosis. You're a chick.

I clenched my teeth so hard my jaw ached. A painful knot tightened in my chest, but I didn't even have time to react before Johnny continued, looking as smug as he possibly could:

— But since you're here, let's check just how much of a chick you are now. I don't have an ultrasound, but I sure as hell know my shit.

He stood up, stretched his hands out in front of him, pressing his fingers together as if preparing for surgery.

— You're fucking serious?

— You think I'm joking, Red? — Johnny lazily raised an eyebrow. — Yeah, you look like a chick, but if you wanna know what's really going on inside, I need to check. Or you can keep telling yourself this is just some fucked-up dream.

I swallowed hard. Shit, I knew he was right. Everything inside me screamed that this wasn't just some minor change—this was a complete transformation. I could feel how my center of gravity had shifted, how my hips moved differently, how the weight of my breasts had become a part of me, like they'd always been there.

A shiver ran down my spine.

— Why so quiet? — Johnny took another drag, blowing the smoke to the side. — Hurry up and strip.

I clenched my teeth.

— Is this really necessary? — I spat, glaring at him with hatred.

— Hell no, of course not. You can get the fuck out, would make my life easier anyway — Johnny smirked, shrugging. — But are you sure that's you? I remember pulling a bullet out of you once, and you sure as hell didn't scream like a little bitch back then. Or is it different now?

A shudder ran through me. Fuck, he was doing this on purpose. Pushing. Trying to piss me off. And it was working.

I exhaled sharply, feeling my chest rise a little more than it should. Damn it. I already hate this body.

Without a word, I reached for my waistband, slow, like I couldn't even believe I was actually doing this. Johnny watched, lazily squinting, while every muscle in my body tensed like I'd been cornered.

When I started pulling down my sweatpants, the sensation of bare skin—too smooth, too feminine—hit me harder than the act itself.

I took a deep breath.

And pulled them off.