

Storyboard-12

The office is between an electronic and an esoteric book store that are part of the same white-washed brick building in Central City South. Like the two others, the office door has a gate for when it is closed. Unlike them, the gate is without rust, and there is a working camera in the corner with a clean lense giving whoever watches the security feed a view of anyone approaching.

For a surreptitious entry, the back is the best. The camera there is also in perfect working order, but there are homeless living there, putting up tents and creating a visual chaos that can be taken advantage of.

I approach from the front.

This isn't an infiltration, it is a delivery.

The bells over the door chime as I enter. The office is dark after the outside daylight, but there's enough light to make out the three men sitting at the desk places in a half hazard way in the room. A fourth one is against the wall, unused. The only remnant of their fourth member.

Jerry, the J in C, D & J Investigation is the first to notice me, looking up from a book, mug to his lip. Then he chokes on the content, trying to stand, and almost stumbles into his chair. By the time his mug shatters on the floor, Donald and Carl are standing, Carl's hand already on the gun inside his jacket.

Donald looks at the other two's reaction, slightly perplexed. He was unconscious, the precious time we met before getting a good look at me. I was only a shadow in the car's dome light when I kicked him unconscious.

I am not armed.

A conscious decision on my part to lessen how threatening I appear. I wear jeans and a t-shirt. My harness, as well as Desert Eagle, are in the trunk of the Lumina I rented.

"If it's going to put you at ease, I can undress."

"Why the fuck would we want that?" Jerry demands.

"So you can be sure I'm not armed. Clearly, you are expecting this to turn violent."

"You did break Jerry's leg the last time we met," Carl says, hand still on his gun. "And kicked Donald unconscious."

"That was him?"

"I wouldn't," I state as he reaches for a drawer in his desk.

"You kind of implied that if we ever met again, we were going to regret it," Jerry says.

"If you ever trailed me again. I would have made you regret it. You didn't. While this visit is related to what you did, it isn't a result of your actions."

"It still doesn't make me anymore comfortable, considering we couldn't find out anything about who you are," Carl says.

"Not even a name," Jerry adds.

"It's John."

"Really?"

"John Gacy."

"Like the..." Donald says.

"Yes. Like the serial killer. I get that a lot."

"I thought he'd died," Jerry says.

"He was white," I point out.

"Yeah, you having the name of some famous serial killer isn't making me any more comfortable than when you told me the situation we were in was only about which one of us was more willing to commit murder," Carl said.

"It did lead to you standing down and Jerry living."

"Okay, I get what you meant about the creepiness factor," Donald says. "Now I'm kind of happy I was unconscious for all of it. But since he hasn't started anything, maybe we shouldn't antagonize the one who clearly got the best of you, Carl."

"He didn't get the best of me. Jerry was my main concern."

"But Donald's got a point," Jerry says. "I get the feeling that if you push the issue, he's going to be happy to get the better of you again, and I'd rather not be caught in the middle of your bruised ego and his fists."

"So you just want to let him do whatever he wants?"

"What I want is to deliver a message."

"Yeah," Donald says. "I'm now siding with Carl. How often does that little warning end with no one

bleeding?"

"My message is only words, and it's not for you."

"If it isn't for us," Jerry says, "why are you in our office?"

"Because you are the only persons I know with a form of contact with the person the message is for."

"And you aren't delivering it directly because?" Donald asks.

"Because he doesn't know who they are," Carl says. "And just so you know. We don't know either."

"I'm well aware."

Alex went through their systems within days of us settling at his house. C, D & J Investigation works with clients whose morality is questionable at best, being private investigators, but they are as above reproach as men in their profession can afford to be and remain alive. They are also of the older school way of running investigations. Their computer expert was killed seven years ago, and they didn't replace her. Donald handles online research, while Carl and Jerry do most of the legwork.

Whatever their method to update the people who hired them to follow me and Alex when we returned from Mexico, it does not rely on the internet.

"And you think we can still contact them?" Carl asked.

"Tell me you no longer have a way to pass along a message, and I will leave."

Jerry and Donald exchange a look, and Carl sighs. "That is so not helping, you two."

I wait. Carl debates with himself. He tried to decide if I will accept it if he tells me they can't pass along the message, when his partners have made it clear they can.

He sighs again. "What's the message. We'll pass it along."

"Tell them that if they dismantle their human trafficking operations, we will stand down. They can continue with their drug running and whatever other criminal operations, the only aspect we object to is the human trafficking."

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"I'm not saying I like it," Alex tells me, sitting on the kitchen counter, too large cup of coffee in hand.

"This leaves them free to come after us, Alex." I'm on my second pemmican bar.

"And if it was just you and me, I'd say fuck this and let burn down the city to get to them, but they figured out enough to have a trap ready for each or us."

"Which we handled."

"Yeah, but neither of us saw it coming. And that's not the point. What happens when they find out about Emil? This isn't some gang members just looking to scare us into taking them seriously. Those are professional killers. Emil's becoming a great fighter, but he's just a kid."

Boxes light up, and I eat to give myself time to regain control of them. Annoyance Alex doesn't Emil to win. Pride at Emil's abilities. Fear that it won't be enough. Ache at the idea of losing him.

"You believe it will convince them to relent?"

"How many of their men have we killed? How many millions have we cost them over only a few months? Even my Dear Old Dad would balk at the idea of still losing that kind of money if there was a way to stop it. And it's not like we'd be telling them to go legit or else. One aspect of what's got to be well diversified business is all we're objecting to, right? They stop peddling kids and I don't give a fuck what else they get up to."

"There isn't a way to ensure they stop only that aspect of the trafficking. They aren't the only prostitution group who target children, so how can we tell when it's not them?"

Alex drinks. "Getting them to stop the entire human trafficking thing is going to hit them harder." He drinks again. "But it's got to be a more appealing option than having us continue to mow down their operation. Because they've got to realize it's only a question of time before we snag a line that leads us to someone who knows something useful."

"The hacker?"

"Asyr is still looking into everything they copied," he says reluctantly. "But they don't hold out much hope. Mister Hacker was competent enough, but the guys he worked for have better people. If he managed to get something that led anywhere, they removed it before we got to him. Or rather, before they let us get to him. Trap, remember?"

"So we tell them that we will back off so long as they stop trafficking people."

Alex nods. "Yeah. The only problem with my plan is that I have no idea how to go about getting the message to them. It's not like I can just hire a blimp and post it on their banner."

I smile. "I know exactly who can relay the message for us."

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"What are you talking about?" Carl demands.

“Just tell them to—”

“I got the message. What I want to know is that’s this thing about human trafficking?”

“We’re you aware of what the people who hired you did?” I know they weren’t. Nothing in what Alex uncovered about them indicated they would go along with it.

“We aren’t in a business where asking question about the people hiring is helpful,” Carl replied.

“Maybe we should start,” Jerry says. “How certain are you about that?”

“Did you see the news segment about the girls, boys, and women who escaped from human traffickers a few months ago?”

“Of course. That was all over the news,” Donald says.

“That is who was holding them?”

“And where’s your evidence?” Carl asks.

“Holy fuck!” Jerry drops in a chair.

“What?” Donald asks.

“You’re the guardian angel. One of the site had this thing about how some of the girls claimed God had sent a guardian angel to rescue them. That the fire was divine retribution for what the men had done to them.”

“I don’t think this guy has anything to do with God,” Carl says.

“Why are you okay with the rest of what they do?” Donald asks. “Seems to me that if you’re going to take down criminals, you go all the way.”

“This was never about taking them down.” I consider how much I can say that won’t help them work out details about me. “The situation between us and them has escalated to a level that can’t be sustained. So we decided what about them was most objectionable and are limiting our demands to that.”

“And how are you going to know if they agree to your terms?” Carl asks.

“Considering the number of people they are trafficking, I expect their sudden reappearance will be answer enough.” I smile. “But if they are more discreet about it, we still have our ways of finding out.”

“And how—”

“Don’t ask how I’ll know if you pass the message along or not. I’m counting on the fact you have a sense of what I’m capable of and a lack of knowledge as with what our limits are when it come to keeping tabs on your to ensure you make the decision that results in you remaining uninjured at my hands.”

I turn and exit to them arguing with Carl over how he could even think of not doing what I instructed them to.