

Blood Debt

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Blood Debt

by [clgfanfic](#)

Summary

Stone ends up taking a bullet.

Notes

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Two men entered their cheap hotel room, the taller and younger of the pair tossing a small black gym bag onto the closest twin bed, covered like its companion with a faded green and tan cotton spread. The bag bounced, a soft metal clang giving away the mechanical nature of the contents. "I still don't see why we can't get a better room," he grumbled, stalking over to turn on the small black and white television that took up the majority of the single dresser's surface.

The picture faded in, surrounded by static-snow, and he slapped the top of the set. Pushing lank dark brown hair off his forehead, he chewed his lower lip as he twisted the tuning knob, forcing the reception to something easier to watch. Dark eyes, angular features, and beard shadow gave his face a furtive mien as he stared at the screen.

"I told you, this is close to the site and nobody will pay any attention to us," his older, more distinguished-looking companion replied, walking over to glance out the two small windows in the room.

The taller man flipped through the channels, settling on the *Three Stooges* dubbed in French. "Ain't nobody gonna care if we got a nice room either," he muttered, moving to the bed and flopping down. His well-worn jeans, red T-shirt, biker boots and black leather jacket added to the man's thuggish appearance.

"I am not going to spend the next two days listening to your whining, Joey," the smaller man hissed as he carried his small travel bag to the second bed, set it down, and opened it.

Unlike his traveling companion, the older man was dressed in a tastefully tailored suit and soft leather shoes. Nice, but not elegant enough to attract the attention of Parisians. Black hair, liberally mixed with grey drew attention to the man's sharp features and contrasting cold blue eyes.

Joey swallowed his comment, his eyes flashing and the muscles along his jaw popping. He hated waiting. And he especially hated waiting in a country where he didn't speak the language. He couldn't find a good bar, a good joint, or a good lay stuck in the hotel room, but he knew it would be suicidal to cross Marino Giachetti.

"Fine," Joey sighed. "How long's this gonna take? I wanna get back to New York, man."

"Yes, I would guess you do," Giachetti replied. "A day, perhaps maybe two," he said, a slight British accent seeping through. "The target has a reasonably consistent routine."

"You been here how long? Just watchin' this guy?"

"Three weeks," Giachetti replied.

"Why didn't you just hit him when you had the chance?" Joey demanded. "Saved me this damned trip."

Giachetti smiled thinly. "Because I do not plan to go to prison. Besides, there is a certain pleasure in observing the prey before the attack. Something I am sure you cannot possibly

understand."

Joey snorted. "So you know what he does and where he goes, so what? Let's just hit the guy and get the hell outta here. I can't talk this Frenchy talk; makes me nervous not knowin' what people are sayin', ya know?"

"Mr. Rosti prefers that the hit occur at a particular location."

"That restaurant place up the block?"

"Yes, Joey," Giachetti said, carrying his carefully folded clothes to the dresser and placing them in the drawers. He returned to his bed and sat down, pulling a book from his nearly empty bag. "Try to remember. We were hired to do a job – the way Mr. Rosti wants it done."

"Hey, I'm just here for the money and t'pay the pigs back who busted Spike and the other boys. Can't let 'em get away with that – makes trouble back home. People get to thinkin' they can say no, ya know?"

"I know, Joey. I know. You will not have to wait long."

"How long?"

"Thursday night, if the target keeps to his schedule."

"Thursday? But that's two days from now," Joey almost whined. "We gotta stay in here two whole days?"

"I'm sure you can find something to watch. Perhaps some kind of sporting event – something that does not require an understanding of the language."

Joey huffed and ground his shoulders back into his pillows. "And I guess you're just gonna sit there and read for two days?"

"Yes, Joey. That is exactly what I plan on doing."

The young man sprang to his feet. "Well, not me, man! I can't sit here two days. I'll– I'll go fuckin' nuts!"

"Joey," Giachetti said, his voice hard, but quiet. "Sit down. Now."

The young man considered bolting for the door. Let the old stiff sit and rot with his damn books, but common sense and fear stopped the action before it even began. He crouched on the edge of the bed, his shoulder pinched defiantly. "Look, I'm just gotta go get a drink, okay?"

Giachetti considered for a moment, then nodded. "But no trouble, Joey. You get into trouble and you will *not* leave Paris. Understand?"

"Yeah," Joey mumbled, springing to his feet again. "I got it." He stomped out without a backwards glance.

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Peter Sinclair, ex-wunderkin of Scotland Yard, glanced up and down the hallway, then slipped silently into the comfortable office. A handsome man with golden blond hair and attractive blue eyes, Sinclair was tall and well-built. He flashed a smile at the attractive forty-something woman sitting at the dark oak desk, his aquiline features hiding his own comparable age behind a youthful mask.

She smiled back.

"Everything set?"

She nodded and replied, keeping her voice soft, "Henri will be ready to begin by eleven. He said that is the earliest he can close."

Sinclair nodded. "Great. And you'll get Alex there at midnight?"

"Not a moment before," she promised. "Alexander thinks he will be attending a meeting for a new committee. We'll be planning an event for the protection of the Amazon Basin rainforests."

"Perfect," Sinclair said. "I've already arranged to meet with Stone and Gabrielle for lunch. I'll inform them of the, huh... meeting, then. I'll have them arrive at eleven-thirty, long enough to help us get everything ready, but not enough time to get suspicious... I hope."

Helene Previn nodded. "Do you think they realize the significance of the day?"

Peter shook his head, then shrugged. "Well, maybe. I wouldn't put it past Gabrielle, but I think Stone will be very surprised."

"Two years together," Helene mused. "A long time. All the good things that have come from it are worth celebrating."

"Alexander's vision is what made it work."

"And your vision as well," she added.

Sinclair dipped his head slightly. "Well, perhaps."

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Gabrielle Germon parked her motorcycle on the narrow sidewalk that ran along one side of Henri's small restaurant. Removing her helmet, she slid it into the lock on the back of the bike and smoothed down her short, form-fitted light green dress that accentuated her shapely but athletic curves. She had a pretty good idea that Peter was planning a celebration for all of them, not just Alexander Addington, but decided she'd play along and act surprised. After all, it was a very sweet gesture.

She turned and started down the sidewalk. Situated on a corner, Henri's building housed a good-sized wine cellar, the restaurant itself, and several empty flats above that were being renovated so they could be rented out. She reached the corner and looked back to see if the shadows hid her motorcycle. They did.

She grinned. She'd made sure to leave the bike on the side away from the door so Addington wouldn't see it. Her newest boss was going to be very surprised. He had been so busy lately that the two year anniversary of the second Counterstrike team had to be far from his thoughts. *Well, not after tonight*, she thought.

She peeked past the lace-curtained windows, then entered, a small bell announcing her arrival.

Peter looked up from where he and the French chef had been collaborating on something. "Where's Stone?" Sinclair asked, his expression turning slightly nervous as he glanced behind her.

Gabby shrugged, running her fingers through long blonde hair to undo the damage done by the helmet. "Don't know. He said he'd meet me here." Her pale blue eyes twinkled. "Maybe he was afraid to ride with me."

"In your dreams," came a low voice.

Peter and Henri turned as Stone entered from the kitchen. He took another bite out of a fried chicken leg. "Great job, Henry."

The French chef grinned, his gaze sliding to Gabrielle and Peter. "Another American dish I can add to the menu. At least it keeps the tourists happy."

Peter stood. "Okay, we've got... twenty-eight minutes."

"The food will be ready precisely at midnight," Henri promised.

Sinclair nodded, mentally running over the list of things they needed to do – luckily it was short. He looked at Gabrielle. "Would you pull three of these tables together and get that ready? Don't forget, Bennett and Suzanne will be joining us, and –"

"Helene and J.J.," she finished the list for him. "Sure, no problem," she replied, eying Stone's chicken hungrily. "Is there more?"

"Later," Peter said, his tone teasing but serious.

"Stone, can you help me?" Henri asked, his gaze sliding to Sinclair, then back to the American. "There is a rack I need for the pastry. It is wedged in behind—"

"Lead the way, as long as we're going back to the kitchen," Stone said, wagging his eyebrows at Gabby as he finished off the chicken.

She frowned. He was going to get another piece when he reached the kitchen. It just wasn't fair.

Henri stood and the pair started away.

"Hey, you got any more of that chicken?" she asked the restaurant owner. "I haven't eaten since this afternoon... Hey, Stone, bring me something, okay?" Gabrielle called.

"I'll see about the wine," Peter offered quickly, a smile on his face.

Gabby watched the others leave, then sighed heavily and pulled three of the small tables together in a line while her stomach grumbled. Walking to a square counter that served as a small bar and storage area, she gathered up flatware, silverware, and linen napkins. She carried it all to the table and set it down, then returned for the coffee cups. Spotting a small apron, she quickly tied it on to ensure that her dress remained clean. Having just spent too much money to have a chocolate stain removed from the fabric, she didn't want to chance a repeat performance.

She'd just finished with the table settings when the door bell jingled, alerting her to another arrival. She started to welcome Bennett and Suzanne, but stopped short when two men entered. Her gaze shifted to the sign in the window. Henri had forgotten to replace the 'open' sign with the one that read 'closed'. Her gaze shifted to the clock on the wall. Eleven-thirty-nine. Twenty minutes before Addington arrived.

The two men paid her little attention as they walked over to a corner table that gave them a good view of the entire room and the entrance. The short-hairs on her neck stood as she met their appraising gazes.

"Miss," the older of the pair called, signaling her with a casual wave of his fingers when he mistook her for the waitress who had left earlier.

She walked over to their table. "*Qui?*" she asked, purposely using French in the hopes of chasing them out.

"Yeah," the younger man said, ogling her chest, then licking his lips. He looked up, meeting her gaze. "We want some food. You understand? Food?" He mimed shoveling food into his mouth. "You got something without all that Frenchy sauce?"

"Mmm, one moment," she said with a plastic smile, then turned, pausing to change the sign before disappearing into the kitchen.

She found Stone finishing off another chicken leg while Henri worked on preparing the pastry cups that would later be filled with custard and fruit.

"Hey, two guys just came in. The open sign was still up."

"Oh, the sign—" Henri said, looking flustered. "Oh, well, did you change it?"

She nodded. "They want to eat."

Henri nodded. "What?"

"Something American," she said, looking pointedly at the heaping plate of fried chicken.

"Uh uh," Stone said. "That's mine... *all* mine."

"All yours?" Gabby challenged. "There's enough there for these guys and you..." She flashed him a coy smile. "And me."

Stone grinned back and shook his head. "No sale."

With a sigh Gabby ceded the round to Stone. "What else do you have?" she asked Henri.

"The special tonight was Italian lasagna," Henri said. "There is still some left if they'd like that."

She turned to leave, then paused. "Stone."

"Yeah?"

She gestured him to join her and he did. "Would you take a look at these guys? They—They..." She shrugged. "They seem odd."

"Odd?"

"Strange," she amended.

He hiked his eyebrows at her.

"I have a bad feeling about them."

Stone considered teasing her further, but didn't. Her expression was too serious to treat lightly. He nodded. "Okay, I'll take a look," he said, following her out of the kitchen.

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Sitting in his office, Alexander Addington signed the last contract from a waiting stack and handed it back to his assistant, Helene Previn. He paused briefly, admiring her tasteful yet still alluring green pantsuit. Gold earrings and necklace complimented the light brown highlights in her short dark-brown hair. She was a beautiful woman and for a brief moment he allowed himself to revel in that beauty.

When he realized that he'd been staring, Alexander cleared his throat and reached to return his pen to its stand, but stopped short when the phone rang. He laid the pen down and tapped the speaker button. "What?"

"So sorry to interrupt, sir," Bennett's voice echoed into the large art-deco decorated room. "But Inspector Philippe Leever is here to see you."

"Leever?" Addington repeated. "What does he want?"

"To see you, sir."

The industrialist glowered at the phone for a moment, then barked, "Well, then, send him up!"

"He's on the way, sir," Bennett replied, his smile clear in his amused tone.

Addington huffed and sat back as Helene crossed to the large double doors and opened them to permit the French police detective to enter. Leever nodded to Helene, exchanging brief greetings, then headed straight for Addington, who stood and, using his cane, maneuvered around his desk to greet the man. "What is it, Inspector?"

"D'Marco was found dead in his cell today."

Addington dismissed the news with a half-shrug and a wave of his hand. "Prisoners are killed all the time..."

"Yes, but Peter told me that you recently cancelled the additional security you had in place after Rosti's arrest and trial."

"It's been nine months, Inspector. If Rosti wanted to make a move he had more than ample opportunity." Addington paced away several steps, then turned to face the detective.

"Besides, my people have better things to do than stand around waiting for something to happen."

"And you think D'Marco's death is just a coincidence?"

"I'd say so," Addington replied, sounding far from convinced himself.

"Well, I don't think so. His appeal was denied four days ago. Three days ago Interpol informed my office that Marino Giachetti had entered the country, and now D'Marco turns up dead."

"Giachetti... Giachetti... isn't he that—"

"British-Sicilian hitman," Philippe finished. "And a known associate of Rosti's."

"And you think he's in the country for me?" Addington asked.

Leever nodded. "You, and D'Marco."

Helene turned a worried gaze on Alexander. "Perhaps we could cancel this evening's—"

"Absolutely not!" Addington stated with finality, pounding the tip of his cane on the floor to drive the point home. He would not allow anyone to dictate his activities, movements or opinions.

"Mr. Addington," the detective interrupted. "I think you'd do well to play this as carefully as you can. Until we find Giachetti."

"I'll take that into consideration, Inspector. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to be late for an important dinner engagement. Ms. Previn?"

Helene nodded and escorted Philippe to the door. "Make sure you tell Peter Sinclair," the detective said softly.

"I will. Thank you."

He nodded and left. Helene turned. "Mr. Addington, are you sure—?"

"Of course!" Alexander interrupted. "I've been looking forward to this all week."

Helene smiled. "Yes, Henri's cooking is wonderful."

"Oh, it's not the food, Ms. Previn. I'm guessing that you all have been carefully... setting me up."

"Excuse me?" she asked, hoping he hadn't guessed the truth.

"Suzanne talked to you, didn't she? She's been complaining about the hours I'm keeping, telling you I'm too busy, yes? That I need to relax more?"

Helene smiled and nodded. "She did mention—"

"A'ha! I thought so," Addington said, walking over to join her. "So, shall we go have a nice... quiet... peaceful dinner?"

"Yes," she said with a smile, then added, "Oh! I have to get my coat. I'll meet you at the car. J.J. is parked out front."

"All right," Addington agreed.

Helene waited for him to enter the elevator, then walked back to his desk, picked up the phone and dialed. "Peter?"

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Peter Sinclair prowled the wine cellar, looking for the right choice to accompany Henri's menu. Finding what he thought Addington would enjoy the most, he removed two of the slightly dusty bottles from their racks and set them on a short counter. That done, he turned to the real reason he'd volunteered to pick the wine.

The small cart was capped and Peter lifted the polished silver cover. He smiled. The sheet cake was perfect. He lowered the cover carefully, then reached under to the second shelf hidden by a tablecloth drape to make sure Stone and Gabby's gifts were there. They were. He smiled.

His cell phone rang and he quickly pulled it free of his jacket pocket and answered. "Yes?"

"Peter?"

"It's me, Helene," Sinclair replied, picking up on the concerned tone to her voice. "Is there a problem?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "Inspector Leever was here. Mr. D'Marco was killed."

"And he thinks it's Rosti," Peter stated.

"Yes, he does. And that Alexander might be the next target. He mentioned a Marino Giachetti."

"Giachetti? After all this time," Sinclair muttered. "Damn..."

"Alexander is insisting on going to the restaurant."

He checked his watch. It was 11:39. "Okay, I'll take a look around. We'll meet you here in twenty minutes."

"Be careful, all of you."

"You, too."

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Stone reached out and grabbed Gabrielle's arm, stopping her from entering the restaurant. "If they don't feel right, let me have a look first."

She nodded and leaned back against the wall, listening as Stone walked into the room.

He spotted the pair immediately, noting the way their gazes swept over the room, alert for any threat. Both tensed when they saw him. And no wonder, Stone looked anything but French. Tall and lanky, with curly dark hair cut close and a pronounced beard shadow he looked more imposing than Joey did.

"Hey, you," the younger man snapped. "C'mer!"

Stone sauntered across the room to their table, his walk casual and confident, almost defiant as he pushed the men, trying to get a reaction.

"Who are you?" the kid asked, fidgeting, his gaze locked on Stone, sizing him up like they were two junkyard dogs ready to fight over territory.

"Bus boy," Stone replied tersely, his hazel eyes challenging Joey to make something of that.

"Where's that waitress?" Giachetti

Stone's gaze shifted from Joey to Giachetti. "They asked me to find out what you want," he explained in his best Philly drawl.

"What was tonight's special?" the older man asked, his gaze locked on Stone's. Two bulls sizing each other up.

"Lasagna."

"In a French restaurant?" the kid snorted.

"International cuisine," Stone replied coolly.

"That will be fine," Giachetti said. "Bring us two."

"And somethin' to drink," the kid added. "And I don't mean no water."

Stone inclined his head, the slight smile on his lips mocking the youth. He turned and ambled back to the kitchen.

"Well?" Gabby asked when he reached her.

"Something's up. Get me two plates of the lasagna—"

"Here," Henri said, handing over a tray with two prepared plates and two glasses of wine.

Gabby took the tray.

Stone gently grabbed her arm. "Give 'em that, then go find Pete," he instructed. "I'll keep an eye on 'em until then."

He held the door open and she stepped out first, carrying the food to the table and setting it out. Stone strolled to the bar, stepping behind it to pour himself a beer from the draft tap.

"Hey," Joey called. "What're you doin'?"

"I'm off," Stone said, not bothering to look up. "Just gettin' a beer before I go home."

"Yeah?" the punk asked. "Well, why don'tcha pour me one, too and bring it over here?"

Stone inclined his head slightly. Filling a glass with the dark draft, he carried it over and set it down. He looked to Giachetti. "You need anything else?"

"No," the older man replied.

Stone nodded and returned to the bar, taking a seat on one of the stools.

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"Where's Stone?" Sinclair asked, reaching Gabrielle just as she returned to the kitchen with the empty tray. "Alex isn't here, is he?"

"No. Stone's out there," she said, nodding in the direction of the restaurant. "Two men—"

"Someone's out there?" Peter asked, trying to see around the turn in the hall. "I don't like this."

"What?" Gabrielle asked.

"Helene called. D'Marco's dead." He watched her expression go hard.

"They're hitmen?"

"More than likely," Peter agreed, maneuvering closer to the door that opened into the restaurant, Gabrielle right behind him.

"So what do we do?" she asked softly.

"Come on," he said, moving back to the kitchen, grabbing a white uniform shirt and pulling it on. "Henri, stay in here."

The chef nodded.

Gabby following, Sinclair walked back into the door into restaurant proper. He paused, telling her, "If there's trouble, pull a table over for cover."

She nodded and the pair stepped out into the restaurant. Stone and Peter exchanged glances, the ex-SEAL immediately on guard when he saw the concerned look on his teammate's face.

Sinclair's and Giachetti's gazes met across the room, the resulting events evolving in a macabre, slow-motion dance of tragedy.

"Gabrielle!" Peter called as he saw, rather than heard, Giachetti say the word "cop."

The younger man bolted out of his chair, drawing a weapon from his shoulder holster at the same time. Stone slid off the bar stool, turning and pulling his weapon at the same time.

Gabrielle, following his earlier instructions, dove for cover, knocking over one of the small tables in front of the bar as two shots rang out almost as one.

The bell rang as the front door opened. Stone spun and fell as a scream echoed through the room.

A third shot tore through the wood of the fallen table, sending splinters flying. Gabby yelped, ducking down, her arms curling up over her head for protection. She heard the thud as Stone hit the floor beside her.

"Stop!" Giachetti snapped loudly, covering the two new arrivals – Bennett and Suzanne, who cowered just inside the door.

Henri burst through the kitchen door, stumbling to a stop and staring down at Gabrielle as she reached out for Stone, who lay deathly still, curled up on his side.

"Everyone, stand up!" Giachetti yelled. "You," he told Bennett and Suzanne, motioning towards the bar, "over there!"

Gabrielle glanced up at Peter, who nodded. She stood, waiting while Bennett and Suzanne crossed the room, joining her next to the bar counter.

"Get that table up," Joey ordered, adding a jerk with his gun to emphasize the command.

Sinclair reached down and righted the table, his gaze sweeping over his unmoving partner as he did. He looked back at Giachetti. "I'm going to check this man's condition.

The older man nodded, ignoring Joey's glower.

"The rest of you, put your hands on the bar," the younger man snapped. The foursome complied. Suzanne met Gabrielle's gaze, her eyes full of fear and concern. Gabby gave her and Bennett a slight, reassuring smile. Bennett replied with a slight nod. They would play along with whatever she and Peter initiated.

Peter knelt down next to Stone, quickly checking the man over. A graze along the right temple... And...

"Bloody–"

"That's enough," Joey growled at Sinclair. "Get 'im up."

"I can't," Peter hissed back.

"Did I kill 'im?" Joey asked, looking from Stone's body to the tear in the sleeve of his leather jacket – the result of Stone's bullet. If the man had been just a little faster, Joey would have been dead.

Gabrielle took a step forward, but Sinclair held up a hand, gesturing to her to stay put. He turned back to Giachetti. "I'm going to move him into the office. He's been shot in the back."

The older man nodded.

"Are you crazy?" Joey snapped.

"We do not want a battlefield here, Joey," Giachetti said casually, then nodded to Sinclair. "Go ahead."

"Stone?" Peter called softly. "Stone, can you hear me?"

"Pete?" came the thick-voiced reply.

"Yeah, I'm right here, Sport."

"Think 'm shot," Stone slurred, stretching out his legs, then curling back into a ball when a flash of pain and nausea almost swept him into darkness.

"That you are," Peter said, checking the injured man over. "Grazed that thick skull of yours – shouldn't even notice. Think you can stand up?"

"Could... if I could find my legs," was the weak but needling reply.

"You heard Mr. Giachetti," Joey growled. "Get 'im out of here."

Peter looked up at the hitman. "I'll need help."

"I can help you," Gabrielle said, stepping closer. She saw the flash of anger pass over Peter's face, but ignored it.

"Joey, go check the office," the older man said and Joey crossed the room, his gun still trained on them.

Sinclair stood and started to bend over Stone, but Giachetti stopped him. "Put your gun on he table, Sinclair, and your cellular."

Peter complied, then, with Gabrielle's help, they carried Stone into the small office, laying him on the sofa that took up one wall. The ex-SEAL groaned softly, but didn't fight them. Joey quickly checked the room, pulling the phone cord out and tucking the instrument under his arm. Next, he rifled through the small desk. Finding nothing, he backed carefully from the room, saying, "When you come back in, I want to see your hands."

Sinclair nodded.

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Giachetti watched Sinclair and the waitress disappear into the office with the injured man. He nodded at Henri. "You, clean this up," he ordered, pointing at the spilled tablecloth and

accouterments.

Henri immediately did as he was told, replacing the spilled tablecloth and other items.

"You two, sit down," Giachetti said, pointing to a table.

Bennett slipped a protective arm around Suzanne's shoulders and guided her to the table, then pulled out a chair for her before sitting himself. He glowered at Giachetti.

Henri finished and took a step back as Joey re-entered the room carrying the phone, which he tossed behind the bar.

"Take him down to the wine cellar and lock him in," Giachetti said, tossing the younger man the small gym bag Joey had carried into the restaurant.

Joey caught the bag, then grabbed Henri's sleeve and shoved him toward the kitchen door. "Wine cellar," he said. "You take me. Understand?"

Henri nodded.

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Peter knelt next to the couch, but looked up at Gabby. "I need some cloths, something to stop the blood."

"I'll get them," she said.

"Gabby," Peter called softly, stopping her halfway to the door. "Please, be careful."

"I will," she promised. Stepping out of the room, her hands held chest high, she pointed to the bar. "I need to get cloths, for the blood."

Giachetti nodded, shadowing her movements with his gun as she crossed to the bar and stepped behind it to reach the linen napkins and table cloths stacked neatly on the rear shelves. She grabbed a handful, looking quickly for anything that might be used as a weapon. Nothing – except the steak knives.

She stood and walked back around the bar, stopping when Joey re-entered the room, rolling a small serving cart in front of him.

"Hey, look what I found," he said to Giachetti. "Looks like this guy was gonna have himself a party."

Giachetti stood and walked to the cart. He lifted the silver cover to look at the cake. He returned the cover and looked to Gabrielle. "Is that right? Is there a party planned for tonight?"

She shook her head and shrugged, pretending not to know. "Please?" she asked, holding out the clothes toward the office.

"Go," the older man said.

Gabrielle nodded.

"You two," Giachetti said to Bennett and Suzanne. "Are you here for this party?"

Gabrielle slowed her steps, listening and hoping they didn't give the situation away.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Bennett said matter-of-factly. "My granddaughter and I were just looking for someplace to eat."

"That right?" Joey asked, moving closer to Addington's daughter.

"Yes," Suzanne said. "What's this all about?"

"Stick around, sweet-cakes, and you'll see," Joey said, reaching out to caress the back of Suzanne's head, rubbing her soft, shoulder-length brown hair with his fingertips.

She jerked away. "Keep your hands off me."

"Joey," Giachetti said, a warning clear in the sharp tone. "Leave her alone."

Gabrielle pushed the office door open and stepped inside, sighing softly.

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Peter grabbed the two faded red throw pillows resting at one end of the couch and used them to elevate Stone's head and shoulders. That done, he maneuvered the American so he was stretched out along the couch, his feet elevated by the couch arm.

"Hey, Sport, still with me?" he asked, pulling out and using his handkerchief to staunch the flow of blood from the man's head wound.

"M here," Stone said groggily, wincing under the ministrations. "Where'd they... get me?"

Sinclair paused a moment, then replied as lightly as he could, "Just a shoulder wound."

"Shoulder?" Stone echoed, his eyes blinking open. A pain-filled gaze met Sinclair's concerned one. "That's it?"

Peter forced a smile. "That's it," he reassured the wounded man, hoping his voice didn't give away the truth.

"M' head hurts..."

"I'm not surprised," Sinclair replied. "A bullet bounced off that thick skull of yours."

"Yeah?" Stone replied. "Feels more like a sledgehammer."

"I told you that before. Don't you remember?"

"Don't remember findin' that hammer."

"Where is Gabrielle?" Peter whispered hotly, turning so he could glower at the door.

"Stealin' my chicken," Stone mumbled.

Peter looked back at the injured man, a thin but amused grin on his face.

Stone arched up slightly, his face pinching with pain.

"What?" Sinclair asked.

"M' back," he said. "Feels like it's on fire."

"Damn—" Peter whispered hotly as the door opened and Gabrielle entered with the linens.

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Stepping back into the small room, Gabby closed the door. "How is he?"

Peter shook his head. "Quick, bring me those," he said, extending his hand.

Gabby handed over the napkins and tablecloth.

Sinclair rested the cloths on his knees, then turned back to Stone. "Okay, Sport, I need you to roll forward a little. Can you do that?"

Stone grunted and tried to shift forward, but stopped when a searing rod of pain and heat lanced through his back and chest. "Oh shit," he hissed, fingers curling into the sofa pillows.

"Easy," Peter said, reaching out to roll Stone a little further forward. "I'm going to see if I can rig a bandage."

"Yeah," Stone gritted out. "Make sure it's tight." He met Peter's concern-filled blue eyes. "Like hell it's my shoulder."

Sinclair offered him a half-shrug by way of an apology, then placed two of the napkins over the wound and pressed down as hard as he dared. He glanced up at Gabby. "Hold this down."

She quickly maneuvered around him, her hand replacing his.

"Press harder," Stone told her.

She did, asking, "Okay?"

He nodded. "'M gettin' slow," he grumbled. "Saw Bennett and Suzanne... lost my focus... should've nailed the bastard..."

"Shhh," Gabrielle soothed him.

Sinclair opened one of the tablecloths, folded it into a triangle, then wound-up one point to create a rope-like length of cloth which he passed under Stone and tied, securing the two napkins snugly in place.

"Suzanne and Bennett said they were here for dinner," Gabby said softly. "I think they believed them."

"Mr. A's due in fourteen," Stone added.

"That's just bloody perfect," Sinclair sighed. He checked his watch. Stone was right – 11:46.

"Hey, Limey!" Joey called from the other side of the door.

Stone grinned. "Sounds like you're bein' paged, Pete."

Sinclair gently squeezed the man's arm, then looked up at Gabrielle. "Stay with him."

She nodded.

"And they don't need to know we know each other," he told her. "It'll be safer that way."

"Be careful," she said as he walked to the door.

Sinclair paused, turning back to meet her gaze. "Do you have a gun?" he asked softly.

She shook her head. There had been no reason to bring one along.

Peter sighed and nodded. They had his weapon and Stone's... maybe Henri? Not likely.

"Pete," Stone called weakly.

"Hey, cop! Get your ass out here, man!" Joey bellowed.

"I have to go, Sport," he said. "Take care of him."

"I will."

Peter stood and walked to the door. With one last glance at his injured friend turned and stepped out into the restaurant.

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Suzanne watched the two men out of the corner of her eye. They were eating, enjoying their meal like there was nothing wrong. But they were there to kill her father and they'd already shot Stone. Anger bubbled in her and her eyes narrowed. She started to rise, but Bennett's hand closed over hers.

She looked at him and he shook his head ever so slightly.

With a sigh she leaned back against her chair, jumping when the younger man yelled, "Hey, Limey!"

Bennett glanced at the closed door to the office, his concern for Stone clear in his eyes. He stood.

"What are you doing?" Giachetti asked.

"I am going to get my granddaughter and myself some water," Bennett stated succinctly as possible. "Is that all right with you?"

Giachetti nodded, he and Joey watching cautiously as Bennett crossed to the bar and stepped around the counter to reach the sink. Taking one of the many empty glass pitchers off the glass shelf, he added ice, then filled it with water, setting it on a small round serving tray when he was through. He added two glasses and carried the tray back to the table and transferred the glasses and pitcher, then delivered the tray to the corner of the bar and returned to his seat.

Suzanne had already poured them each a glass of water and was carefully sipping at hers when he returned. Bennett sat, hoping that he had bought Peter a little more time with Stone.

"Hey, cop! Get your ass out here, man!" Joey yelled.

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Peter stepped out of the office with his hands held chest high, palms out so there could be no doubt that he was unarmed.

The first thing Sinclair noticed was Suzanne and Bennett, the second was the cart holding the cake and, underneath it, the presents he had intended to present to Stone and Gabrielle. *So, I have a plan after all*, he thought.

"Get over there and sit down," Joey snapped, pointing to an empty table near the one he and Giachetti occupied. He reached out and gripped his gun in a silent reminder that any nonsense on Peter's part would result in his death.

Sinclair walked to the indicated table without a second glance at Suzanne and Bennett. If Giachetti didn't realize who they all were they might just have a chance.

"Hey, where's blondie?" Joey asked.

"She's with the man you shot," Sinclair explained as he calmly sat down. Meeting Giachetti's appraising gaze he asked, "This is about Addington, isn't it."

The older man shrugged.

"Rosti hired you," Peter stated matter-of-factly.

"Hey, you're good," Joey said with a feral grin.

"Shut up, Joey," the older man snapped.

Joey sat back, surprised at the vehemence in the man's voice. "What?" he replied, anger quickly swamping his fear of the hitman.

"I do not discuss my business, Joey," Giachetti said softly but firmly.

Sinclair noted the tension between the pair, but didn't think trying to exploit it would help their cause.

Suzanne glanced at him, and he gave her a covert, reassuring wink. He watched her turn back to Bennett and lean slightly forward, saying something.

"Maybe I can convince them to let me go," Suzanne whispered to her father's long-time friend.

"It's too dangerous," Bennett informed her. "Your father would never forgive me if anything should happen to you."

"I have to try. If they *do* let me go, I can warn father."

"Suzanne, let Mr. Sinclair—"

She stood, determined to try before common sense convinced her otherwise.

The sound of her chair moving broke through Sinclair's thoughts and he watched helplessly as Suzanne stood and walked over to Giachetti's table and sat down.

Joey grinned. "Gettin' tired of gramps?"

"I just wanted to ask you if we could leave. We don't know why you're here, or what you want. We don't know anything. We don't care. Please, let us go?"

Joey's smile grew as he glanced at Giachetti. "So whaddaya think, should we let her and her gramps go?"

"No one is going anywhere," Giachetti said, ignoring Suzanne's imploring gaze and Joey's licentious expression. He glanced briefly at Suzanne. "Please, go back to your seat, miss."

"But—"

"Go back to your seat," Giachetti repeated, his voice cold and demanding.

Suzanne stood and walked quickly back to her chair and sat down. Bennett reached out and patted her arm.

The door to the office opened and Gabrielle stepped out.

"Hold it!" Joey snapped, shooting to his feet, his gun coming up to cover her.

Gabby gasped and stopped, her hands coming up. She stuttered out a sentence in French that sounded like an apology.

"It's all right," Giachetti told her, reaching up to rest a hand on Joey's arm. "Joey, sit down."

The younger man did, but his gaze remained locked on Gabby as she walked slowly to Sinclair's table. "I think he needs you," she said softly.

Peter stood to follow her.

"Sit down, Sinclair," Giachetti called.

Peter swung around to face the man. "Look, he could die if I don't see what the problem is."

"Sit down," Giachetti repeated, his voice hard.

"You can shoot me, but if you do you'll blow your chance at Addington. I'm going to go take a look at that man," Sinclair said, then turned and walked to the office door, expecting with each step to be shot.

He reached out, his fingers closing around the doorknob and turned it, opening the door and stepping inside before he allowed himself to breathe again.

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Gabrielle walked to the bar. "Water?" she asked.

"For him?" Joey asked.

She nodded.

"Why bother? He's just gonna die anyway."

Gabrielle glowered at the young man.

"Go on," Giachetti said, glancing at the clock on the wall. Ten minutes before midnight and Addington's arrival. It would be easier if they kept everyone quiet and occupied until then. Once Addington was dead they'd take care of the rest of them.

She stepped around the counter and filled a pitcher with water, then grabbed a glass and headed back to the closed office door.

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Peter closed the door and crossed to Stone, who was shifting restlessly on the sofa. Bending over his teammate, he checked the makeshift bandage, finding it nearly soaked. Grabbing two more of the thick linen napkins, he deftly replaced the sodden ones, tossing them into the small wastebasket. With that done, he rested the back of one hand on Stone's cheek. He was warm.

"What's goin' on out there?" Stone asked.

"Marino Giachetti, ever hear of him?"

"Hitman. British-Italian. Pretty good, too."

"That's the one," Peter said, checking Stone's head wound. "Helene called. D'Marco's dead."

"He's after Mr. A?"

"My thoughts exactly. And we have—" He looked down at his watch. "Eleven minutes before he arrives."

"What're we gonna do, Pete?"

"We?" Sinclair asked, then changed his mind. "Do you think you can create a diversion? Maybe make some noise in here?" He paused as Gabrielle entered carrying the full pitcher of water.

"Noise?" Stone echoed. "I can do that."

"What?" Gabby asked, carrying the pitcher over.

Peter grabbed another napkin and dunked it into the water, then wrung it out and placed it on Stone's forehead. With that done, he motioned Gabby closer. The pair knelt next to the couch.

"Okay, there are two guns on the shelf under the cake," Peter said.

"Cake?" Stone asked. "Gun? One helluva a party you had planned, Pete."

Sinclair grinned. "It was supposed to be a surprise for you and Gabrielle, but now it might be a surprise for Giachetti." He looked at Gabby. "Do you think you can get at one of the boxes under the cart?"

"I'll try," she said.

"Good." He reached out, resting a hand lightly on Stone's shoulder. "What we'll need is some kind of loud noise to get their attention."

Stone forced his eyes open, blinking owlishly twice before his vision cleared. "Whaddya have in mind?"

Sinclair turned, his gaze sweeping the room. He stood and grabbed the water pitcher, pouring the contents into the wastebasket. Kneeling down again, he handed Stone the heavy glass container. "Think you can throw this against the wall?"

"This?" Stone asked, hefting it weakly. "Sure... piece of cake."

"Good." He checked his watch. "In four minutes, okay?"

"Four," Stone said, rolling his wrist over so he could check the time. "Seven 'til midnight."

"That's it."

"You got it."

Peter stood and offered his hand to Gabrielle. "Let's do it."

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They exited together. Peter slowly making his way back to his assigned table.

"Hey, he dead yet?" Joey asked as Peter sat.

"No," Sinclair stated flatly.

Gabrielle walked to the cart and lifted the silver cover. "May I?" she asked Joey, pointing at the cake.

"You want some cake?" Joey asked.

Gabrielle nodded hesitantly, as if she wasn't exactly sure what he had said.

Joey laughed. "Well, this *is* gonna be a party, ain't it?" He nodded. "Sure, have some cake. And get me a piece, too." He pointed to his chest. "Me. Too. Understand?"

Gabrielle smiled shyly at the young man, hoping the anger she felt didn't reach her eyes. If he didn't see her as a threat it would make things easier.

Setting the cover aside she used the waiting knife to draw a careful straight line down one side of the cake. With that done, she crosscut two pieces and began to transfer them onto two small plates. The loud crash caused her to jump, even as she knew it was coming.

Joey bolted to his feet, his gun swinging in a wide arc to cover the room. Suzanne yelped, but Bennett grabbed her hands, keeping her in her seat. Gabby dropped behind the cart, her hand shooting to the shelf below the cake. Her fingers closed on the first of the two boxes and she pulled the top off, grabbing the gun inside.

Sinclair stood, his hands held up and away from his body. "Take it easy—"

"Shut up!" Joey cried, swinging his gun. "What was that?"

"I think it was the injured man," Sinclair said calmly. "Would you please put that down? You're frightening these poor people."

"Yeah?" Joey asked, glowering at Sinclair. "Well, if any of you are plannin' anything, I'll kill you."

Peter looked to Giachetti. "I'd like to go check on that man."

Giachetti glanced at the clock. "Make it fast, Sinclair."

Peter nodded and hurried to the closed door and entered.

"Hey!" Joey snapped. "Where's blondie?"

Gabrielle slowly stood up from behind the cart, her still-wide eyes reflecting real concern.

Joey studied her for a moment, then noted the smear of cake on her dress and laughed. "Had you scared, didn't I?"

"Joey," Giachetti warned. "Leave her alone."

Gabrielle cut another piece of cake and carried to the table and set it in front of Joey.

The young man grinned up at her, making her wish she could rip the smug expression off his face.

"Get your cake, blondie, and come sit down," he told her, pointing at an empty chair at the table.

The office door opened and Sinclair took a half-step out. "Miss?"

Gabrielle turned.

"Can you help me, please? He fell off the sofa."

"*Qui*," she replied, striding away without a glance back.

Joey bolted around the table and grabbed her. "Hey! I didn't say you could go, blondie." He scowled at Sinclair. "You take care of 'im. We're gonna have some cake."

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Peter stepped back into the office, cursing softly under his breath.

"She get it?" Stone asked from where he lay on the floor. Sweat beaded on his face from the effort the distraction cost him and one arm hung limply along his side.

"I don't know," Peter replied honestly, moving to help Stone sit up and lean back against the sofa. He grabbed Stone's arm and started to move it, noticing the complete unresponsiveness. "You all right?"

"I'll live," Stone replied, grimacing at the pain that radiated through his chest, vying for supremacy with the pounding in his head.

"Can you feel this?" Peter asked, squeezing Stone's arm.

"Feels like a serious hurtin'?" he replied.

"No, I mean your arm. Can you feel your arm?"

"iS only thing that doesn't hurt," Stone told him.

Peter maneuvered the limp appendage up and down and front to back the best he could, but Stone seemed completely unaware of the activity. "You'd better live," he said softly, but with conviction.

"Why's that?"

"I don't want to waste time breaking in a new man."

Stone grinned briefly, too weak to respond to the tease.

"You sure you're all right?" Peter asked as he rested the arm in Stone's lap, then arranged the pillows behind Stone to prop his head up.

"Peachy."

"Right," was the unbelieving reply.

"Sinclair, get out here," Giachetti called.

"I have to go," he told Stone.

"Whaddya plan to do?"

"Wing it."

"Oh," Stone replied as Peter walked to the door. "I should've known that."

Stepping back into the restaurant, he glanced from Giachetti to Gabrielle. "Miss, could you take him some more water, please?"

She glanced from Joey to Giachetti. "Please? He is my... boyfriend."

"Your boyfriend?" Joey asked, then slapped her. "You two-timin' bitch!"

Giachetti grabbed Joey's arm to stop a second blow. "You can go, miss."

Gabby nodded and hurried to the office, her hand still cupping her cheek. She closed the door behind her.

Sinclair walked back to his table and sat down, silently praying that Gabrielle would find a way to get him the gun. They were rapidly running out of time.

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In the office Gabrielle turned away from Stone long enough to remove the gun from her underwear.

"Hell of a chastity belt," the ex-SEAL muttered as she handed him the weapon.

She blushed slightly, saying, "It's the only place I could put it."

He looked her over as if for the first time. "Good point," he admitted. With shaky hands he turned the new Baretta over, checking it out. He released the clip. It was fully loaded.

"We're ready to rock 'n roll, but my aim's gonna be shaky."

Gabby thought about that for a moment. "Maybe I can get Peter back in here."

"If not..." Stone let the sentence fade away. If not, he'd simply have to do the best he could and hope that lady luck was riding on his shoulder.

Gabby walked to the door and opened it far enough to lean out. "Please," she said to Peter. "He... needs you. He's... dying."

Sinclair stood and managed one step toward the office door before Giachetti had his gun out and trained on his back.

"Sinclair, sit down!"

Peter glanced at the clock. Less than five minutes. He turned slowly. "No. And if you shoot me there won't be time to clean up the mess before Addington arrives."

The older hitman considered the words, frustration pressing his lips into a fine line. He lowered the gun and Sinclair bolted for the door.

In the office he took the gun from Stone's trembling hands and shoved it under his waistband where his jacket would hide it from view. "Okay, Sport, this is it. You up to one more distraction?"

"Any time, any place... in any condition," Stone joked, then coughed, pain twisting across his face. "Damn," he wheezed. "Better make it fast."

Together, Peter and Gabrielle helped Stone to his feet. He swayed dangerously for a moment, but nodded. They moved to the door.

The American nodded to the desk. "Get me those rocks."

Gabrielle moved to the desk, and grabbed the two halves of a geode that had been split open to reveal a collection of amethyst crystals. She carried them back to Stone and handed them over.

Stone took a deep breath and swallowed several times, forcing back the nausea. He closed his eyes, concentrated for a moment, then opened them and nodded. "Let's do it."

Peter nodded and then opened the door. Gabrielle exited first and walked to the bar, sitting down on one of the stools, out of the line of fire.

Sinclair returned to his seat and quickly removed the Baretta from his waistband, aiming it at Giachetti under the table.

"He finally dead?" Joey asked hopefully.

Peter shook his head. "I think he's slipping into a coma." He stopped, hearing the sound of a car pulling up at the curb. The engine continued to hum, but a car door slammed – J.J. getting out to open the door for Addington and Helene.

It was now or never.

Peter heard the door to the office open and lunged off his chair, firing as he did, matching Giachetti's move as he grabbed for his weapon, lying on the tabletop. The shot caught the hitman in the shoulder, slamming him back against the wall.

Joey jumped out of his seat, his gun coming up to fire on Sinclair.

Peter watched the young man, knowing he couldn't bring his own weapon around in time to stop the kid. Outside the sound of squealing tires told Peter that at least Alexander was safe.

Stone watched from the doorway, silently praying his aim would be true as he threw the two halves of the geode with his good arm. One caught Joey squarely in the shoulder, the other

bouncing off his chest. He yelped, dropping the gun as numbness shot down his arm and into his fingers.

Seeing the gun fall from Joey's hand, Gabrielle grabbed the serving tray and brought the flat piece of metal down hard on Joey's skull. The room rang with a dull *hwang*. He dropped to his knees. Suzanne and Bennett stepped up, Suzanne wielding an empty water pitcher which she happily shattered over the young man's head. Bennett finished him off with the glass vase from the table.

Joey collapsed, out cold.

J.J. burst in through the front door, a gun in his hands. Looking frantically around the room for trouble, he relaxed, lowering the weapon. "Guess you don't need any help after all," he said with a grin.

"Call the police," Peter said, still covering Giachetti.

"And an ambulance," Gabby added, moving quickly to Stone's side, supporting the man until he reached the closest chair and collapsed into it.

Addington and Helene entered, having received an all-clear from J.J. The industrialist was met by his smiling daughter, who gave him a swift, hard hug. "What happened?" he asked, taking in the casualty count.

"Marino Giachetti," Sinclair stated by way of an introduction. "Alexander Addington."

The hitman's smoldering gaze moved from Peter to Addington and back again.

Addington shook his head. He moved to Bennett, asking, "Are you all right?"

"Fine, sir, but I'm afraid we can't say the same about Mr. Stone."

Helene joined Suzanne, the two women embracing, then sat.

Addington made his way to join Gabrielle, who was half-holding Stone in the chair. The ex-SEAL glanced up at the industrialist. "Guess we're gonna have a party after all," he managed.

Addington took in the man's grey complexion, the blood dried along one side of his face, and the makeshift bandage in one long appraising glance. "I think this is one party we can postpone, Mr. Stone. At least until you're feeling better."

The distant wail of a siren echoed into the building. J.J. stepped up behind Gabby, helping her to keep Stone from sliding off the chair. Addington turned, meeting Sinclair's gaze. "So much for a quiet, peaceful dinner..."

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Addington and the others occupied the hospital waiting room like it was a war-room in the middle of a conflict. Bennett occupied himself fetching water and coffee from the commissary. J.J. and Gabrielle each stood watch near one of the two doors into the small room, waiting for someone to come and report on Stone's condition. Helene sat with Suzanne, who had drifted off to sleep. Addington stood at one of the windows, watching the first hints of sunrise break over the city. Peter paced quietly in the room, keeping a watchful eye on all of them.

"Someone's coming," Gabrielle announced.

The group gathered in the center of the room.

A middle-aged man stepped into the room. He gave them a reassuring smile. "I am Dr. Jean Gabow, and you are friends of Mr. Stone?"

"Yes, we are," Addington said.

"How is he?" Gabrielle asked.

"The surgery went well, he is resting comfortably."

"What about his arm, Doctor?" Peter asked.

"He should be fine once he begins to heal."

Sinclair allowed himself a sigh of relief. "When can we see him?"

"This evening," the doctor told them. "Now, why don't you all go home and rest."

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Almost a week later Dr. Gabow was more than happy to sign Stone's release form. The American was slowly driving the nursing staff mad. Uncooperative, disagreeable, and brusque were just a few of the labels he'd heard the nurses use. The only one who seemed to escape the grouchy attitude was the physical therapist, who called Stone "motivated, hard-working, and amusing". He found the latter difficult to believe, but the man's progress was nothing less than phenomenal and it was time he let Mr. Stone go home, visiting the physical therapist on an out-patient basis.

He smiled at Sinclair and Gabrielle as they walked down the hallway towards Stone's room, each carrying a bag. They paused when they reached him.

"He's all ready to go," Peter said, handing over the paperwork.

"I'm sure he'll be much happier at home," Dr. Gabow assured.

Gabrielle grinned. "I'm sure you and the staff will be much happier that way, too."

Gabow grinned. "There is that, too."

"Well, let's go fetch our wayward boy," Peter said.

Gabrielle clutched the small paper bag she was carrying tighter and followed her teammate into the hospital room.

Stone immediately sat up in the bed. "Hey, am I leavin'?" he asked hopefully.

"Yes, you're leaving," Peter said with an amused smile. He handed over the bag he was holding.

Stone pawed through the bag, finding jeans, t-shirt, underwear and socks. He looked up at Sinclair, gratitude clear on his beard-shadowed face. "Now?"

Peter nodded. "Yes, now."

"Great!" Stone said. He looked at Gabrielle. "What's that?"

"This?" she asked innocently, shaking the small paper bag.

Stone sniffed the air. "Is that...?"

Gabby grinned. "*My* lunch."

"Yours?!"

She nodded.

"But that's fried chicken!"

"Very good," she said, opening the bag and peering inside. "Yes, that's what it is."

"For me?" Stone asked hopefully.

She shook her head.

"No?" Stone said, his eyes narrowing. He threw back the covers and slid out of the bed.

Gabrielle rolled the top of the sack down, holding it protectively.

"You plannin' to share?" he asked, moving in on her like a huge predator.

"No," she replied casually.

Stone stopped, drawing himself up and looking hurt. "I would've."

"But you didn't," she said, her eyes twinkling.

"We ran into a little trouble, if you'll recall," he countered.

"That's no excuse."

"No excuse?!"

She grinned, her gaze dropping to Stone's knees and lower legs, displayed below the hospital gown that only fell to mid-thigh.

Stone glanced down, his cheeks going red.

"You'd look good in shorts, Stone," Gabby told him. "You should try them sometime. Nice knees."

Peter cleared his throat and Stone whirled around to look at him. "You got somethin' to add, Pete?" he half-growled.

Sinclair shook his head, his hands coming up in a gesture of surrender. Grinning, he added, "Nice tattoo, as well."

"Tattoo?" Stone echoed, his eyes going slightly wide as he realized the situation.

"Very nice work," Gabrielle said appreciatively from behind him. "What is it?"

Stone's hand shot back to clutch the two halves of the hospital gown together. He glowered playfully at Sinclair. "Give me my pants, Pete."

"We'll just wait outside," Sinclair assured him.

Stone watched them go. "Hey, save me some of that chicken. I'm starvin'!"

Gabrielle gave his knees one last look. "Maybe."

"Maybe!?" He grabbed for the bag of clothes, dressing as quickly as he could.

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Henri moved around the table, making sure that everyone's champagne glass was full. Addington stood, raising his glass. "To two years of outstanding work, making the world just a little better," he said. Then, looking at Sinclair he added, "And to good friends." To Stone: "Good health." To Gabrielle: "And good causes."

The others raised their glasses for the toast, then sipped.

"And to many more, equally successful, years," Bennett added.

"Hear, hear," Addington replied.

Peter cleared his throat to get their attention. "I know the surprise is lost, but..." He stood and walked to the counter and retrieved two boxes that sat there. Returning to the table, he handed one to Stone and one to Gabrielle.

The pair opened their gifts.

Stone grinned down at the Baretta. "Looks familiar," he said.

"Already test fired," Sinclair told him.

Stone snorted, then looked at the smaller Browning in Gabrielle's box. "Nice," he said.

She nodded. "And I'll remember to bring it with me next time," she stated firmly.

Stone leaned back, admiring the weapon. "You know, in the SEALs it was kind of a tradition to name your weapon..." He glanced at Gabrielle. "Think I'll call this one Chastity."

She grinned. "I think I'll call this one Tattoo."

Laughter filled the small restaurant.

The End

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