

-SYLVIA-

OK. The cameras are not hard to avoid, and even if I pass one in the dark, the security on task has to be looking at them, and odds are he's not. The place is too big, and it's too late for anyone to really be on the ball. I napped in a storage closet in the boiler room. Very well hidden, and once I was inside I could tell that nobody had used the closet in a long time. It was full of old yellowed, books and dust-covered cleaning supplies. Not exactly comfortable, but it gave me enough rest to want to stay up the remainder of the night. I didn't make my move until 2:30 AM when my watch alarm sounded. Having observed the crew of Hoes and staff I estimate that where Curosa sleeps at night must be high in the hotel. I perused the upper floors but there was nothing to them. Halls with lights out and empty hotel rooms. My best bet, I knew, was to check things out on the first floor. Then see about the elevator, which must have been where Curosa last was, and show his last stop.

The place I had seen from the third floor, what was party central is just a blackened empty lobby with the fountain still running. I hop up on top of the fountain's fake stone, and sit next to the fake tree as a real security guard walks his rounds through the lobby. His flashlight glances from place to place in the walkway, never glinting near the fountain, but just to be sure, I hide behind the structure of the thing. The security guard clicks on his walkie talkie.

"I've finished my sweep" Oh, it's a girl.

"All clear." A big fat bitch.

While she wanders out, probably back to her security station I scurry down to behind the massage table and then walk up to check out the elevator. The floor indicator marks that it has stopped on the floor above six: PH. He's in the Penthouse suite. Shit. I didn't even see a penthouse from the road. Most likely the only way in or out of that is this elevator. The second that starts moving, the second I step inside, security knows where I am. The only way in is another way in, and I haven't got the first clue about it. I sneak down the hall the security guard came out of.

Get it while I can. I run down the hall quietly as I can. On both sides are floor-level lighting that form half-circle pools and they are the only lights to see by. I move through the corridor by one light island and the next, and find my way to a stairwell. No good. This one is lit up. I have to get to a lesser-used stairwell with the lights out. It'll be less dangerous that way. I move like a shadow casting a shadow. The corridors are as uninviting as they are dark. I head to a stairway that's in the black, and make my way up to the fifth floor. I turn a corner, and I see a silhouette down the hall.

It's a dog. Oh, fuck, it's a dog. It's a big one. Looks like the size of a moose to me. I back away from the corner, but I know dogs. I know backing away won't save me. In a few moments he'll get curious of something he's seen or smelled. My heart races as I head back down the hall, looking for the stairwell. I just need to get behind a closed door. The dog will

bark like hell, and then he'll get me. If I'm lucky, I'll just get caught. If it decides to maul me, I'm in for it. I get ready to unstrap my bear mace. I hear the jangle of the collar behind me.

Oh, Shit. Oh my god.

I hear the tapping of paws on the floor, but I'm almost to the stairwell. That's when I see a shadow standing in the hall. There's someone there. It's a girl. She's seen me. I'm sure of it. I get distracted, and before I know it the dog is right behind me. I don't move from my spot. I have the bear mace in my hand and I need to hit it right in its face with this stuff in order for it to work. I turn, looking at the dog, and I check my shoulder. The girl is gone. I'm really fucked now. Near one of the pools of light I stand my ground. The dog prowls toward me, head low, eyes trained. I can't run. I can't scream. It's a rottweiler. Big as an ox. I catch a look at his eyes, cold and glinting. He paws his way forward, sniffing the air. He hasn't barked yet. He growls just a little but he hasn't been too aggressive. I don't understand but it doesn't look like he's going to attack me. I reach my hand out, cautiously, and lower my guard. He sniffs my fingers. Without warning he pounces.

That's when I'm on the floor, screaming, and when I realize he's licking me. Licking my face over and over. He won't stop. His tongue is as big, slimy and wet as a raw fish fillet. I holster my mace, grab my flashlight and pry the big lugs face off me. I just want a good look at his collar.

'Brucie.'

Oh, god. I pimped him out two months ago! For a biscuit a dog will love you for a day, for a piece of tail he'll love you forever. I hear a whistle. Brucie jumps off of me. The girl down the hall. She's back. She's closer.

"We finally caught up with you." She says

I turn my light on her. Her skin is pale in the bright LED light, She wears an ash-colored sweater and khaki pants, but no sock or shoes. Her eyes are large; piercing blue, and her vibrant red hair flows to her back, in fiery curls. She doesn't look any older than me.

"Who are you?" I ask.

"My name is Winnifred."

"Stay where you are, Winnifred!"

"Are you scared?"

"Shut up."

In the door behind me. The stairwell; I can hear plodding footsteps. It's security. They're on

to me. I run from the door. Fuck it. I lost. I'm bugging out. I'll go out the back, and over the fence. No problem. I don't get far. Winnifred is behind me and muffles my mouth. Christ, she's fast. I don't scream, but I want to. Her hand is cold.

"Kill your flashlight. Go hide behind that corner!" she says.

She turns me loose and without a thought I do just that, and just as I cup the beam of the flashlight with my hand and slip behind the corner the door opens.

"Winnie? Was that you?"

"Yes. Just me playing with Brucie. I got carried away."

I try to breathe fast and silent. Oh, Jesus. That was scary.

"What the hell did you scream for?"

"I just told you. It was only me and my dog getting rambunctious."

The man sighs.

"We let you stay up late, Winnie, the least you could do is respect the other people in this house. In the shadow of the security flashlight I see her knelt over, just petting her dog.

"There's a good boy, Brucie. I'm sorry I yelled at you."

"OK, HQ, Checked it out. It was just Winnie. I'm heading back now." I hear the door behind me shut, and I am frozen where I am. I can hear her coming my way. What now? Then she's standing up next to me, as I sit huddled on the ground.

"Take off the mask."

With a moments hesitation I do, I take it off and then I shine my light on my face.

"Welcome to the prison." She says

"Prison?"

"I get great food here, I can go wherever I want, but I can't leave." I shine the light back on her, starting at the base of her khakis. Behind her I can see that her hair starts at about her knees.

"Are those extensions?" I ask

"No."

I stand up and she puts her hand on my head. She's might be a good foot taller than me.

“You're pretty short, huh?”

“Yeah. And you're pretty tall. Your hair might be longer than I am.”

“I've been growing it for ages.”

I chuckle honestly, not nervously.

“My name is Sylvia.”

“That's a nice name.” she says. “Sounds prettier than Winnifred.”

“Well, that's not a bad name either.”

“I've been following you for a while, you know. When you were down there, I saw you.” she points to the lobby. “Then I waited for you to come up the stairs, and you happened to come across my dog. I thought I might have to stop him from hurting you.”

“But you didn't rat me out?”

“What are you here for, Sylvia?”

I turn off the light.

“I'm not here to hurt anybody, and I'm not here to steal anything. Mr. Curosa has a key, and I just need to check it.”

“Check it?”

“Yeah. It's an orange-ended key on a big ring that he keeps on him.”

“Oh, I know that one. Do you want me to get it for you?”

I want her to, but I don't trust her all the way, and I wanted to do this myself.

“No, I can get it, as long as I know where it is. Penthouse, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Is there any way up there besides the elevator?”

“Well...Not inside.”

“OK. How about outside.”

She chuckles.

“If you do anything to hurt anybody, or if you rat me out, I'll kill you.”

“I won't. I won't. I promise. Just tell me.”

“OK. I've only ever done this in the summer, but what you do is go to the east wing on the fourth floor, stairwell. That's down these stairs and then take a left, and go to the end of the hall to the next stairwell. There is a hatch that opens to the roof, no alarms. Go out that and head to the penthouse, and you only have to climb up two slanted roofs to get on top of the hotel. Now you'll see the penthouse ahead of you, and there is a glass-enclosed patio up there. It's the only door that goes inside that isn't alarmed this time of night. Inside the patio is a door to the penthouse, that IS alarmed. The window next to it, however, isn't and it's always unlocked.”

“Wow. How do you know this?”

“I like to run around at night too.”

“You don't look a day older than me, you know.”

“Looks about right. What are you, fourteen?”

“Seventeen.”

“About right.”

“OK. So, where can I find the keys then?”

“You have to promise when you're done to come to room 523.”

“523?”

“That's right. I'll be there.”

“Well, then I promise to come.”

“Where?”

“Room 523.”

“OK, well, I don't know where he keeps the keys. Probably where he puts his wallet.”

“OK, well...” I check my watch, it's 2:45 AM. “How much longer will you be up?”

“Pretty much all night.”

“Well, I'll be at your place in less than 30 minutes. Go there and wait for me.”

“Sure. Thank you, Sylvia.”

I smile and put my ski mask back on, and then head for the stairs down to level four. Quick check of the hallway confirms I'm alone out here. I run to the wing she told me about, and out to the stairwell. Sure enough, there's an access hatch there. The gusting night wind greets me, and I step out onto the roof of the hotel. Far beyond the hills I can see the glinting lights of the city, and high above me are the stars. The wind gusts and blows around me, and I am surrounded by so much darkness that I almost seem to be suspended in space. The moon gives me just enough light, however, and I don't even need my flashlight yet. The sloping rooftops ahead of me point the path to my goal, and I hurry toward them, and make the easy inclined walk to the next two levels up. There's a safety fence around the perimeter of the penthouse and I slink over it easily enough, and make my way up to the glass enclosed patio. I cautiously flick on my flashlight, and see that there is no-one inside. I try the door handle. It's locked.

Well, it just shouldn't be that easy. I go for my probe and torsion wrench and make quick work clicking out the pins of the lock. The latch pulls loose, and the door is free. Now I get to find out if Winnifred was lying to me. I push the glass door open. No alarm. I'm in. It's a little warmer inside the glass patio, but not as warm as it will be inside. The glass framed door is right in front of me, and it is very inviting. Through it I can get a good look, and there is nobody on the other side. I trust her that this is alarmed, so I go to the window, and place my gloved hands on the frame of the glass.

I'm hesitant to try this one. It's not locked? It's not alarmed? Really? I breathe in and out, and press up on the window, and it slides open quietly. Really. Slipping inside, I leave the window slightly open for now just to remind myself. It's not that big a problem. Here comes the real big risk. I take out my glow stick, snap it into place, and shake it. A pool of soft green light surrounds me. I control the light with my hand, and I can push the stick into my sleeve whenever I need to, but now I'm a walking lantern. I walk into the bedroom.

I can hear all of them snoring and breathing. It's a fiasco. In the aqua green of the light I can see him on his enormous bed, those girls are draped all over him. His bed is easily fifteen feet in diameter, and it looks like they had to take out walls to fit it in. They had to remodel the penthouse just so that he could fit this mattress for mistresses that they are all draped over like piles of rags. I walk closer to them, and it's disgusting the old perv has this huge hickey on his neck. I couldn't imagine fucking this old fossil. Gross. I trace along the wall, and eventually hit a door on the side of the room, opposite the patio entrance. I get in, shut the door quickly and hit the lights.

It's his dressing room. His bathroom is here too. His wallet is right there, and next to that his keys. The keyring. Even now I see the bright hunters-orange key grip that Arthur was talking about. I take the keyring into the bathroom, and remove the key, just as planned. I open the clay stamp, remove the wax paper and press the key down into it, making sure I got a good mold. Then I removed it and made a mirror-image copy of the other side. It's done. I did it. I look at myself in the mirror and my smile is so broad. I click the lights out and from the window behind me the half-moon is in view. I turn and look.

It's odd. There is a raven out there, sitting on the window sill, that I only just now saw. I didn't see it in the mirror, but from this angle it's pretty obvious. The crow seems to notice me noticing it and quickly flies off to mingle with the darkness.

-DAVE-

I'm still tipsy and my head is aching when the alarm goes off. I don't know who's alarm it is or why the fuck it's waking me up now.

I'm holding Arthur Delobb in my arms. Neither of us is clothed. We're chest to chest.

“Shut that fucking thing off!”

A girls' voice behind me says this.

“Just a sec.” says Arthur. He rolls over toward the alarm and I take as much of the sheets as I can and cover myself up.

Lord, God, What have I done?

He sits up in bed looking at the clock. Oh, God, I remember. He slaps my thigh.

“Get up big guy. I have to go get Sylvia.”

“It's five in the morning, Arthur.” moans Martha.

I thought it was supposed to be just me and her. Oh, my God. I feel a push from behind.

“Go! Get the fuck out. I want to sleep.”

Do not lay with a man as you would with a woman. It is an abomination.

Leviticus.

No. No. No. No. No.

This was the line I never wanted to cross. I have kept my ways so far from it that I never dreamed I would wake up like this. It's OK, though, right? I was with a woman. Then he came in and-holy shit.

Arthur already has his pants on “Come on, Ken,” he says “I'm dropping you off, then picking up Sylvia.”

“You mean the stumpy blond twat?”

I turn. "Fuck you. Who are you calling a twat?"

"Excuse me?"

"Dude, be nice. We're guests."

"And fuck you too, DeLobb. I mean, you just... You just... I can't even say it."

Sort of raped me.

"Don't look at me, man. I just walked into a room."

"It's way to early, assholes. Take it somewhere else."

To hell with this. In the dark I fumble around to find my pants. That's all I find. Just my pants. I zip them up and walk out the door.

I hear Arthur behind me.

"I'm gonna drive you home, man, hang on."

At the entrance I zip up my coat and jam my bare feet into my shoes. I close the door and shuffle down the apartment complex stairwell. When I open the door at the base of the stairs the cold bites me. I feel alone. I feel like not even God is with me now.

-ARTHUR-

From the window I can see Dave jogging to a bus stop.

"There. I don't want to do that again, OK, Arthur? Not unless its a girl, then maybe."

"Once is enough for me too, Martha.

I gather Daves' clothes and head out to the living room, where I throw on my unbuttoned shirt.

If all goes according to plan, I'll get to see him tonight.

Send questions, Comments, thoughts to

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