
Coercion

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The incandescent light bulb swung back and forth, creating an ellipse of light within the dark room.

Or maybe it was his head that was swinging.

Crunch. His head popped backwards from another fist. His one good eye looked through his plastered down brown hair and searched the surrounding darkness, looking for the next attack. He tasted blood. His arms burned, tied behind him to the chair. They had already worked over his chest; his face felt on fire.

Movement! He closed his eye and cringed, waiting for the blow.

"Ok boys, I think he's learnt his lesson." A voice. Foreign. Slimy. His skin crawled.

"Haven't you Alex White?" the voice continued. "You've learned not to interfere in our...operations"

Alex struggled to get the words past his swollen lips. "Just defending my shop."

"Well that's the problem, Alex." The voice sounded disappointed. "This is our neighbourhood: your shop is our shop." The room went silent. Alex's heart raced. Were they going to kill him now?

***Say something!* Alex tried to work his lips, but the Voice cut him off.**

"You know boys, I don't think he has learnt his lesson after all."

Alex's eyes darted side to side. He saw a pair of shapes move in from the side.

He was going to die. Right here, right now. He cursed his hot temper and those punks who tore up his shop. He closed his eyes and wished he could have held his wife Natalie one more time...

A vice like grip held his chin. The blurry bright spot above him coalesced into the familiar light bulb. He was alive!

"Ok Alex, I think we understand each other now. We're going to drop you off

somewhere. Next time we call on you or your shop, you'll do exactly as we tell you. **OK?"**

Alex squirmed in the chair. Every inch of his body screamed back in pain. He gasped, almost blacking out. He probably had permanent damage. He needed a doctor; he needed...oh god.

How am I going to explain this to Natalie?

He had to get out of this mess right now. He needed to get home. Taking a steadying breath, he whispered, "Ok."

The light went out.

*

Alex recognized the man the instant he pushed through the shop door: trouble. Alex's hand went to his nose, still red and out of shape. The man strolled through the shop, glancing at the food racks, grocery shelves and ice cream fridge, trying to give an air of innocence. Alex saw the remnants of a shiner on the man's left cheek. Alex looked at his left knuckles and smiled. At least he had hit someone before going down. Shiner grabbed a packet of Wrigley's chewing gum and approached the counter. His eyes were cold, his mouth thin and straight. Alex's heart rate jumped and his carotid spasmed. He met the gaze and swallowed. This moment had kept him awake for the last nine days. If he didn't play ball, he'd lose everything. He spoke slowly. "Sixty cents."

Shiner fished around in his pocket and slapped a few coins onto the counter.

"Close at seven. Turn off the lights, leave the front door unlocked," said Shiner.

"Fifteen cents change. Have a nice day," Alex said. Shiner's eyes narrowed to slits. Alex forced a smile then turned away.

Don't look back. Don't look back.

He heard the shuffle of feet then footsteps heading for the door. Alex looked up. Shiner was gone, but only temporarily. Shiner would keep coming back, keep using him, forever. He slammed his fist into the counter.

Trapped.

He glanced at the wall clock. Four-thirty. His thoughts drifted to the upstairs apartment. He rubbed his hands through his long hair. He hadn't told Natalie the whole truth about the previous week. He hadn't wanted to scare her, but he also didn't want to admit his failure. He was her husband. It was his job to keep her and little Ingrid safe.

He pursed his lips. It was time to be a man. He had to get his wife and daughter to safety while he still could.

A solitary street light stood vigilant against the night, barely illuminating the shop front. Alex watched from a skip in the alley across the road, as the deadline came and went.

Each tick of his old wristwatch felt like an eternity.

***Tick.* The street was empty. Not even a punk kid rattling the shop doors.**

***Tock.* The wind whistled through the street. He shivered.**

***Tick.* He thought of Natalie, hoping she was warm and safe.**

***Tock.* He growled to himself. Why didn't they just show up and get it over with?**

His attention waning, Alex was about to give up, when two cloaked shapes approached his shop. One pushed open the door and slithered inside, the other turned and waved. Several other shapes appeared and quickly entered the shop. The second cloak remained outside.

Alex looked on, knuckles white as he held onto the skip. Were they going to rob him? No, they wouldn't go to this much effort for his pitiful stock...

As he looked through the shop window for movement, another group of figures walked past and into the shop. The sentry followed them.

The door closed with a clunk.

Now what?

His fingers drummed against the skip. The glare from the streetlight made the

shop window a mirror.

They could be doing anything in there.

He jumped out of the skip. He had to find out what was happening. He crept onto the street then sticking to the shadows, slinked around the corner, crossed the road and doubled back, halting before the shop window. He brought his ear as close to the glass as he dared. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to listen to the noise inside, but could only hear a murmur.

"Dammit."

He remembered the back door. He edged down the side of his building and over the fence into the corral. A set of bins sat in the far corner. He crouched by the door and put his ear to the cold wood.

Silence.

He moved to grab the doorknob but paused.

Wait. Just let them finish. Don't do anything stupid.

No. They had him under their thumb now; he and family would never truly be safe.

He gritted his teeth and grabbed the knob. He eased the key in, and rotated, millimetre by millimetre.

The door unlocked with a crash. Alex's eyes widened as he jerked backwards. He scampered behind the bins, watching the door. He focused on his breathing while he wiped the sweat from his eyes.

The door didn't move. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath.

Ok, this is it. He sneaked back to the door and slowly pulled the handle down, cringing as the lock mechanism ratcheted, until the handle met its stop. He pulled the door open a fraction, snuck inside then closed the door silently behind him. He eyed his surroundings. Clear.

Alex moved cautiously through the staff area, dropping to his knees by the stairs and bead screen to the shop floor. Leaning forward, he studied the shapes before him.

Two groups faced each other across the counter. Two shadows, the leaders, shook hands. They both grabbed something from the counter. The group before the counter quickly disappeared through the front door; the other group remained behind.

Alex inched forward on his knees, ears perked.

"I don't trust them. Follow them. Meet back at The Della-Cruz." Alex inhaled sharply.

That voice! The one that tortured him last week. Alex's heart raced. *That son of a bitch.*

He took a slow breath, calming himself. *Think!* What had they just exchanged? And what was the Della Cruz? It sounded familiar. A restaurant perhaps? He pulled back from the bead screen, listening. He heard murmurs, crinkling wrappers and rustling jackets - the bastards were stealing his food - then the soft chime of the door bell.

Silence.

The shop was his again.

His heart pounded against his ribs. Was it safe to come out? He hesitantly pushed through the beads into the main shop area. There was something on the counter top. He shivered; it couldn't be good. Holding his breath, he approached the counter...

...To find an open case.

Filled with bags of white powder.

Flashing red and blue light illuminated the store. His jaw dropped as he turned to see the police cars outside. A distorted voice called out over a loud speaker.

Oh shit...

*

He tugged on the handcuffs. At least this interrogation room had decent lighting, he thought. Oh, and a large one-way on the far wall. With some luck, he might leave the room without a battered body.

He shook his head, eyes clenched tight, holding back the tears. He didn't know

what to do anymore. The second detective to visit him asked him about the hundred-kay worth of cocaine, blended with a biological agent.

The first had told him that if he ever wanted to see his family again, then he had to keep quiet.

The second cop had left without getting an answer. Alex cursed and pulled on the handcuff. How had it ended like this? From protecting his property, to a life sentence.

Or a dead wife and child. How had those criminals found Natalie and Ingrid?

Alex sighed and gave a sad chuckle. If they could afford to turn a detective, they obviously had resources. Alex knew he could never hide from these people.

He dropped his head to his hands. Destroy his life, or kill his wife. And he had no guarantee those crims would let his family live once he was in prison anyway.

"Baby, I'm sorry." He couldn't hold back the tears. He would never see her again, never be able to hold her.

*

Alex watched the buildings zip by from the rear seat of the police car. He was on his way downtown for final booking and a long time in prison.

The coppers radio whistled static then a scratchy voice asked for an update.

"Passing through Brookeville now, Control."

Alex's pupils dilated.

Brookeville...

After his beating, he had awoken in a dumpster in Brookeville.

Down the road from the Dalla-Cruz club.

His pulse quickened. That had to be where the criminals were hiding out--and where Natalie and Ingrid were being held! He twisted around in his seat, studying his surroundings.

Kay Road. They were only a couple of blocks from the Dalla-Cruz.

He would never get another chance like this. He was passing the point of no return: once he got to the police HQ, he could kiss his life good bye.

He had to do this. Alex knew with every fibre of his being that once he was in prison, those criminals would kill his family. He had to try to save them.

Even if he died trying.

He took a deep breath and calmed himself. A small smile touched the corner of his lips.

This is for you, my darlings.

He slapped down the release for his seat belt and fell sideways along the back seat. He grabbed the armrest on the door by his head. He brought his legs up.....then brought them down on the door window as hard as he could!

"Hey!" The car swerved, rolling Alex around. "Cut that out!" the officer snarled. Alex took another breath then banged his heels down on the centre of the glass - the weakest point.

"If you don't stop this second, you won't make it to prison in one piece!"

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The office slammed on the brakes. The tires screamed in protest as the car skidded across the road. Alex held on tight as the car came to a rest.

"That's it!" the officer bellowed as he undid his seat belt.

Panic swelled up inside Alex. He was out of time.

Just once more!

He paused, tensing the muscles in his legs. Then he screamed, deep, feral, then fired his legs forward with everything he had left.

SMASH!

The window exploded outwards. Alex turned and locked eyes with the policeman. Then they both burst into action:

Alex scrambled forward and unlocked the door from the outside.

The cop threw his door open and charged around the car-

-Just as Alex got the door open and fell onto the road right in front of the cop!

The baton flew at light speed towards Alex, who rolled away from the officer and up to one knee. Another blur of speed. Alex cringed, turning away as he put his cuffed hands up in defence.

Clang! Alex opened his eyes. The handcuff chain had caught the baton arm. Acting on reflex, he twisted his hands trapping the baton. He cried out as the metal dug into his wrists, but he held on, pulling the metal bar away from the officer, obviously unprepared for retaliation. Alex fell backward from the momentum. He fumbled the weapon into his hands.

The policeman charged forward. Alex shoved the baton forward, driving it into the officer's stomach. The officer collapsed. Alex climbed back to his feet and ran to the car driver's door. He looked at his cuffed hands.

Too hard to drive.

But he couldn't leave the car for the cop either. He grabbed the keys from the ignition, turned and ran through the screaming traffic. Cars missed him by millimetres as he fled across the four lanes, then down a side road.

He was puffing, but forced himself faster.

For Natalie and Ingrid...

For Natalie; for Ingrid. He repeated the mantra as he raced down yet another street. Sirens wailed from every direction; tires screeched behind him. The police were closing in. Alex glanced around, eyes wide, searching as he ran. His heart pounded against his ribs. Sweat dripped into his eyes.

Blue and Red flashed in a nearby window.

Alex swore. Adrenaline coursed through his system. Where was that goddamn club? He was running out of time. He turned right at the T intersection.

It has to be this street...

Yes! A faded wooden sign advertising the Dalla-Cruz was half way down the road. He pushed his tired legs harder, cuffed hands dangling in front.

Suddenly a police cruiser swung sideways onto the street ahead, lights flashing, siren blaring, heading straight for Alex! He urged his body faster, breathing fast as he pushed one leg in front of the other.

The squad car slammed on its brakes, skidding towards Alex. Just before impact, Alex swerved to the right, barging through the front door of the Dalla-Cruz. He forced his battered body forward. Three surprised customers turned on their bar stools. Alex made a beeline for the staff door.

"Hey you can't-" Alex ignored the bar keeper, banging through the door--straight into Shiner. Shiner's eyes went wide as Alex collapsed on top of him. Alex scrambled back to his feet. His face went red, eyes alight with hatred. He kicked Shiner in the head.

"Where's my wife you son of a bitch!" he screamed, smashing his boot into the man's chest again and again.

"Alex!"

Alex froze. Even his ragged lungs paused.

Natalie.

He heard a noise from behind him. Two cops were at the main entrance, their weapons drawn. Alex turned and ran further into the building.

"Alex! Alex!" Natalie screamed, then went silent.

No...

She couldn't be dead! He pushed his burning legs faster. He turned the corner to find a dead end with two doors.

Right.

He slammed through--to come face to face with a gun barrel. Natalie and Ingrid held each other in the corner, eyes wide, locked on him. Finally, Alex focused on the man behind the weapon. Although he hadn't spoken yet, Alex instinctively knew who he was.

The Interrogator.

The son of a bitch who had come into his life and fucked everything up.

"So long Mr White," oozed the slimy voice. Alex looked at his family and his shoulders slumped. His eyes began to water.

I failed you.

"Freeze!" A voice behind him. Alex instinctively dived to the ground.

BANG!

BANG!

Alex opened his eyes. Interrogator clutched his stomach with both hands. Blood dribbled from his mouth, then he fell backward.

Heart pounding in his ears, Alex clambered to his feet and raced to the corner. He scooped his family up in his arms, his tears wetting Ingrid's hair. Natalie hugged back, wailing. She buried her head in Alex's shoulder.

"It's ok baby. It's ok."

He looked down at Ingrid and smiled. She smiled back, her little white teeth glinting in the artificial light. Alex sighed as he turned to rest his body against the wall. His family was safe. That was all that mattered.

There was only one problem left. He tore his gaze from his daughter to the policemen by the door.

But they weren't coming for him: one was kneeling over the still body of the

other.

He took the bullet meant for me. Fresh tears welled up in Alex's eyes. How much pain had this group of criminals caused?

The kneeling cop looked up, locking eyes with Alex. His red eyes narrowed, face twisted in a blend of pain and anger.

Alex swallowed. Was this cop going to exact revenge? But the policeman wasn't staring at Alex anymore, but at the Interrogator's corpse.

Has he figured out what happened here?

Alex closed his eyes and just lay there. His wife in one arm, his daughter the other. He had saved them. He gave his girls another squeeze. He looked up at the ceiling. A little grin spread across his face.

"Everything's going to be ok."

THE END