



A RAYTHE REIGN PUBLICATION

THE
ARTIFACT

BOOK I - THE BODYGUARD

X. ARATARE



The Artifact

Book 1 - The Bodyguard

By X. Aratare

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE - SOLE SURVIVOR

CHAPTER TWO – A LEAD AND A LOSS

CHAPTER THREE - THE SCARRED MAN

CHAPTER FOUR – CLOSED CASKET

CHAPTER FIVE – DEAD END, NEW BEGINNING

CHAPTER SIX – DANE GAREIS

CHAPTER SEVEN - THE JOB OFFER

CHAPTER EIGHT - THE MUSEUM

CHAPTER NINE - THE SARCOPHAGUS

CHAPTER TEN - OUTFITTING

CHAPTER ELEVEN - HALLUCINATION

CHAPTER TWELVE - DINNER IN

CHAPTER THIRTEEN - MONSTER

CHAPTER FOURTEEN - PLEASANT DREAMS

CHAPTER FIFTEEN - RESISTANCE IS FUTILE

CHAPTER SIXTEEN - IT COULD BE ANYONE

CHAPTER ONE - SOLE SURVIVOR

Detective Sean Harding thrust open Winter Haven Memorial's emergency room doors. He strode past the nurse on duty with a flash of his detective badge and a curt nod. The badge was a necessity. As an undercover operative for the Winter Haven Special Task Force and Narcotics Unit, known simply as “the Unit,” he didn’t look the part of a police detective even when he wore a suit like today.

His dark brown hair was long enough for it to begin to curl and brush the tops of his shoulders, and he had a perpetual five o’clock shadow. His olive-toned skin spared him from looking vampire-pale despite long hours spent on night-darkened streets and in the windowless rooms of clubs. But despite having been up for over thirty-six hours straight, Sean’s green eyes still looked sharp and clear.

He hadn’t stopped moving since first hearing about the drug that was known simply as the Powder. Everything surrounding the drug was shrouded in darkness. Where it came from, who was behind its manufacture, and even its actual chemical makeup were all unknown. The only thing that was certain was that it killed everyone who took it. And that fact made Sean fear there would be a holocaust of drug users unless he could locate the source of the Powder and choke off its flow. He had finally gotten his first solid lead tonight in the form of a phone call from Dr. Olga Vostok, a good friend and emergency room physician at Winter Haven Memorial.

“Sean,” Dr. Vostok had said. “We have a survivor.”

“Are you sure?” His heart rate had risen.

“Yes. He’s a young man. More like a boy. He took the Powder and he’s here. Alive,” she had said, her voice rushed and strained.

“Keep him alive, Olga. If he says anything—I mean ANYTHING, write it down, record it, remember it. Do whatever you have to do,” Sean had ordered. As soon as he had hung up, he had jumped into his car, peeled out of the police station’s parking lot. He got to the ER in record time.

And now he was here, in the hospital, feet away from the boy that could turn his investigation around. Sean yanked aside the curtain that surrounded the boy’s hospital bed. The sound of the metal rings sliding along the pole was nearly deafening. He froze.

Too late.

Sean recognized death when he saw it. His gaze riveted on the red blood oozing out of the corners of the boy's unseeing blue eyes. It looked especially vibrant against the child's chalky white skin. The blood trails were dry, appearing almost painted on in their vividness. For a moment, Sean wanted to grab the boy's shoulders and shake him. He wanted to believe that the red was makeup or paint. But he knew it was not. The boy was dead and gone. Sean swallowed the bile that rose in his throat.

"His brain liquefied. We will need an autopsy to confirm it, but I am sure already. Just like the others," Dr. Vostok's Russian-accented voice suddenly came from behind him. Startled, Sean spun around to face her. His first thought was that she looked as deathly pale as the boy. "Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you, Sean."

Sean waved off her apology even as his heart still thundered in his chest. "How long ago did he die?"

"Moments after I called you, so the guilt in your eyes is unfounded. You couldn't have gotten here in time unless you had teleported." She touched his shoulder tenderly, but he didn't want tenderness. The disappointment was too great.

"He is—*was*—the only lead I had, Olga. More are going to die, because I didn't get here fast enough."

Dr. Vostok walked over to the boy's bed. Her dark blonde hair gleamed under the fluorescent lights. The lines that framed her mouth deepened as she looked down at the dead boy. She lightly placed one of her hands on the child's forearm. Sean noticed that her nails were bitten to the quick.

"He took the Powder just once," she said softly. "Just once, and this was the result. He looks all of fifteen, doesn't he?"

"Any ID?" Sean's police instincts kicked in even as his shoulders slumped in exhaustion and despair. Another lead to nowhere.

"No, no ID. No wallet. He didn't even have on shoes or a shirt when he wandered into the ER," she said, patting the boy's arm.

"Did he say who he bought the drug from?" Sean asked.

She shook her head. "He would only speak of what the drug showed him."

“So it causes hallucinations?” Sean asked wearily. He expected a quick confirmation from Dr. Vostok, but she was silent for so long that Sean began to feel a trickle of unease. “Olga?”

“I don’t know,” she said, then shook herself. “I mean, most probably. Yes, definitely, it causes hallucinations. He couldn’t have really been seeing what he claimed he was. It’s quite impossible.” The last was said softly, almost as if she were speaking to herself.

Sean grasped her elbow gently. “What is it? You look unnerved. I’ve never seen you like this.”

“Unnerved? That’s a very good word to use to describe how I feel.” She wrapped her arms around herself as she added, “This drug, Sean, it isn’t like anything I’ve ever seen. If you had heard what he *said*. His voice is still in my mind.”

“Tell me,” Sean urged.

“He said that I should think of reality as a matryoshka,” she said.

“A matryoshka?” Sean asked. The word was alien on his tongue, and didn’t sound like something a fifteen-year-old would know.

“It is the Russian term for a traditional Russian nesting doll,” she explained. “You know, the wooden dolls where, when you open them, there are other dolls inside.”

“Oh, I’ve seen those.” Sean’s brow furrowed as his confusion grew with the explanation. “And he used the word ‘matryoshka’?”

“Yes, it is strange, isn’t it?” Dr. Vostok let out a soft, uneasy laugh. “And what’s even stranger is that I believe he used that metaphor just for *me*. Just so that *I* would understand. But if he had been speaking to someone else, he would have used a different metaphor. A metaphor that would have resonated for that person.” She wrapped her arms around herself again. “He was dying, Sean. His brain was literally becoming soup in his skull, but he was thinking at such a level—I cannot explain it.”

“Did he say anything else about this—this nesting doll metaphor?”

She nodded. “He said that I should imagine that the outermost nesting doll is the world as we know it. That doll is the reality we can see. But the drug, the Powder, has the ability to pull that doll apart and show us what is inside.”

“And what does the inside look like?” Sean asked, that earlier trickle of unease becoming a torrent.

“Beautiful and terrible.” Dr. Vostok shivered. “He told me that just one layer down from here, just *one*, things get a whole lot more interesting, but if you continue on, you will find ...” She suddenly stopped and let out a nervous little laugh that had the hair on the back of Sean’s neck standing on end.

“What do you find?” Sean asked, resisting the urge to shake her. His desperation to know *anything* about the drug rose up in him stronger than ever.

Her eyes were bright, glassy with unspeakable unease, as she said, “You’ll find that we’re not alone. But having seen who we’re sharing all of this with, you’ll wish we were.”

CHAPTER TWO – A LEAD AND A LOSS

You'll find that we're not alone. But having seen who we're sharing all of this with, you'll wish we were.

You'll wish we were.

Those were the words that ran through Sean's mind as he and his Unit partner of five years, Carlos Garza, waited on a little scab of beach just off the main highway. Sean's eyes were trained on the ocean, searching for the telltale ruby red running lights of the sleek speedboats often used for smuggling.

A week after the nameless boy had died in the hospital, Sean had finally gotten a break. Joey, a long-time snitch, had called and told him that the Powder was being brought in by boat. Joey had heard that a huge shipment was supposed to be coming in that night. Sean, along with four other members of the Unit, were part of the sting.

Sean glanced over to his right at Carlos. They were posing as tourists enjoying the upcoming sunset. Carlos was wearing shorts and a garish Hawaiian print shirt. He looked like a colorful party balloon. Sean couldn't help the grin that flashed over his handsome, angular face at the thought.

"Can you see Lily and Rob?" Carlos asked, rolling the 'R' in Rob's name.

Sean casually raised the binoculars to his eyes as though he were watching the seagulls feed when, in reality, he was focusing on Rob and Lily's boat. "Yeah, looks like they're right on target. Check out the fishing boat about a mile north of us."

Sean passed the binoculars to his partner. Without them, he could barely make out the bright splash of color that Lily's wide-brimmed hat made against the slate gray water. His eyes skipped over to his left towards the long jutting pier that Lieutenant Michael Branish was running the operation from.

Branish had unexpectedly taken over control of the Unit four months earlier from Lieutenant Jack McCarthy. McCarthy had fought against it, but he was pushed aside and given a promotion he didn't want. The rest of the Unit hadn't wanted McCarthy to go either. Branish was as different from McCarthy as night was to day. Where McCarthy had been a political glad-hander, Branish would give even the most powerful an appraising look and turn away if they didn't interest him.

Yet Branish already knows more about us than Jack ever did. He watches and analyzes until it's as if he can read your mind.

Sean could feel Branish's sharp gray eyes on him at that moment. He knew that as much as the Lieutenant would be surveying the crowd on the pier, Branish would spend just as much time watching him. From the start, Branish had fixated on him in a way that made Sean feel like prey. It wasn't leering. It was an intense, all-absorbing gaze that sought to freeze Sean in place and consume him.

At first, the rest of the Unit had ribbed Sean that Branish had a crush on him. Of course, they said that only when there was no chance of the Lieutenant overhearing. Branish was built like a tank, and no one wanted to get on his bad side. Only Carlos had stopped the teasing after it became evident that Branish was actually stalking Sean. But not even Carlos guessed the extent of Branish's obsession or how Sean's actions had played right into it.

Thankfully, Branish's obsession hadn't stopped him from listening to Sean's suggestions on the job. He had agreed to the beach stakeout even though it seemed an unlikely spot for the drop. Sean's instincts were well-known around the Precinct, and only a stupid man would ignore them. And Branish wasn't stupid.

Sean was like a magnet and bad guys were his true north. He was drawn to them, to trouble, to danger. It had always been that way. And tonight, the Unit was relying more on Sean's instincts than ever before because of the lack of intel on the drug and its purveyors. No one knew how the Powder's sellers would react to being caught. A shootout or a request for lawyers? The Powder was so volatile, so dangerous that Sean believed that those who sold it had to be just as treacherous as their product.

Sean met Carlos' dark gaze. His partner winked at him and grinned, his white teeth glowing against the golden brown of his skin. The exhaustion and fear that had filled Sean for the week since the boy's death receded a bit, and he found himself relaxing in his partner's warm presence.

"Sean, don't you think we're sticking out a bit? Who is going to stop at this section of beach with us hanging out here?" Carlos asked.

"Maybe you're right," Sean answered, but his instincts told him that they should stay put.

"I mean this beach is isolated enough for a drop off, but with us around aren't they going to stay away?"

“You’d think.” Sean shrugged

“Yet we’re not moving.” Carlos’ voice was lit by his mischievous smile.

“Nope.”

“You are one damn strange gringo,” Carlos chuckled.

“Strange is the only way to be.” Sean couldn’t help giving the pier a sideways glance.

“Branish can’t see us. He’s too far away.” Carlos’ big face drew down into a frown.

“He’s got binoculars, too,” Sean said, too casually, as he turned back to stare out at the water.

“You should tell somebody about him. Or maybe *I* should.”

“What would we say? That Branish looks at me too much? That would go over brilliantly,” Sean replied sarcastically. *And there’s no way I’ll ever tell anyone what he did do. Because I let him. I wanted him to do it. It was punishment for letting Jamie die.*

Carlos’ hands fisted in the blanket they were sitting on. “If you were a woman and he looked at you like that, tried to get close to you, there’d be no question about what was going down. It’s sexual harassment or something!”

“Yeah, and if that woman complained, she’d be seen as weak. Not a part of the team. She’d be ostracized by a lot of people. That would be how it would go down.” Sean sighed. “How do you think it would be if *I* made a complaint? The same? Better? Or worse? I think we both know the answer to that.”

His partner bit his lower lip before he asked, “Have you heard the rumors about him?”

Sean shook his head. “What rumors?”

“They’re saying that Branish has dirt on some of the wealthy SOBs on the Hill and that the higher-ups *had* to let him take over the Unit.”

The Hill was the wealthiest section of Winter Haven, which in itself was something of an accomplishment considering that the wealth in the city exceeded some nation’s GDPs.

“Who would want to have Jack’s old job so bad he’d blackmail someone for it?” Sean frowned.

Carlos spread his arms wide at the empty beach. “Maybe to have a piece of all this excitement.”

Sean chuckled. “Right.”

“But it does make you think, doesn’t it? Weird as shit that one of those richer-than-god motherfuckers on the Hill with federal connections pulled all sorts of strings and bam! Branish is now our leader and our problem,” Carlos said.

“The Unit’s not high-profile. Most times we have to back down because the user’s daddy is a bigwig,” Sean pointed out. “Why not Homicide or the White Collar Crime division? Those are better places to be.”

Carlos shrugged his big, rounded shoulders. “No idea, mi amigo. But Branish wanted to be here pretty damn bad.”

Carlos went quiet suddenly and started shifting his weight from side-to-side as he gave Sean guilty looks.

“What’s on your mind, Carlos? You look like you want to ask me something,” Sean said.

“Some of the guys around the station are saying,” Carlos began, then swallowed and looked away.

“For fuck’s sake, Carlos, what is it?”

“That you and Branish had sex after the Radek bust,” Carlos said. “That’s why he’s so weird around you, because ... you *let* him have sex with you.”

Sean felt like the ground had shifted under him. A denial sprang to his lips. Could he lie to Carlos? His partner? The man he trusted with his life?

But I don’t trust anyone with this. We did have sex. Once. And that was enough for a lifetime.

Like Carlos had suggested, it had happened after the Radek bust. Lustov Radek was a weaselly little turd of a man who sold meth and liked to fuck teen boys. Sean had gone undercover as a fellow connoisseur of underage male flesh. He had gotten to be Radek’s best friend. What Sean had had to do to earn that friendship still gave him sweaty nightmares, but he had done it to put the bastard away.

The bust was supposed to go down when Radek took Sean to a club appropriately named Skin. He could still smell the stifling back room where he and Radek had been shown “special” services. Those included a spread of fine Russian caviar and cured meats. All thoughts of eating had vanished, though, when Sean saw what else was on the menu. Teens, some no older than fourteen, were brought in wearing nothing but collars around their necks and brands on their flanks.

Like cattle. They branded those kids like cattle.

Just thinking about it was enough to pull him back to that memory. It was seared into his brain.

Radek had gotten up from the low velvet couch they were sitting on to go over to the teens. He grabbed a handful of a blond boy’s hair and yanked his head back until the youth gave a gasp of pain. The boy looked to be about eighteen. His blue eyes were huge and his nostrils flared with fear. Skin didn’t sell “used” goods. All of these boys were supposedly virgin and unspoiled.

But they are broken. Trained. That’s why the boy is staying on his hands and knees and not trying to get away.

“A little old for me, but still, isn’t he the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen?” Radek asked. “Can you imagine a piece of ass like this is still virgin and sweet? What the fuck were his parents thinking of letting him go downtown by himself? Looking like he does, he was bound to get in trouble.”

Radek leaned down and licked a stripe across the boy’s cheek. Sean took a huge mouthful of his drink to stop his gorge from rising or himself from going over and ripping Radek off the kid.

Just a few more minutes and it’ll be over. The Unit will be in here as soon as the sale is made.

Skin’s flesh purveyor Gustov Samir spread his hands out to his sides, an oily smile crossing his too-broad face as he said to Sean, “Pick one.”

“He’ll pick two. It’s on me tonight,” Radek said before downing another shot of vodka so cold it was frosting the glass.

“You first,” Sean offered, mildly.

“But you’re the guest! Oh, hell, you know me too well. I am a pig when I do not get first choice,” Radek chortled. He fingered the blond boy’s hair again.

“His name’s Jamie,” Samir said.

“So pretty. I must have him. First time in the saddle. He’ll be so hot and tight. Do you want to watch, Sean? Watch as I pound Jamie’s virgin ass?” Radek smacked his lips.

Jamie’s eyes met Sean’s. Time seemed to slow, yet paradoxically, the boy’s actions seemed to speed up. Sean watched, frozen on the couch, as Jamie lunged for a wicked-looking knife on the table. The boy plunged the blade into Radek’s thigh. The rat bastard went down with a shriek of pain. He rolled back and forth, clutching at his leg, squealing. Samir made a grab for the teen, spittle on his lips, face reddened with fury, but Jamie slashed at him with the knife. Samir scrambled back out of stabbing-range.

“Don’t!” Sean yelled as Jamie brought the blade up in front of his own chest.

Those blue eyes flashed with despair and terror. Sean was only halfway to the teen, when Jamie plunged the knife into his own chest. Only the hilt remained exposed as he toppled over. Sean hunkered down beside the dying boy. Jamie’s eyes were so clear.

Like I can see right into his soul.

“It’s going to be okay. We’re going to call you an ambulance,” Sean said, even as he knew it wasn’t going to be okay. No ambulance would be able to get there in time.

The sound of booted feet and the cries of “police” met his ears, but he didn’t turn, didn’t even acknowledge the police as they crashed into the room. He was holding the boy’s hand and trying by force of will alone to keep the teen in his body. But Jamie gave one last rattling breath and his blue eyes lost the gleam of life.

Carlos had been the one to “arrest” Sean and take him to the precinct in order to keep his cover from being blown. But once the charade was over, Sean begged away from everyone and went into the locker room to be alone. He stripped off his blood soaked clothes and stepped into the communal shower. He stood under the scalding hot spray, still and silent.

Jamie was minutes away from being saved, and now he’s dead.

Sean didn’t believe there was enough water in the world to wash off the boy’s scent of terror and despair from his skin.

If only I had acted sooner. Forgotten the bust. Forgotten the damn protocol. Just gotten that boy out of the place. Away from Lustov's hands and tongue and foul cock. Jamie would be alive now.

When his skin felt scoured by the hot water, he reluctantly turned off the spray and wrapped a towel around his slender waist. As he walked over to his locker, his soaking wet hair sent trails of water down his body, pebbling his nipples and raising goose bumps on his skin. That was when Branish cleared his throat.

Sean whipped around to face him. Branish was as tall as Sean, but broader. Branish's size had never intimidated Sean, as he had plenty of muscle himself. But, at that moment, in the locker room alone with the older man, Sean felt a hint of fear.

"Rough night," Branish said, his deep, gravelly voice echoing in the empty, half-lit locker room.

"Yeah, that's one way of putting it," Sean said.

The hint of fear made Sean bold, or perhaps foolish was a better description. Instead of grabbing another towel from the rack to dry his hair, he used the one around his waist to do the job. As he stood totally naked in front of the other man he could almost feel Branish's eyes rake over his body like a physical caress.

Sean knew he had made a terrible mistake exposing himself like that, but he had always been the pursuer, not the pursued. *But not this time*, a small voice whispered in his mind. He swatted it away.

Branish's head cocked to the side and he stared at Sean in that searching way of his. "Something on your mind, Sean?"

"Lustov's off the streets and Skin is out of business," he answered coolly, even as his cheeks heated at the other man's unabashed appraisal of his physique.

"What's eating you, then?" Branish pressed. His eyes were still hooded with ill-concealed desire.

Sean clenched his hands into fists. He slung the towel around his neck in defiance of the man's leering. "The fact that an innocent boy is dead."

"That's not it. Or not fully it," Branish said, walking towards him until there was only a foot of space between them.

Branish then slipped off his jacket and tossed it on the bench. Sean's eyes followed the falling material before swinging back to the older man. His gaze was drawn to Branish's tie as the Lieutenant tugged it off and let it slither to the ground. Sean felt the silken material slide over his feet.

What the hell is he doing? Part of Sean's mind asked, even as another part laughed hysterically in response. *You know what he's doing! Has it been so damn long since you've thought about sex that you can't recognize being pursued?*

"I know what it's like to look at something you desperately want to possess but then watch it slip through your fingers." Branish undid the first few buttons of his shirt, exposing the tops of his well-defined pectoral muscles.

The masculine, spicy scent of him washed over Sean. His heart began to pound in his chest as Branish leaned forward. Sean jerked back from the older man. The lockers rattled as his elbows slammed against them. Branish suddenly grabbed hold of the damp towel around his shoulders, stopping him from getting away. The cool metal of the lockers pressed against Sean's bare buttocks, and the danger of his nudity was suddenly made clear to him.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Sean had meant the question to come out indignant, angry, but instead his voice sounded weak and uncertain.

Branish drew the towel away from Sean's neck, dropping it casually to the floor. Sean swallowed hard as Branish pressed up against him. He felt the rough brush of Branish's pants against his bare thighs. Sean gave a disgusted gasp as he felt his cock twitch when Branish's hot breath ghosted over his face.

"The boy," Branish said. "The dead boy. You wanted him. You wanted to possess him, and now he's beyond your grasp."

Sean shook his head violently. "I didn't want to possess Jamie! I wanted to save him!"

"Save him?" Branish murmured.

His gray eyes darkened as he reached up and lightly brushed his knuckles along Sean's cheek. Sean flinched, but his head hit the lockers. There was nowhere else for him to go.

“Save him from the horror of being raped by Lustov?” Branish asked, his deep voice skating across Sean’s skin. “Save him from feeling disgust at a man’s touch because of it? Save him for yourself?”

“I didn’t—I wouldn’t! You’re crazy! You’re fucking crazy!” Sean tried to shout, but his voice came out breathless and reedy. He sounded guilty.

Had he thought of any of the teens like that? Had he thought of any of the parade of porcelain-skinned boys that had been made to sit on his lap as something he wanted to possess?

Yes. Oh, God, I did. Not the younger ones, but the older ones. The ones I could have had if I had met them someplace else. Yes, those I wanted. I got hard at the thought of them.

Branish leaned in further. Sean twisted his head away so they weren’t nose to nose, but that was the wrong move, because it allowed Branish to shift in closer. He buried his handsome, hawk-like face in Sean’s hair.

“I know, Sean. I understand. Because how you felt about Jamie,” Branish whispered, his lips brushing against Sean’s neck, “is how I feel about *you*.”

CHAPTER THREE - THE SCARRED MAN

Sean was brought out of his memories when he realized that Carlos had finally said something to him. And it wasn't what he had expected.

“What?” Sean asked as he brushed a shaky hand over his forehead, certain that he had heard wrong.

“It wouldn't matter to me if you were with Branish, Sean. My uncle. He's gay.” Carlos grinned big as he added, “Mi tio was the one who encouraged me to get through school, encouraged me to join the Force. He was smiling and clapping louder than anyone at my graduation. So I'm good with it. Just, others might not be.”

“It's Branish. Nothing's good when it's connected to him,” Sean whispered, realizing that he was confessing to being gay and having sex with a superior officer. But it was Carlos, and that meant trust.

“I've told those assholes that are talking trash to shut the hell up. But I thought you should know. So that you'll be more careful.”

“I am careful, Carlos. I don't even have a life outside of work to hide. You know that,” Sean answered. “That thing with Branish was ... it wasn't about sex.”

“Then what was it about?”

“Darkness,” Sean answered. He waved off the questions that Carlos clearly wanted to ask. He wasn't discussing it. Not now. Not when he knew Branish had his binoculars trained on them. “I should have told you about ... about *me*. I didn't mean to hide it from you. I haven't had a relationship for a long time so it really didn't come up. But that's bullshit, I guess, because I let you assume things about me that weren't true.”

“I understand why you didn't say. People can still be bastards about it,” Carlos agreed.

“But not you.”

“Not me.” Carlos nodded. “And now, when you do find somebody, I'm expecting that you let me meet them. Or better yet, I'm going to set you up with someone!”

Sean shook his head and laughed. “Who is going to want to date me, Carlos? I’m married to my work.”

Carlos just gave Sean one of his shrugs and a lazy grin. “Oh, I can think of a few who will make you *divorce* your work.”

“Now you’ve got me intrigued.”

“But seriously, man. Those idiots don’t usually think big, tough guys like you and Branish are gay. I think it shocked them that Branish doesn’t really hide what he likes. And he likes *you*,” Carlos said.

“He really doesn’t give a shit what they think.” Sean snorted. “I appreciate your support. All of it, Carlos.”

His partner clapped him on the back. “Any time.”

They fell silent then. Sean digested the turn of events. His partner knew about him and was okay with it. More than okay with it. He had no reason to fear that Carlos might turn on him if it ever got out that he liked men. Carlos was continuing to take his side against Branish.

“I’m glad we’re good,” Sean said, slowly.

“No problem. All is well, my friend.”

Only in moments, it suddenly wasn’t.

Sean pulled at the front of his T-shirt, unsticking it from his chest. The scent of his sweat and fading cologne was whipped away as the wind suddenly picked up. Rippling waves began to appear on the ocean’s darkened surface. That was when he saw the boat. It seemed to come from out of nowhere. The boat’s glossy black body gleamed in the low lights of the city. It was heading towards the beach where he and Carlos sat.

“Looks like your famous instincts strike again,” Carlos breathed. “They must see us, but they’re still coming.”

“They don’t know we’re cops,” Sean guessed, but a trickle of unease rippled through him.

“Doesn’t matter. Should spook them off that anybody is here. At least make them cautious. Something isn’t right,” Carlos said.

“You always say that,” Sean replied.

“And how often am I wrong?”

“Not often, unfortunately,” Sean breathed. “And I feel the same way as you do this time around.”

Carlos’ shoulders bunched as though he were about to jump to his feet, but both men remained seated, appearing unconcerned, even bored, as the power boat drove to within fifteen feet from the sandy shore before its purring engines went silent. The boat’s shallow draft allowed it to come in so close to the beach. An anchor plunked into the water off to one side.

How did we miss the boat until it was almost on top of us? Sean grimaced, but his thoughts were derailed as Carlos cursed.

“Mierda!” Carlos swore under his breath. “We look to be in for quite a time.”

There were four men in the boat. The wind plastered their clothes to their muscular bodies. They looked hard, more like soldiers than street thugs with their close-cropped hair and the economy of their movements. They eerily reminded Sean of Branish.

Sean tightened his hands into fists against the sand. His heart rate soared as adrenaline poured into his bloodstream. How long would it take for Branish to get more officers to their location? His gaze darted to the pier. It hadn’t looked so far away before. Lily and Rob’s boat wasn’t moving either. Didn’t they see what was going on? Had Branish told them to hang back until the men were fully on shore and meeting with their compatriots? Sean pressed the microphone hidden under his collar.

“Lieutenant, we have company,” Sean whispered, but the earpiece remained silent.

“Lieutenant?”

Nothing.

“Do we wait for backup?” Carlos pretended to turn and crack his back as if he had been sitting too long on the coarse sand.

“I can’t get through to the Lieutenant,” Sean said through gritted teeth.

One of the men in the boat swung himself easily over the side and into the water. The water reached up to his waist. He sloshed towards them, carrying a single black duffel so that it stayed well above the water. Two others followed him, each carrying identical duffels, leaving one man behind in the boat. Sean looked for a weapon on the man who remained with the boat, but he couldn't see one in the failing light. The man stood by the controls of the powerful vessel looking completely relaxed and unconcerned with his hands resting lightly on the wheel.

“That’s it? Three damn duffels that they can lift one-handed? How much are they selling this stuff for?” Carlos let out an explosive huff of air.

“Maybe they plan to cut it with something else,” Sean replied. “Lieutenant? Do you copy? They’re here. They’re on the beach. Is backup in place?”

Again, there was no response.

The first man was already out of the water, his boot-clad feet leaving distinct impressions in the wet sand. His eyes were deep set, and he had a jagged scar that crossed over one eye, ran down his cheek and trailed off into the collar of his black shirt. His gaze swung over to them and lingered for a moment on the brightly colored shirt that Carlos wore as if he hadn't seen anything so vivid in a long time.

“Do we move or do we wait?” Carlos hissed.

“Lieutenant? Rob? Lily? Anybody?”

All four men were on land now and striding up the beach. They would pass Sean and Carlos' position in moments. Lily and Rob were supposed to cut off the dealers' escape by boat, but Sean could spot no movement on the fishing vessel. He swallowed shallowly. Something was very, very wrong.

A black SUV with chrome trim pulled up on the road that bordered the beach. Its windows were tinted so dark Sean couldn't see inside. This was the drop. By now, there should have been cruisers coming in on their position, other undercover operatives filtering down the street, but Sean saw no one.

“We have to move, Sean. They’re going to get away!” Carlos whispered fiercely.

Sean knew that even if they got the men on the beach, those in the SUV and boat would escape. But this might be their best and only chance to get any leads on the Powder and its makers. These men didn't look like typical couriers. They would know something. The empty look

on the dead boy's face at the hospital and Dr. Vostok's frightened expression were seared into Sean's mind. He had to act. No matter what the risk. He jumped to his feet and reached for his gun. He pointed it directly at the men with the duffels. Carlos mirrored his actions.

"Freeze, police!" Sean shouted.

The men stopped moving.

"Drop those bags on the ground! Hands over your heads!" he ordered.

Sean was moving rapidly towards the first man. Carlos flanked him. Yet despite what was clearly a bust, none of the criminals seemed concerned. The SUV remained idling. The boat's powerful engines were silent. It was quiet except for the hum of far-off traffic and the slap of the waves on the shore. Acid flooded Sean's stomach.

This is all wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.

The scarred man was directly in front of Sean now. His scar was more livid close up. It carved deep into the flesh, puckering the skin on either side of the furrow it created. The eye it crossed over was milky white. Damaged. Yet it still seemed to track Sean's movements. The scarred man put down the duffle he carried. When he straightened up his hands remained at his sides. His right one was curled half-shut into a fist.

"I said get your hands up!" Sean ordered.

The man tilted his head to the side. The scar seemed to shine in the center. He lifted the fist up in front of him and unfolded it. It looked like he was holding a palm full of embers.

"Hands over your head or I will shoot you!" Sean threatened.

But the scarred man didn't listen. Instead, he merely smiled and blew across the palm of his open hand. The embers morphed into a fine shimmering red powder, as soft as pencil shavings, which sprayed across Sean's face. They flowed thickly into his eyes, nose, and mouth; blinding him, suffocating him. The last thing Sean saw before falling into oblivion was a strange glow emanating from the center of the man's scar.