

Chapter One

He often wondered if he knew what right and wrong meant anymore.

The rain sprayed against the windshield with a tell-tale chunky splat, the gray morning so cold Eldon thought snow would begin falling at any moment. Eldon had been allowed to dispense with his blindfold once they'd left behind any sight of the city. The driver hadn't been apologetic about having to blindfold him before they left, but Dr. Forster had at least forewarned of that particular... wrinkle.

The noise the driver's black leather coat made against the back of his seat was vaguely unnerving, the sound jarring in the muted quiet of the truck. It wasn't Eldon's first assignment; vice was positively overflowing with opportunities for plain-clothes, even deep cover, work.

Neither Nathan, the hulking driver with a high and tight haircut, nor Eldon, alone in the backseat of the massive Hummer, said a word. It was too early. And it was clear the man behind the wheel was watching his passenger as much as the road.

Eldon's handler — the amusingly disheveled Lieutenant Bennett — had gone over it one more time that morning in the hotel room, dawn still hours away, the wafting blue-white of his cigarette smoke drifting from his nostrils as the man's keen eyes scanned the laptop's screen.

"They're going to be suspicious of you, at first. Get used to that right now. It doesn't matter if your story is good, if everything checks out. They're used to Dr. Forster. You've been doing these long enough to know the deal. Don't be fucking cute. Just do your business, and get scarce when you can. Observe only — but if you find someone in danger, you do anything you can to get them out." Bennett's cold gaze had fixed on him then. "As long as you *don't* break cover."

The Dominion Trust was known to vice, of course, but what was frustrating was the fact Olympia PD knew next to nothing about it. Neither did Thurston County, or the states. The organization had a dizzying array of businesses, subsidiaries, and proxies all over the country — and likely worldwide — but not a single one of them had ever come back dirty.

Not *one*.

What was even more unusual, the organization didn't appear to deal in any drugs at all, nor prostitution — at least nothing low rent. Presumably, if the Trust was involved, it was probably high dollar whores only. Those girls were much too smart to get pinched.

It was all too neat and tidy.

But yet the name of the Trust came up — and often enough to matter. Especially in the anonymous tip Thurston County had received about one Dr. Tom Forster.

He was an OB/Gyn out of Seattle, but the tip said he regularly made trips down to a location somewhere in rural southeastern Thurston County. The interesting thing was: there wasn't much of *anything* in southeastern Thurston County. No medical center, not even an OB practice. They'd checked as far into the interior as Rainier and Yelm. Nothing came up on him.

But they did know one thing about Dr. Forster. He was a known associate of the Dominion Trust. He was listed as a stockholder in several of their subsidiaries, and he even sat on the board for one of them.

That was all they had to go on.

Thin as fuck.

But still, it was enough to convince vice to put someone in deep cover to try to learn more — starting with the good doctor.

Pre-med in school before dropping out to join the US Army to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan post-9/11, Eldon was the perfect candidate for the assignment. It helped that he was new to the squad — not senior enough to dodge what was most likely a bullshit assignment.

Somehow they'd managed to pull off getting Eldon hired on as an MA in Forster's practice.

Nobody, and no *thing*, was as clean as the Dominion Trust appeared to be. Especially not an organization of that size. He knew they were up to something — any cop worth a squirt of piss would have suspected it.

A hunch and proof were two entirely different kettles of fish though.

Vice was Eldon's last stop, though he'd never told his superiors that. In their minds, he was the job. A good cop, a lifer, someone who could be trusted to do what needed to be done.

Even in the shitty underworld of vice.

It wasn't nearly that cut and dried though. Had he been that man once? Yes, maybe.

But now?

The world was a lot more complex than shades of gray. It was an upside down shitshow.

Spending the past two years busting hookers, ruining the marriages of johns, and generally making the lives of small-time dealers miserable had worn him down, well past the point of really believing that what he was doing made the world a better place.

No, this was his last cover. Then he was out.

Even if he had not the faintest fucking clue what he might do next.

"You never been to the farm before, have you?"

The rumbling voice from the driver's seat made him jerk, and Eldon rubbed his eyes, feigning exhaustion, hoping the man up front hadn't seen his jumpiness.

"First time. Dr. Forster filled me in on the cases he usually sees though." Eldon tilted his head, the popping of his neck clearly audible. "How often are you out there?"

"A time or two," the no-neck muttered.

Eldon knew it would have been better to shut up about it, but he actually wanted to know. He guessed the gorilla sent to pick him up was some sort of transporter or fixer. The crisp, economical way he walked up to the office door said military, or at least some sort of martial training. So did the fact the man knocked on the door at *precisely* 7:00 AM.

Typical run-of-the-mill scumbags were on time almost as often as a broken clock.

"How much left to go?"

They'd been driving for a while, long ago leaving Olympia behind, heading southeast toward the foothills of the Cascades, nothing but deserted two lane blacktop and soaring Douglas firs all around.

"Almost there."

"Would never imagine a farm being this far out."

Nathan looked back with a wink. "Kinda the idea."

Though tempted to look at his phone, Eldon thought better of it. It said 'nervous.'

"I'm new on this job. Anything you think I should know?" Eldon feigned a weary chuckle. "Dr. Forster wasn't exactly thorough with his directions."

"You'll figure it out." Nathan met his gaze in the rear-view mirror, his sly grin spreading across his face. "More fun if you just go in blind for your first time anyway. I did."

Asshole.

Turning off the blacktop, the Hummer bounced down the shoulder onto a gravel single lane, not much more than a logging road snaking through the forest, the branches of the Douglas firs occasionally skirting along the side of the vehicle.

"Little, ah, rustic out here."

Eldon clenched his jaw at the stupidity of the words.

Stay cool.

“Not much farther now,” Nathan said coolly.

More than one serial killer victim had probably heard those exact words.

He hated leaving his piece at the hotel, but he had no choice. One search — something practically guaranteed to happen if indeed the doctor turned out to be dirty — and the cover was blown.

Shaking his head, he looked out the window, grimly smiling at the injustice of a vice officer potentially getting nicked on his last fucking op.

At least if he got his ass killed, he wouldn't have to decide what to do with his life once released into the civilian world.

The road suddenly smoothed out and straightened, and they rolled up to what looked like a cattle crossing, little more than a steel grate in the roadway, flanked by triangular frames. What was interesting was the fact a ten-foot ivy choked wall extended into the forest to either side of the grating. The truck's tires made a teeth-rattling hum as they passed over the steel.

Beyond the wall, the trees had been cleared, leaving nothing but uniform verdant lawn for a hundred yards to either side of the roadway.

They drove another couple minutes, then followed a long, gentle rise up toward a cluster of white clapboard, low-slung structures, the group of buildings punctuated by a huge soaring A-frame house clad in cedar shake. It looked like a five story ski chalet.

He'd never seen anything like it.

The road ended in a wide circle, several vehicles, including two white, windowless panel vans, parked neatly along one side.

A weathered wooden fence, encrusted in hunter green moss, ran along most of the perimeter of the circle, a single open gate punctuating its lines.

And there stood a sight that had Eldon rubbing his eyes once more. A girl, blonde and beautiful, dressed in little more than a snug white sleeveless top and a pair of tan shorts so brief they were practically panties.

But that wasn't the only thing she wore.

Stout black cuffs at wrist and ankle, and a matching collar around her slender neck completed the ensemble. As did the swaying silver chains linking them all together.

Two hulking men flanked her, standing quite close to the girl, saying something to her. One of them was dressed in a slate-gray Armani suit that was probably worth more than Eldon's life, his jet-black hair slicked back and gleaming. His partner, wearing a black coat that reached to mid-calf, was pointing at the girl. Her head was bowed, her mouth an anguished moue, a lock of her flaxen hair at her temple blowing in the chill breeze.

Nathan shifted the big truck into Park, draping an elbow over the side of his seat as he looked back at Eldon.

“Welcome to the Farm.”

* * *

Though he knew he was stupid to do it, Eldon couldn't help but stare at her. Nathan was at his side, silent as ever.

The girl met Eldon's eyes once and in those blue depths he saw something he hadn't felt in a very, very long time.

Something like... hope.

Then she turned away, and the men followed her closely, like hyenas on fleeing prey. Eldon's cheeks

heated — a wholly alien sensation to him — as he watched the movement of her pert buttocks in the close embrace of those shorts.

You've got a job to do. Stop acting like a fucking hormonal teenager.

He had no idea what the two brutes were saying to her, but he wanted to wring their necks for hounding the poor girl.

She slipped through the gate and disappeared. Strangely, the pair of men pursuing her stopped just outside that boundary as if knowing they could advance no further. They watched her go a moment, then turned back toward Nathan and Eldon, striding across the asphalt toward the parked vehicles. The man in the long coat looked back one last time toward the gate, a vein pulsing at the center of his high, tanned forehead.

His compatriot in the suit glared toward Eldon, a sneer marring his otherwise handsome features. “What the *fuck* are you looking at?”

Nathan placed a gentle hand on Eldon's shoulder, then stepped forward. His deep voice took on a threatening, gravelly note, the sound eerily carried upon the soft, cool breeze.

“I'm looking at a couple fellas who need to be on their way. Don't make me tell you twice.”

“Tour guide duty again, Nathan?” The man in the suit snickered.

His taller companion was silent, flicking a quick look at the hulking driver and picking up the pace of his walk.

Nathan said nothing, merely undoing the last button of his bomber jacket. The men got the message, and fled to a dark blue BMW. The tires screeched along the asphalt as they sped away, Nathan watching them go.

“It's the same every time. Assholes.” Nathan shook his head, then headed toward the gate. “Sorry about that. Let's get you inside.”

“What do you mean about this being the same? They been here before?” Eldon walked alongside the driver, matching his pace easily.

“Never mind,” Nathan muttered. “Not important.”

“Don't worry about our visitors. They're harmless.”

Both Nathan and Eldon stopped in their tracks at the new voice, the tall, lean form of another man filling the opening of the gate. Dressed in a silk suit the color of dark emerald, the man extended a long fingered hand, his bright teeth gleaming as he smiled.

“You must be the new hire. Dr. Forster's right hand man, yes?”

Shaking the offered hand, Eldon nodded. “Well, medical assistant, actually. But I'll take it.”

The towering man's gaze glinted. “Travis Heller.” The man addressed the driver. “Trip was good?” “Uneventful.”

Heller's brow arched. “Evaluation?”

“Shouldn't present any problems, I don't think.”

What are they talking about?

Then he had it.

Glancing back down the road they'd taken to get here, Eldon squinted, trying to see if the BMW was still visible. But it had disappeared into the morning mist. Maybe those two were more trouble than the gruff driver let on?

“That should be all then, Nathan.” Heller shook his hand, clapping him on a shoulder. “Thanks for bringing him out.”

Nathan scratched the back of his neck. “Same time tomorrow?”

“Wait — what?” Eldon's heart began to beat a little faster.

“Come on,” Heller said, slipping back through the gate. “I'll show you around. You must be eager to get started.”

“Uh, sure. But how am I getting home? If Nathan's not back until tomorrow...”

Heller winked at him, one hand on the top of the gate's inner post. “Not tonight, that's for sure.”

You've got too much work to do. We have very nice accommodations at the central residence." He nodded toward the towering chalet. "You'll love it. I promise."

This is not good, Eldon. Not good at all.

He tried to shake off the uneasiness at the change in plans. He hadn't anticipated an overnight stay, and another quick check of his phone confirmed there still wasn't a signal for some reason. Bennett was bound to get antsy if he didn't return, but he had little choice but to chance it. To resist the offer — if it could be called that — of accommodations was something he knew was going to be frowned upon. Besides, an overnight might allow him time to glean additional information.

He had nothing but hunches to go on, thus far, but he suspected that was about to change. And in a big way.

Let's hope that 'big way' doesn't involve your dumb ass in a shallow grave.

There was more to this than that though.

The girl.

There was something about her, the way she seemed to stand there and endure the harassment from those men, like a tall, elegant evergreen riding out the lashing winds of a coastal gale, her strange mix of strength and vulnerability fascinating him in a way he'd never experienced before.

But he didn't even have so much as a name for her.

He gave the director the most relaxed smile he could muster. "Where to first? Gonna give me the grand tour?"

"Oh, absolutely. I suspect you're going to find this place very interesting, Eldon." The director extended an arm toward the complex of buildings clustered around the looming central residence. "Very interesting... for all of us."

Chapter Two

Following along the twisting white ribbon of a crushed rock trail, the director led Eldon into the heart of the complex. Clustered around the dramatic rough-hewn log facade of the chalet was a system of one-story, weathered wooden sheds and long, block buildings. At first glance, it resembled an industrial scale cattle operation, though in this case, the chief difference was that not a single cow could be seen.

Wisps of mist hung here and there just above the roof lines of the buildings, the trees in the distance that lined the huge property soaring up into the low clouds. Though the air was cool, somehow the temperature wasn't as chilly as he would have expected, as if the ancient old-growth forest sheltered the site from the worst mother nature might throw its way.

"Excuse me for asking, Mr. Heller, but I was wondering what it is that is, uh, farmed here? I don't see any cows..."

Still walking, the stones crunching beneath his feet, Heller's expression suddenly grew serious. "This is a place of punishment."

Whoa.

Perhaps sensing Eldon's shock, the director gave him a slow nod. "That's not all, of course. It's a place for reflection and training. And if those ensconced here are lucky, of learning too."

"So, I take it this isn't an actual... farm?"

"No—at least not how it's commonly understood."

The path led up to one of the long, low-slung buildings, the shingles of the roof covered in a healthy coating of bright green moss at the seams. Heller stopped at the door, his hand around the weathered metal handle. "Dr. Forster hasn't told you anything about what we do here?"

"No. I assumed I'd just be tending to the hands, or workers here..."

Eldon looked around pointedly. The place seemed deserted.

Heller's grin returned. "You will too. But that's far from all you'll see here, Eldon. Are you ready to find out what that means?"

The tall man had a strange stillness about him, almost a serenity that was equal parts comforting and unnerving. It reminded him of Eldon's CO when he was deployed in Ninevah province in Iraq — one of the very worst combat zones in that country. His company commanding officer, Captain Decker, had a quiet strength that he admired, that could inspire — but at the same time, an unbending strength Eldon was glad was on *his* side, and not the enemy's.

"Lead on, sir," Eldon said with a nonchalance as genuine as a three-dollar bill.

Swinging the door open, a blast of warm, scented air washed over them.

The massive guard suddenly blocking the doorway surprised him, and Eldon's fingers automatically fluttered at his hip, the habit of seeking his sidearm — the weapon that he'd consciously deprived himself of while on deep cover — one that he knew he'd never be able to fully unlearn.

You need to calm the fuck down, asshole.

The guard, a stocky, dark-haired wedge of pure muscle, his snug black t-shirt revealing a tribal tattoo stretching around an upper arm, looked *entirely* out of place at the rustic property. The formidable man

broke into a smile. “Director, nice to see you down here. What’s the occasion?”

Heller shook the man’s hand and tilted his head toward Eldon. “Got a medical call. Dr. Forster couldn’t make it, so his assistant will be filling in today.”

His grin fading a little as he regarded Eldon, the guard waved them inside, nevertheless. “Welcome.”

Eldon didn’t miss the straps across one shoulder, nor the very familiar MP5 variant slung over the guard’s back. The submachine gun was just like the ones the security details of dignitaries and other various big cheeses used when visiting Iraq. Their personal security bodyguards were usually contractors — many of them ex-military — and always armed to the teeth.

“This is the punishment bloc,” Heller said, as coolly relaxed as if he were showing a museum exhibit.

Stretching down the length of the building were high-walled stalls on one side, complete with hinged, half-height doors like one would see in horse enclosures. Along the other half, in several alcoves spaced along the opposite wall, were what looked to be combination training, and, for lack of a better term, torture chambers. Alongside comfortable upholstered chairs stood racks, crosses, and various sorts of padded benches. Chains and ropes hung from the rafters, the floorboards punctuated in places with stout D-rings, polished bright. Spot lights, overhead floods, and flexible flashlights ensured the area was well illuminated if required. Each space was equipped with a rack displaying numerous instruments of corporal punishment, from canes, to supple whips, to paddles of both leather and wood.

Two of the alcoves also featured stout steel cages, no more than three feet high and perhaps five feet long each.

Jesus Christ, what in hell is this?

He knew he was close to the jackpot now, but that excitement he usually felt at the imminent breaking open of a case was tempered this time. By dread, and something else entirely.

A sick sort of fascination.

Heller led him down the row of stalls, leaving the watching guard back at the main door, observing them more closely than Eldon had a good feeling about. The guard — and Heller, for that matter — were much too cordial for his tastes. There was something else going on here, and the fact he was totally in the dark about it, was not a good position to be in on a cover assignment like this. His instincts told him there was danger here. It might have just been nerves, but he knew he had to suck it up regardless. For now, anyway.

“Packing quite a punch isn’t he?” Eldon glanced back at the guard. “We’re in the middle of nowhere, right?”

Heller chuckled lightly. “Never can be too careful can we? Some very valuable pieces of property cooling their heels here at any one time.”

Property?

Heller stopped at the corner of the first stall, and leaned a hand against the rough timber. “This is where our inmates spend most of their time. Not very comfortable accommodations, but then they’re not supposed to be, are they?” Heller checked the gleaming silver watch at his wrist. “Most of them will be out at the harvest shed right now, so it’s a little quiet. But I had them keep Kelly back for you. She’ll be a little uncomfortable skipping a harvest, but I need you to look her over.”

It was at that moment that Eldon spotted the man leaning over the half-door to the stall at the very end of the row. He could just make out the hint of a deep voice, but it was impossible to tell what the stranger was saying.

“Ah, here they are. Come with me. I’ll get you in to see sweet Kelly.”

Heller led Eldon down to the waiting man who stepped back from the stall at their approach, raising a hand in greeting. Dressed in gray slacks with a dark vest over a white button-down, the man looked like he’d stepped out for lunch from a downtown office. His dark eyes scanned Eldon for a moment before alighting on Heller. “Director, uh, thank you for coming down.”

“We’ll just take a quick look at her, Mr. Chase, then you can take her over to harvest. Hopefully, she’s learned her lesson.”

“I, uh, suspect she has, Director.” Something passed between the two men, a slow smile creasing Mr. Chase’s lips as he raised his voice ever so slightly, continuing. “She’s inside, dozing. Endorphins always make her nod off.”

Mr. Chase produced a silver key, unlocking the heavy gold-plated padlock at the door’s latch, and swinging the door outward.

Holy shit.

Inside, lying curled up upon a thin mattress atop a low wooden pallet was a young woman. Her arms were folded under her head, her dark, straight hair drawn into a messy ponytail. Other than the leather cuffs at her wrists and thick black collar clasping her neck, she appeared to be nude. Pert, apple-sized breasts were just visible huddled under her elbow, the glint of steel betraying the studs piercing the prominent blush colored nipples. A light blanket striped with garish thread of every color of the rainbow — strikingly reminiscent of a horse blanket—was draped over her legs, the smooth pale curve of an upper hip just exposed above the edge of the fabric. Her eyes were closed, her swollen rose lips pouting in her slumber.

The pallet and mattress dominated the center of the space, the head of the mattress butted against the far wall. Incandescent fixtures mounted low in each corner illuminated the area in muted, warm light. The only other furniture was an unvarnished three shelf bookcase of dark wood next to the bed, the shelves containing numerous tins, bottles, tubes and small boxes. On the lower shelf, a stack of white hand towels formed a strange juxtaposition against a mini rack from which hung an array of tiny, intimate leather whips, paddles and straps. Several phalluses, vibrators, and a massive black Hitachi wand were lain upon the top shelf.

The space held the faint, but still distinctive, note of sex on the still air.

Drawing the blanket down her body, Mr. Chase stroked her hip, his voice a whisper. “Turn over, bad girl. Gonna have a look at you.”

Apparently, she was a light sleeper, for she obeyed the quiet command with nothing but a faint whimper.

Be cool, Eldon.

The man eased a fingertip along the tracery of livid marks laddering her pale buttocks, several of the lashings a striking purplish hue.

“She had a little problem submitting to the cups yesterday, so she required a reminder to obey her handlers.”

Mr. Chase touched one of the marks rather... proprietorially. “Wrapped a couple here. Oozed a few spots of blood, but nothing else. Want to make sure she’s none the worse for wear.”

Eldon wanted to clock the asshole in the mouth, but he knew the force of his sudden emotion was a cover for something else.

Namely, the stirring of his cock at the sight of the girl’s shapely ass decorated with vivid mementos of an appointment with the whip.

Crouching down next to her, Eldon examined the marks, not missing the way the girl canted her hips up at a subtle sound from Mr. Chase. The change in her position revealed a gleam of moisture between her upper thighs, the smell of semen now unmistakable.

“Should clear up... fine.” Eldon looked up at Heller. “I don’t have witch hazel in my pack, but that’s probably best for the marks themselves. I—”

“Right here.” The director plucked a round, white plastic container from the shelf. “These are in wipe form. Good enough?”

“Ah, perfect.” Eldon tried not to think about why they’d have such things so readily at hand.

Wiping down her marks as gently as he could, he didn’t stop until they were well coated, the girl’s breathing hitching occasionally as he touched a particularly raw spot.

She exhaled deeply as he closed the container and set it back on the shelf.

“I can give her Ibuprofen for any, ah, pain.”

“No — no painkillers,” Mr. Chase said, his strong jaw tightening, nostrils flared. “As long as the marks will heal fully, I want her to feel them.” He raised his chin. “You hear me, girl?”

“Yes, sir,” she rasped against her arm.

Jesus.

“Just rest,” Eldon said softly, patting her hip after pulling the blanket back up. “You’ll be fine.”

He said the words as gently as he could, hoping his voice didn’t betray the fact his thoughts were racing at a thousand miles an hour, his heart banging away triple time in his chest.

Rising to his feet, Eldon stepped out of the stall, taking one last look at the girl as her... whatever he was, knelt next to her, whispering in her ear.

“The quiet moments are the sweetest ones of all. When the wayward girl finally understands.” The director watched them a moment longer, pleasure in his gaze, then turned his attention to Eldon once more. “I think it’s time we saw the others, don’t you?”

“Others?”

“I have a handful of other cases I’d like you to attend to. They’re minor, but a little more... complicated. Though, I’d like you to see the other inmates first.”

There was that term again, and the sound of it sent a strange frisson through him. Was this nothing more than some illicit prison? A kidnapping ring? He had enough already to get a warrant sworn out for suspicion of unlawful imprisonment and probably sex trafficking, but he needed to be patient. He knew there had to be more.

The question was: could he handle seeing more? It wasn’t as if he’d hadn’t seen some heinous shit before—he worked vice after all—but his reaction to today’s sights was a first.

And it was profoundly troubling.

Good guys don’t pop a fucking Woodrow at the sight of a woman’s naked ass whipped almost to the blood.

Good guys didn’t give up when things got surreal either.

He’d see this through, no matter what.

“Wonderful!” The director raised a hand, his fingers beckoning. “Right on time, my dear.”

Eldon spun around — and his heart skipped a beat. A warm heaviness flooded between his thighs as he looked upon their impossibly lovely new visitor.

It was the girl.

* * *

Eldon cut a more interesting figure than I’d realized when I’d first seen him at the front entrance.

The man was a new face, and new faces were rare at the farm.

He was nearly as tall as the director, but far more well-muscled, the shoulders broad, the waist compact. Though his face was much too rugged to be considered classically beautiful, his hazel eyes were striking, both for their intensity and for what practically radiated from them.

Loss.

The man looked... adrift. A sad listlessness in his gaze that was completely at odds with the disciplined way he carried himself, the rough and ready physique.

It made me want to touch his cheek, to feel that dark stubble against my palm.

He was tall and powerfully built, so unlike what one typically saw in medical personnel.

“Do you have them with you, my dear?”

The director raised a brow. I’d learned not to ever keep him waiting longer than was necessary. He was a gentleman on the outside, but I knew what he was capable of. Obedience was far, far better than...

well, anything else.

He ensured it.

I handed the radio to the director, and kept one for myself.

“You’ll need this.” Handing the radio to Eldon, he clapped him on the shoulder. “Terrible cell service out here in the sticks, so we have to resort to these damn things. Little embarrassing, but we do what we must.”

“Uh, okay...” Eldon looked at it in an exaggerated way, as if it was the first time he’d seen one. It seemed... forced.

Who was this man?

His bearing was all wrong for a man of medicine. Much too reminiscent of that hulking beast Nathan. Very decisive, no wasted movement, and a voice that cut through the calm quiet. It was a *martial* bearing.

I didn’t really know exactly how I knew, but I was positive he’d been in the military once.

“I’ll get you over to the harvest sheds. They’ll still be going a while longer.” The director’s eyes glinted as he smiled at Eldon. “Wouldn’t want you to miss the festivities.”

I shivered, but hoped neither man saw it.

“What, uh, what exactly are you harvesting here, Mr. Heller?” Eldon clipped the radio to his belt with a smoothness that bespoke familiarity. Another check in the martial column.

“The harvest is the price paid for utilization of... this special place. There is a very demanding market for the commodity produced at this farm, and that market is ever voracious.” The director’s lips quirked. “We aim to meet that demand. But rather than tell you, we’ll show you.”

The director grasped me by the shoulders, pulling me in front of him to face Eldon.

“Before we show you more, let me introduce this luscious creature.” His finger caressed the line of my jaw. “This is Tamara.”

“Hello,” Eldon said, his eyes fixed upon me in a way that had my belly doing little flip-flops. “I saw you, at the entrance... right?”

Nodding, I looked at the floor, knowing he’d see my blush. “I’m sorry for the scene. It’s... often that way. With them.”

“Who were they? Were they threatening you?” There was a protectiveness in the question that part of me responded to immediately, a caring that was often in short supply at a place like this.

“They’re not important, sir. Please don’t worry about them.”

I wanted to tell him. Perhaps he’d understand? There was a kindness there that told me he would. But it wasn’t the time for that.

The director’s hands squeezed my upper arms pointedly. “Tamara will be accompanying us today. I thought she’d be the best match for you. She’s very helpful — very eager to please.”

I peeked up at Eldon at those words. His throat worked, his eyes widening just the tiniest bit.

“Well, thank you, Mr. Heller.”

“You are to treat her as your own,” the director said. “She will provide you whatever you need during your work here.”

“My work.” Eldon scratched his chin. “I need to ask. Is this what Dr. Forster usually does when he visits? I-I want to make sure I’m... taking care of the things you need.”

“Of course. Please forgive me.” The director patted my shoulder. “You must have a storm of questions, Eldon. Ask them — we have nothing to hide.”

I wished I could have seen the director’s face as he said such a thing.

“I do have some questions, actually. I’m the new guy — obviously — so I’d kind of like to get the, uh, lay of the land.” Eldon looked down the length of the building. “What is this building? I mean, the girl. What was she doing here?”

“As I said before, we call this section the punishment bloc — but I admit, I didn’t really explain what that means. These are the usual quarters for inmates when not being used, or harvested, or otherwise

indisposed. Spartan, yes, but we find it puts the inmates in the proper state of mind.” The director made a soft sound. “This after all, isn’t a place of leisure. Not for the inmates, that is.”

Eldon’s face paled as he listened to Heller matter-of-factly relate the purpose of this place. There was far more, of course, and I knew the director would rely upon me to explain it. I could tell Eldon had so much more that he wanted to ask.

But for some reason, he didn’t.

“As you might imagine, inmates may have various medical needs while staying at this facility. Dr. Forster’s visits serve to ensure those medical needs are seen to promptly and thoroughly.” The director’s voice softened, his tone taking on a distinct note of solemnity. “Safety is paramount here at the farm. Though this may be a place of pain, and trials, and humbling rituals, it is never to be a place of actual *harm*. Which is where Dr. Forster — or his right hand man — comes in.”

Taking a deep breath, Eldon glanced at me once more, then met the director’s gaze. “Well, I’ll do my best.”

He clapped Eldon on the back, his grin bright. “I know you will. Now, you must be anxious to see the harvesting.”