

The Baxter Boy's Sacrifice



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Chapter 1

Cassidy Kimball stood on the cement sidewalk and faced the red brick Pennsylvania state penitentiary building. Hot July sunlight glinted off the razor wire that looped in circles at the top and beside the chain-link fence. Off to the right, the circular guard house, with its tinted windows, glared down at the parched brown and empty exercise yard.

Her stomach twisted like mangled metal in a car accident.

It could have been her on the inside. Not here, of course. But somewhere.

She glanced at her watch before dragging her clammy hands down her skirt. *Please, God, don't let my makeup melt before he walks out.* A simple request; she shouldn't care what her makeup looked like, although right now, it felt like much-needed armor. Plus, she'd learned the hard way to be thankful for little things.

And big things. Like not serving the ten-year prison sentence for vehicular homicide that should have been hers after she T-boned a car with Torque Baxter's pickup when she was nineteen. Nope, she didn't serve it. Because Torque was serving, had served, it for her.

Hot and turbulent doubt swirled in her stomach. Would he see what she had become and think his sacrifice had been worth it?

Part of her wanted to announce her sacrifices to him, to tell him of her charity work and the people she helped. That he had played the gallant knight in shining armor to her Cowardly

Lion, but that it had not been in vain. Part of her wanted him to see it for himself. All of her craved his approval. Or maybe just his forgiveness.

Swallowing the nerves that clenched her throat, Cassidy twisted the delicate linked gold of her wristwatch. Any minute now. Would she still recognize him? Of course, she would. The question was, would he recognize all that she had done as a tiny down payment on the huge debt she owed him?

She reached the same conclusion she had every day for the last ten years. There was nothing she could do to pay back her monstrous obligation. There was no way to atone for the cowardice that she had shown. How could she have been so yellow?

When he'd seen the passengers in the other car, when he'd known what the consequences were going to be, he'd never wavered. His brown eyes had been steady and level as he said, "Get out of here and don't look back. You don't know anything about this." She hadn't understood at first what he was going to do. Still shaken from the accident, she'd not really been thinking straight. But she hadn't needed her brain to be fully functioning to know that she was in deep trouble. She'd already been fighting the urge to run. His command had prompted her to do what she subconsciously wanted to. "Hurry, before anyone comes."

Then, he hadn't accepted her calls, hadn't graced her visits with his presence, hadn't used the money she deposited in his account. Her letters returned unopened, and her emails disappeared into the prison of cyberspace. She didn't know, couldn't know, what he thought or felt.

She assumed he hated her.

A bead of sweat trickled down her temple. Her watch chain snapped under her shaking fingers. She shoved the broken links into her clutch.

Her hands stilled as the prison door opened. The jaws of a monster spitting out its prey. Prey she had fed it.

A man, tall and straight, strode out into the sunlight. Her eyes devoured him. Same casual arrogance dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. Same confident walk, with only a slight limp. The limp was her fault, too. With his slim build, Torque would never be bulky, but she could see the t-shirt that probably fit him when he first walked into this building as an almost-eighteen-year-old now stretched tight over shoulders that had widened and filled out.

Cassidy bit her lip and lifted her chin, taking a deep breath to calm the cramping of her stomach and disguise the curl of heat that came to life in her chest. Torque had always had that effect on her. She pushed the feeling aside and channeled her inner upper-crust snob—the only defense that had ever come close to working against the elemental pull that Torque exerted on her.

The last words that man had said to her were, “Shut up, Cassidy.” Now, she intended to get one question answered. Then she had to figure out how to pay him back. What did ten years of a man’s life cost?

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Torque floated above the sidewalk, taking in big lungfuls of the sweetest smelling air in the country. Same air that he’d been breathing for the last decade, but it smelled different on this side of the fence. Felt different, too. He wanted to lie belly-down and kiss the ground. He resisted the urge.

Instead he exalted in the unchaining of his spirit, in the freedom and openness that surrounded him, in the beautiful blue sky, in the purple mountains of his home state unobscured by fences or bars.

His stomach rumbled.

A small talon of anxiety poked his rib. He'd have to find his own meal tonight. After years of his basic needs being met on a schedule with no thought of his own being necessary... He pushed the thought away. He'd taken care of himself for years before he went up. It was a privilege to do so again. He couldn't think of it any other way. He certainly was not going to worry about it. There were things that, to him, were more important than eating, anyway.

Before he'd been locked up, he'd been well on his way to his goal of owning his own diesel garage. But technology had moved on without him. A few outdated Popular Mechanics weren't enough to update his knowledge of emissions standards and computerized motors. Still, surely there was some diesel garage that would hire a hard worker and a quick learner. With a rap sheet.

First things first. He scanned the sidewalk for his brother Turbo or at least a monster pickup that would be Turbo's latest project. All he saw was a slender woman in a slim skirt with miles of legs reaching down to impossibly high heels. She stood at the T in the sidewalk. Long brown hair streaked with blond. Big shades. Not Turbo.

He didn't allow his eyes to linger. Beautiful women had been few and far between in the lockup. But he wasn't going there, although his eyes were drawn to this one like air to the intake valve. He had a life to put back together first.

She stood with one hip jutted out. A hand with shiny red nails rested on it. Her whole bearing screamed money and class.

Most definitely not for him.

He altered his direction, aiming to give her a good ten-foot birth on the right without being obvious about avoiding her. His infatuation with one such girl was how he had landed in the pen to begin with.

Infatuation.

No. Chivalry.

Whatever. It would have driven him to step between her and a bullet. That would have been a heck of a lot faster than what he actually did, which was put himself in her place, and *she had allowed it*. He'd told her to. He'd volunteered to do it. He'd kept his word and protected her through it all. That was great. But his sacrificing days were done. Not going down that road again.

The woman casually removed her shades.

Torque's heart rammed to a stop the way a rod shot through the side of a block kills an engine.

*Cassidy.*

What was she doing here? All his body systems slammed into overdrive.

He clenched his jaw and kept walking. He'd be ready to face her when he had put his life back together. When he could meet her on equal footing, and she no longer looked down her cute, rich-girl's nose at him.

Who was he kidding? Like he'd ever be good enough.

Turbo had to be around here somewhere. *Please, God.* Another sweep of the visitors' parking lot revealed only a low-slung, red sports car.

Mere feet from Cassidy, he surrendered to the inevitable and stopped. Her scent overwhelmed him. Exotic fruit. The memory of a hot summer night slammed into him. Radio on.

Cruising. Country air blowing into his truck and tangling with the incense of the girl next to him.

Suddenly the urge to turn and run surged through him. Back into the prison, back where the smell of perfume and the twitch of a lip didn't turn his brain to mush and make him do the stupidest thing a man had ever done for a woman, back to where his brain and heart weren't engaged in all-out warfare and where it would be easy to remember the only smart choice he needed to make: stay away from Cassidy.

Those soft red lips, the ones he'd dreamed about for years, the ones he'd heard later that same night scream in terror, opened. "Why'd you take my place, Torque?"

Torque schooled his features, refusing to allow the longing her voice elicited to show on his face. Rich, yet friendly, living in her mansion on the hill, Cassidy had infatuated him since this poor, trailer-park trash saw her in the kindergarten lunch line. He had plenty of experience in shoving that magnetic attraction aside and pretending indifference.

He didn't have to fake the bitterness.

"Didn't hear you on the witness stand contradicting my story."

"You told me to shut up."

"Has to be the first time in your life you listened to anyone." Was that hurt that flickered across her features? Couldn't be. Not Cassidy. Tough as tempered steel. "You've got a mouth, and I've never seen you afraid to use it."

"My dad wouldn't let me."

Torque snorted. What a line of crap. "Your dad wouldn't let you ride with me either. But that didn't stop you." Heat spread up his side as he remembered how she felt snuggled up against him on the bench seat, her hair whipping in the wind, her laughing eyes and flashing teeth grinning up at him. Her hand clenching his leg. For that one short ride, he'd forgotten that she

was rich and he poor and that their futures, headed in completely opposite directions, would never merge into one.

But where he'd been since then wasn't so easily wiped away, and he allowed his heart to harden. She was tempered steel. He was titanium. She would break first. This time.

"After the accident, it was different. He wouldn't let me out of his sight until you..." Her voice trailed off, and she looked away.

"Until I was locked up?" he asked with a sardonic lift to his brow. He wanted to close the step between them and take her in his arms. Not that she needed it or wanted it. It was simply the effect she always had on him, like there was a vulnerability to her that no one but him could see, and it brought out every protective instinct in his body. He hated himself for it. He hated her even more.

"Yeah," she whispered. A breeze lifted her hair, showcasing the elegant curve of her neck. She turned her head, and he looked away.

"Plus, you had given the police a lie. I wasn't going to contradict that without talking to you." Her chin tilted. "You wouldn't talk to me."

She visited the jail once, where he was being held, unable to make bail. Strutting down the corridor in her designer clothes amid catcalls and whistles from the other inmates, looking like she belonged on a Paris runway rather than visiting a good-for-nothing like him, surrounded by all the other lawbreakers and criminals locked up in that dump. He'd taken one look at her and turned away, refusing to speak to her. But it was then that he solidified the impulsive decision he made the night of the accident. She didn't belong in there. And as much as he couldn't decide whether he loved her or hated her, he could at least protect her from that.



His dad might have been a lousy parent with even worse child-naming skills, who eventually ran off, but his mother and grandmother had instilled a rock-solid code of ethics in his brain. Women deserve protection. They might not want it. They might not need it. Still. A woman nurtures, a man protects. And with Cassidy, and the hold she had on his over-hormoned teenaged brain...heck, he hadn't used his brain at all to make that decision.

But with that choice—the choice to become a convicted criminal—went the last hope he harbored that he might eventually be able to knock on the door of her mansion and speak to her father as an equal, seeking and receiving permission to date his daughter.

He couldn't let her see his weakness. He couldn't articulate his reasons then, and he wasn't sure he wanted to now. He changed the subject instead. "Well, it's been fun, getting reacquainted and all, but Turbo's gonna be here any minute." Torque stepped toward the parking lot.

"He's not coming."

Torque stopped midstride. His stomach sank like water in oil, a slow, graceful, unstoppable dive to his feet.

"I told him I'd bring you home." She spoke to his back.

Turbo owned his own truck and was busy, of course, but Torque hadn't thought that would abandon him to Cassidy. Of course, Turbo didn't know how twisted his feelings for her were, either.

Steeling himself against the idea of spending the next three hours cooped up in a car with Cassidy, he turned back. "The last time I rode with you isn't in my top ten best memories."

Did she flinch? Had to be his imagination.

He wasn't angry at her. Not really. And he didn't hate her. But he still wanted to insist that he drive, wanted to dominate her because of the inferiority complex she always brought out in him, but his license was long expired. Just one thing on a long list of things for him to take care of.

Cassidy stepped closer and put one shiny red fingernail on his chest where it scalded like acid through his t-shirt. He couldn't have moved or looked away from her blue-black gaze even if his shirt had incinerated from his body.

"I asked you why you lied. Why you took my place. Why you served the time that should have been mine."

He stared over her shoulder. There was no way he was going there.

Her minty breath flowed over his face. "Torque, I owe you. I don't know what ten years are worth, I'm not sure you can put a price tag on them, but I have to do something to pay you."

This obligation that she felt didn't sit right. The feelings that he wanted from her were much deeper and more intimate.

He didn't want her to owe him, *he wanted her to love him.*

Stepping away from her dagger of a finger, he started walking again. "I don't want anything from you."

"Torque..." Her heels clicked on the pavement as she hurried after him. The red sports car was hers. Had to be.

The "Bus Stop" sign caught his eye. He fingered the small amount of money in his pocket. A small sliver of anxiety slipped through him. It had been so long since he'd done anything for himself. Getting on a bus, paying the fare... Another burst of anxiety, thicker and heavier, tore through his chest.

Suddenly the fresh air, the wide-open space, the looming mountains in the distance, all seemed too big, too much, too threatening.

He set his jaw, refusing to give in to the sudden insecurity. He wouldn't ride with Cassidy. He'd take the bus, prove that he could do it.

"Torque!"

He swung around, realizing that Cassidy had said his name several times, and he'd been so caught up in the grip of anxiety and borderline panic, he'd not even heard her. He hadn't expected to have that kind of trouble adjusting to life on the outside.

Setting his feet, he crossed his arms over his chest. "Yeah?" he asked, grateful his voice didn't crack and hoping his face didn't show the anxiety that still curled in his chest.

"This is my car." She indicated the beat-up dark blue clunker beside him.

Surprise shot through him. He tried to cover it, but his eyes ripped back to her, the skyscraper heels, the fancy blouse and classic skirt. The perfect hair and makeup. It all screamed money and class. But the car?

"I'm taking the bus." He turned. Whatever her deal, he really didn't want any part of it. If he kept telling himself that, he might start to believe it.

"Torque, wait."

He stopped but didn't turn.

"Listen, I know you're angry for what happened..."

"Not at what happened. And I'm not angry," he said through clenched teeth.

"Great imitation," she said, half under her breath.

He spun. Couldn't stop himself from taking a step toward her, reaching out, and grabbing her forearm. "I had enough time in the last ten years to figure out I was just a toy for you.

Something you played with when you were bored with your high-society life. I get it.” He dropped her arm like it had erupted in hot grease. Her skin felt soft and warm and alive under his fingers. Fingers that hadn’t seen much human contact and definitely not the softness of a woman in the last ten years. He shut his mouth, clenched his fist, and stomped off.

“I’m your sponsor.”

He skidded to a stop. Turned slowly. “No,” he said drawing the word out even as he racked his brain for where he might be wrong. “I served my whole sentence. Every day of it. I’m out, free and clean. No parole. No stipulations.”

“It’s a new program. Officially called the Reintegration into Society Sponsorship Program, it’s designed to help people who have been in prison for a while readjust to society, find or keep a job, update on the latest technology, brush up their skill sets, that type of thing. It pairs a professional with a former, uh, inmate.”

He smirked as she stumbled over the word. Like she didn’t know what to call him. “Ex-con. Pairs a ‘professional,’” he said it in a jeering tone, “with an ex-con.” Then he snorted at the irony. “Do they know they paired this ex-con with the ‘professional’ who should have been in prison in the first place?”

“No.” Her tone was small, and he felt instant guilt. It had always been his intention to protect her, not hurt her.

He sighed. “I supposed that’s what the meeting they told me I had to attend tomorrow is about?”

“Yes. It’s a small program, just starting. There are eight pairs, including us.”

“So, let me get this straight. You’ve kept up with diesel mechanics over the last ten years, and you’re going to help me catch up and land a job?”

The last time, her tone had been affected, but now, for the first time, her confident carriage seemed to wilt. “It wasn’t very fair of me to ask to be paired with you, was it?”

She had asked to be paired with him. To torture him? To rub in his face that he was an ex-con and she wasn’t? Or, worse, out of pity?

“This isn’t mandatory for me.”

“No. Not for you, since you’re not out on parole. But,” she tilted her proud head, and her eyes almost seemed to plead. “if you were to ever get in any kind of trouble again, this would look good when you came up before the judge.”

“Lady, maybe you haven’t figured this out, but when that judge looks at me, all he sees is street trash that’s better off out of society and behind bars.”

“He’s wrong.”

He wasn’t going to fall for her lies. Not a second time. Once, he’d believed she’d seen more in him than anyone else, that he could be successful and climb out of the gutter he’d been born into, where no one expected him to do more than get an entry-level position in some kind of manual labor job and keep it until he retired. Nothing wrong with that, but Cassidy had made him think he could be more.

He could be. He knew it. And he didn’t need her to help.

“I’m not planning on getting into trouble again.”

“You didn’t plan this, either.”

He shrugged. She was right about that.

“Listen. I might be able to help, but I need you to do this program.”

“Help?” he said derisively. “Like you helped me ten years ago?”

“You told me to leave. If you had given any indication that you wanted anything from me, I would have done everything I could to do what you wanted.”

“Big words. Actions don’t back ’em up.”

“You wouldn’t talk to me, wouldn’t accept my mail...”

He held a hand up. “Enough.”

“You keep acting like this was my fault.”

“It was.”

Her lips pursed together, and she looked away. He should have felt satisfaction, but he only felt the nagging sense of guilt. Guilt for hurting her. Never mind the last ten years. Guess his heart had missed that part. It had always been on her side.

“You’re the one who stole my truck,” he said roughly.

“It was hardly stealing.”

True. He would have given her his truck to go along with his heart, of course. The problem was he should have taught her how to drive it.

He fingered the money in his pocket. It was all he had in the world. But he wasn’t getting in a car with Cassidy. He could work. He could fight. And he’d never quit. But she was his weakness. Always had been. If he were going to get out of the hole he was in now, he needed to keep his distance. She could derail his good intentions with one small touch of her hand.

Once more, he turned to go.

“I’ll give you a ride.”

“The bus is safer.” It was a slam, and she flinched, which did not make him feel better.

She lifted her head, like she was ready to take it on the other cheek. “But you’ll come to the meeting tomorrow?”

He stopped but didn't turn around. The rumbling of a motor sounded in the distance. His ride was about to arrive. "I'll think about it." He shouldn't go. Should protect himself with everything he had, but chances were he hadn't learned a thing in the pen, and he'd be there, just because he'd see Cassidy, and he'd never been able to resist that.

## Chapter 2

The bus bumped down the highway, swaying as the airbags gave with the pressure of the potholes in the road. Torque would never have guessed that a bus from Philly to Altoona, PA, would be so crowded.

They hit an exceptionally large hole on the turnpike, and his shoulder brushed the old lady beside him. She'd shrunk up against the window when he'd sat down, but he sat with his boots planted, his hands in his lap in plain sight, and didn't move. That seemed to settle her down after an hour or so.

He stared over her head, out the window at fields of corn and beans, planted in rows as straight as a good man's life. Fields the same now as they were when he'd gone up—a lot younger and a heck of a lot more innocent, despite his rugged upbringing. Part of him resented the time that he'd missed and the innocence that he'd lost. Part of him still wondered if he did the right thing, although he never doubted that he'd do it all over again the same way. His life would never be a straight row, even if what he'd done still felt like the best thing to him. He'd volunteered to take Cassidy's penalty. There was nothing immoral about that; the price had been paid.



The elderly bus driver continued to race along at what felt like a reckless pace to Torque, but it'd been a while since he'd gone any faster than running speed. The Jersey barriers lining the edge of the road flew by at an alarming rate. Torque didn't mind their proximity, though. It was the wide-open spaces that kickstarted the prison-release anxiety.

A bang exploded through the bus, followed by a long, drawn-out hiss. Torque jumped along with everyone else, his heart jumping and his palms in an instant sweat. Someone screamed. Then silence. The bus swayed and dipped as the driver jerked the wheel to the right, pulling off along the narrow shoulder, squeezing up along the cement barriers.

Torque wiped his hands on his jeans. Most likely, an airbag had blown out. Not the kind that everyone else would be familiar with, but the kind that had replaced springs as suspension on all commercial vehicles—trucks and busses. Indeed, as they pulled to a stop, the back of the bus leaned a little toward the passenger side.

The white-haired driver already held his cell phone to his ear. The hissing continued, even after the driver shut the motor off.

A tractor trailer roared by, inches from the window.

“Okay, everyone,” the driver announced in a raspy voice. “We have a repairman on his way. Please stay seated as there is no safe place to disembark.”

“How soon?” someone shouted from the back.

“Two hours,” the driver answered wearily.

Murmurs and complaints followed his announcement.

The driver snapped his seatbelt off. Probably to go put the orange triangles out. Torque debated with himself. Did he really want to draw that kind of attention, by standing up and

volunteering to head out? Everyone knew he'd been picked up at the prison, since it had been the last stop.

He hated the insecurity that plagued him since his release two hours ago. Like he wasn't as good as everyone else. Even though he hadn't even done the crime for which he'd served the time. Prison did a good job at beating a man down. Cassidy's mentor program might actually be a good idea.

Without allowing himself another thought, he stood. The bus driver met his eyes in the rearview mirror. He kept his hands in sight—a habit he'd picked up in prison—and started slowly down the aisle.

The driver's brows puckered, and his mouth opened, like he was going to tell Torque to sit back down. Just a few feet from the driver, Torque spoke, projecting his voice to be heard. "I'll set the triangles up, and I can take a look at it if you want."

"I've got people coming. The police will be here soon, too."

"I'm guessing it's a blown airbag. If you've got a pair of vice grips somewhere on this thing, I can pinch the airline off, so we can at least get down to the nearest exit and park in a safe spot. Maybe somewhere where everyone can get out and stretch their legs?" Torque stopped by the front seat, trying not to crowd the driver. He held his hands up like it didn't matter to him if the driver took him up on it or not.

"What's vice grips gonna do?" the driver asked slowly.

"If it's a blown airbag, the grips won't fix it, but I can pinch the airline off to stop the leak which will give you brakes to make it to the next exit. Wouldn't want to run a hundred miles on it, but won't hurt anything to go a short distance." Torque put a hand on the pole. "Unless

you've got eggs in the luggage compartment? Then we'd better stay put." He meant it as a joke. With the airbag out, the suspension would be compromised, and they'd feel every bump.

The driver's lips curved up. "No eggs."

Torque allowed his mouth to curve up, too. It had been a while since he'd shared a little clean humor with another human. It made the ten years he'd spent locked up seem to vanish on one hand, and on the other, he felt like an eighteen-year-old in a twenty-eight-year-old body.

He wasn't a kid anymore. But he'd missed all those experiences from his twenties that should have helped him ease into his thirties. Now, he felt like he was eighteen going on eighty.

He held his hand out to the driver. "Torque Baxter."

The driver looked at it a minute. Torque almost let his hand drop before the old guy placed his gnarled fingers in his. "Bill Anders." He jerked his head. "What'd they lock you up for?"

"Vehicular manslaughter." He didn't bother with the protestations of innocence. He'd pled guilty. The time was served. Every minute of it.

The old man pushed his glasses up on his nose. Another line of tractor trailers whooshed by. His teeth rattled in his mouth. Finally, he wiped a hand down his pants and sighed. "If you can get us off this road, that'll be great." He nodded at a black box beside the shifter. "There's a couple of tools in that box right there."

Torque didn't wait for a second round of permission. He didn't want to get released from prison, only to be killed along the turnpike on the way home, and the way this bus was sitting, so close to the Jersey barriers with no room to move over more, it was about as dangerous as declining a request from the Aryan Brotherhood. Put in that perspective, Torque figured he'd take the bus.

There were no vice grips in the box.

He looked up to see the driver watching him intently. Probably to make sure he didn't steal anything. Irritation rippled around his neck. He closed the box and lifted his hands again, just enough for the driver to see they were empty.

"No grips. Where's the orange triangles?" Every Class A vehicle was required by law to have the triangles and use them in case of a breakdown.

Bill dug them out from behind the seat and handed them to Torque.

"Thanks," Bill said. His face still held a hint of suspicion.

"When the trooper shows up, I'll see if they have the grips. Otherwise, they'd better shut that lane down which'll screw traffic up from here back to Philly."

The driver nodded out the window to the big exit sign one hundred yards down the highway. "It's only two miles to the next exit."

"I'll see what I can do." He stepped out of the bus into the bright fall sunlight. He took a second to lift his face to the sun, closing his eyes, and relish the feel of the heat and breeze. Taking a deep breath, he savored the fall scent mixed with diesel exhaust. Maybe it was the diesel exhaust he enjoyed more. The smell of his work. His first love. The smell of freedom. Sure as heck didn't smell diesel exhaust in the pen.

Didn't smell exotic flowers, either.

He shrugged that thought off along with its companion: diesel exhaust represented his *second* love.

Sighing, he opened his eyes. An underwear model, her skin golden and glistening, her lips pursed in a seductive, beckoning pout, stared down at him from the billboard on top of the rise. Her glossy hair covered one high cheekbone, but he still recognized her.

Cassidy.

The entire billboard was in neutral colors, except for her blue eyes and the tiny, tiny blue bra and underwear set she wore.

His breath caught in his throat, and his chest hurt. He'd wondered occasionally if she looked as good under those soft blue jeans and loose sweaters as he figured she must. He'd seen a picture or two of her at high school dances back in the day. He'd heard she competed in beauty pageants and did some modeling, but other than the Homecoming picture on the front page of the paper, he'd never seen that side of her. He swallowed, unable to look away from the billboard. Not yet.

That picture right there was better than any pinups he'd seen. Better than the occasional picture the guards sometimes passed around, illegally, of course. And Torque had never much been interested. Now he wondered if Cassidy had been in any of the pics that had exchanged hands on the inside, and he wasn't sure how he felt about all those eyes on her body. Not that he had any say. It wasn't his. *She* wasn't his.

He couldn't keep the disappointment from eating up his inside. He supposed modeling was a career that paid well and some women sought, but Cassidy had so much potential for more. Maybe he'd hoped that she'd made something out of her life while he was locked up. None of his business.

Taking another deep breath, he ripped his eyes away from the billboard.

He was just setting the third triangle out along the highway where the cars were barely slowing down as they flashed past when the flashing lights pulled along the road. He straightened, face-to-face with the Pennsylvania law as a free man for the first time in ten years.

Swallowing the anxiety that bubbled like battery acid up his throat, he strode as casually as he could to the patrol car and met the officer there.

She was short and curvy, with her patrolman's hat tilting over her dark brown eyes set in flawless olive skin. She wasn't smiling. He'd never learned to flirt, and since the current time didn't seem like the most optimal time to begin self-instruction, he returned her look with a non-smiling one of his own. Figuring it was her prerogative to speak first, he held his hands where she could see them and waited. If there was one thing he'd gotten good at after ten years in the slammer, it was waiting.

"You the driver?" She jerked her head at the bus.

"No."

She had her mouth open to ask another question, but it closed at his unexpected answer. Her lips pursed together, and she raised her brows.

He wasn't compliant by nature, and she'd had her chance to take control of the situation. "Driver's an old guy. I volunteered to set the flares up. If you've got a pair of vice grips..."

He waited for her to answer his implied question, but her face remained blank. She didn't know what vice grips were.

"I'll pinch off the airline so we can move the bus off the road."

"It can move?" A little chink in her face armor appeared as she glanced at the bus, then her eyes swiftly ran across his torso before meeting his gaze again.

Stinking t-shirt was too tight. He'd never thought to have his brothers bring him something bigger to wear home. "Not unless we get the airline pinched off."

She regained control of her face. "If we can get it down to the exit, that'd be better than sitting here along the road. I'm going to have to shut a lane down."

“You have a box of tools or anything in your cruiser?”

She tilted her head. “There’s something under the seat. Let me look.” She turned then stopped and looked back. “Um, what do they look like?”

In the end, she brought the whole box out to him and set it on the hood. He fingered through the sparse number of tools, remembering just in time not to let his fingers linger and caress the cool smooth metal. Having his fingers on those tools was more like coming home than actually walking into his gram’s trailer.

The lady trooper gave him an odd look, and he focused his wandering thoughts. First thing he was going to buy with his first paycheck was a set of tools, the best he could afford. He could fondle a wrench in his hand all day long if he wanted and sleep with a ratchet and socket set under his pillow. Not now.

He took a last look at the set in front of him. No vice grips. He pulled out the zip ties. These would work if...

“You got a blade on you?” Since he’d been about five, he’d carried a pocketknife on him everywhere he went. They’d taken it when he was arrested and never given it back. That was next on his list of things to buy after the tool set.

“No.”

Surely someone on the bus had a pocketknife. “Gimme about ten minutes, and I’ll have it fixed up good enough to limp her down to the exit.”

She nodded, her face relaxing a little. “There’s a big truck stop right at the end of the exit ramp. Do you think it could make it that far?”

“Yeah. No problem.”

“Okay. Let me know when you’re ready to pull out, and I’ll follow with my lights on.”

“Preciate it.” Torque strode back to the bus and poked his head in the door. “You have a knife on you? I’ll need to cut the line.”

The driver shook his head.

“Mind if I ask if anyone has one?”

“Help yourself.”

Torque stepped up and called out over the low murmur of voices, “Anyone have a blade I can borrow to fix the bus?”

No one said anything for a few moments. Then a big-shouldered, tough-looking dude at the back called out, “I’ve got one. Come get it.”

Torque walked back the narrow aisle toward the man who spoke. If they weren’t on a cheap bus bound for nowhere, Torque might have thought that as big as he was the dude was a professional football player. But the hard look in the guy’s eyes was as familiar as his own breath.

He stopped at his seat.

The guy stared at him hard for a minute, sizing him up. Torque kept his gaze steady and his face impassive. He’d never bulked up like some guys had, although his shoulders had widened. But he didn’t cower or even feel fear. He’d learned that it wasn’t normally the big guys that one needed to watch out for.

A small movement of the guy’s brow broke the stare. A shadow of a smile touched his lip before he flicked his ten-inch knife out of the boot that rested across his knee. He flipped it around, his fingers graceful and sure, before offering it to Torque, handle first.

Torque stared at his wrist and the “M” with the flying rat tattoo. Mexican Mafia. Ruthless. Vicious. Pitiless. Yeah. He knew it from experience.



His poker face had become his greatest asset in prison, but he'd stared at the tattoo an instant too long. His eyes flicked back up to the man's face where a smirk slouched on his mouth. The three tattooed dots by his right eye, representing the gang lifestyle, crinkled together as his eyes narrowed.

God forbid the dude think Torque was somehow an enemy. "Thanks, bro." He gripped the handle. Intricately carved, it felt smooth and warm in his hand. "I'll take care of it and make sure you get it back."

The guy jerked his head. Torque broke the number one unwritten rule from his time inside and turned his back on a man he didn't trust, walking back to the front of the bus and back out into the glorious bright air of freedom. Maybe he'd pitch a tent in his gram's backyard and live outside for the rest of his life.

It took a few minutes to figure out how to get the skirting off the bus, and a few more to weasel his way under it enough to reach the airline that needed to be severed and wire-tied off. He made his ten-minute deadline, though, and the patrolwoman pulled out behind the bus, lights flashing.

After delivering the knife back to the Mexican Mafia dude, Torque returned to his seat and sunk down into the cloth cradle. Felt good to be useful again. To have something to occupy his hands and to have honest work to accomplish. Wish he had a job lined up.

His brother Tough had a body shop and did some light mechanical work on small cars. Torque was good enough with his hands that he could be a help to Tough. But it was the big trucks and the diesel motors that were in his blood. That's where his heart was and where he wanted to be. It had been his dream forever to own his own diesel repair shop. To feel the power and vibrations, to breathe the exhaust, to work in the grease.

But he'd take what he could get, he supposed, since he'd be starting from the ground up. His brothers had told him that the shop he'd worked in as a kid had closed down after old man Miller had passed away. Made his heart feel a little painful pinch thinking about the kind old man who'd taken him in as a grade school kid and given him a few bucks a week to sweep the shop and wash trucks. His responsibilities had increased over the years until he'd been the main mechanic and the main money-earner for the shop as he tore down the mechanical motors and rebuilt them.

But old man Miller was gone, his shop closed down. Turbo had told him that much on one of his visits.

He leaned his head back against the headrest and closed his eyes. Wasn't going to worry about tomorrow.

“Hey, sonny.”

Turning his head, he opened his eyes. The little old lady beside him peered at him from over the top of her thick glasses.

He blinked. She must have been talking to him, but he was one hundred percent sure he didn't know her.

“Yeah?”

“You're the Baxter boy. The one that went to prison.” She put her hand on his arm.

His body wanted to flinch, and he fought the urge to hide. Stupid side effects of freaking prison.

“Yeah.”

“I remember my husband talking about you. Remember him showing me your picture in the newspaper.” She grinned, and somehow, even with the wrinkled skin, smart but sunken blue eyes, and wild, white hair, she looked youthful. Girly.

He’d won the local fair’s pulling contest the summer before he went up. He was only sixteen and had built the motor himself. Paper made a big deal about it, and he’d landed on the front page. Not that he had parents to give a crap, although Gram had seemed pretty proud of it since she cut the article out and used one of her Christmas magnets to stick it on the refrigerator.

The lady didn’t seem to need him to talk, so he didn’t.

She leaned closer. “He was jealous of that old man Miller. Said with a kid like you working in the shop, the sly old fellow would never lack customers.”

He shrugged. The bus slowed as it came to the end of the exit ramp. It wasn’t hard to see the big truck stop just ahead to the right. Looked like his patch job was gonna hold.

The lady tightened her fingers on his arm. He focused back on her face. “You weren’t visiting that prison. You were leaving it.”

“Yeah.”

“My Tyke could always fix anything and wasn’t afraid to stand up and say so.” She let go of his arm and placed both hands on the purse on her lap. “Do you have a job lined up?”

He hesitated before answering, just because he wasn’t sure what to say. That was the one question she could have asked that would make him curious. “Kinda.”

“If it doesn’t work out, I’d like to talk to you. Tyke’s Garage. Take Seventh Street out of town in the opposite direction of Miller’s, and it’s at the top of the hill overlooking Brickly Springs.”