****

**Vanilla**

The house reeked of stale cigarettes, fried food, and a faint undercurrent of mildew. The odor clung to the peeling wallpaper and seemed embedded in the worn, threadbare carpet. It was the scent of desperation and cheap survival, the same kind of survival that stained the peeling wallpaper and embedded itself in the sagging furniture. Its corner lot location offered a decent vantage point of the street—a key advantage for watching out for strangers, the cops, or worse rival crews.

In the cramped kitchen, the air felt heavy, weighted by more than just the cloying stink. Four of us were crammed around a rickety Formica-top table, its aluminum edges dented and dull, the once-shiny legs scuffed to a lifeless but sturdy gray. Maps, timetables, and crude diagrams cluttered the tabletop like the wreckage of a storm. A nearly-empty bottle of bottom-shelf whiskey stood at the center, its missing cap discarded somewhere on the tabletop. The silence between us was alive and electric with the sharp edge of anticipation.

“How many guns?” Carp’s voice broke the stale air. His words were calm but carried a bite, the kind of tone that made it clear he didn’t like repeating himself. His mullet glistened under the flickering fluorescent light, a reminder of the previous decade. Maybe he was holding on to the style as long as possible, even when it was no longer in style. He leaned forward, toward the edge of the table, causing the black leather of his jacket to creak. The sunglasses he wore felt like a barrier, his eyes locked away, making it hard to know if he was studying you or thinking about something else entirely.

“One for each of us,” I said, my voice steady enough, though I could feel the sweat gathering at the back of my neck. “Foreign semi-automatics, extended mags, serials filed clean.”

Carp gave a short, approving nod, and the smallest flicker of relief loosened my chest. “Cars? You got those ready, Grease?”

Grease—Jason to anyone who didn’t know him—leaned back in his chair with an air of practiced indifference. His toothpick shifted lazily from one corner of his mouth to the other, the faint smell of motor oil rising off his clothes like a second skin. “They’re out back under some tarps,” he said, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Starters are set—just turn the screwdriver, and you’re gone.”

“Good.” Carp tapped his fingers against the table rhythmically, his mind clearly running through the plan’s details. “And the route? No screw-ups this time.”

“I…I…I’m…p-positive,” Dander stammered, his hands fidgeting with the edge of his shirt. His words tripped over themselves, but his wide eyes had a spark of sharpness, even if they were clouded by nerves.

Carp’s lips curled into something that wasn’t quite a smile. “Good man.”

“W-what about the radios?” Dander ventured hesitantly, his voice barely above a whisper.

“They’re here.” Carp tapped the table, absently kicking a battered cardboard box at his feet. “We’ll finalize the channels day-of. You good with that?”

Dander nodded quickly, like a bird pecking at seeds.

Then Carp turned his head toward me, his sunglasses tilting just enough for me to catch a glimpse of his eyes—sharp, assessing, and dangerous. “Ramsey, how old are you?”

“Just turned eighteen,” I said, the words sticking in my throat like gravel.

He tilted his head, his gaze boring into me like a drill. “You know I don’t bring just anyone into a job like this, right? I only pick my top guys. And you, kid, you’re one of them.”

The words hit me like a sucker punch, and for a moment, all I could hear was the pounding of my heart. I wasn’t sure how I’d earned this spot. Sure, I’d moved weed for him at school, acted as muscle during a few tense handoffs, but this operation was on a different level.

“You know what we’re about to do?” Carp’s voice was quieter now, almost conversational, but it carried the weight of a loaded gun.

“We’re about to go to war,” I said, forcing the words out before doubt could stop me.

His lips twisted into a smirk, and he pushed his sunglasses back up, his expression unreadable. “That’s right. And you’re the only one untested.” He leaned closer, his voice dropping to a growl. “So, are you ready for this?”

I swallowed hard, squared my shoulders, and forced myself to hold his gaze. “I was born for this.”

Carp’s smirk widened into a grin. He stood abruptly, slapping his knee for emphasis. “That’s what I like to hear.” The sudden movement making the chair legs scrape against the floor.

He gestured to the table, his voice back to its commanding tone. “Finish that bottle. After that, there are girls upstairs—one for each of you. Enjoy yourselves. I’ll see you all in seven days.”

He turned and strode toward the stairs, but just as his boot hit the first step, he paused. Turning back, his expression darkened, and his voice dropped to a low, dangerous register. “And remember—don’t get caught. Don’t give up the crew. You all know what happens if you do…”

Around the table, the others’ faces were a mix of calm resolve and something harder to define. They already knew. I was about to find out.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

My job was supposed to be the easiest. Sit tight in a rusted-out, “borrowed” hatchback, clutching a walkie-talkie tuned to channel 3. The range on this cheap thing was little more than half a mile, so I had to be ready when the call came in.

Waiting. Easy, right? But waiting gave me too much time to think. The neighborhood around me matched my mood—dull, cold, lifeless. Tin-sided warehouses hunched like giants along the roadside, their sliding doors scrawled with graffiti, while across the street, empty lots stretched out like scars in the earth. The drizzle turned the pavement slick, mirroring the gray skies overhead. Everything felt damp and heavy, like a world waiting to break.

I leaned back in the squeaky seat, staring at the cracked windshield, my fingers absently toying with the rough edge of the walkie-talkie. My mind, as it always did in quiet moments, wandered back to my so-called life. Not much of a life, really. More like a scrapbook of bad memories and worse decisions. If I ever knew my mother, I couldn’t remember her. She walked out when my youngest brother was still in diapers. Maybe she had her reasons. Maybe she didn’t. I’d stopped caring a long time ago. My dad stuck around, but life had worn him down into a different person. I glanced at the faint cigarette burns on my forearm—souvenirs of his unique brand of discipline. Some scars were layered, one over the other, each telling a story of punishment for whatever sin he thought I’d committed.

My brothers had it easier. They found ways to vanish, crashing at friends’ houses, staying out of Dad’s reach. Especially on pay day. He had a special affinity for Windsor.

School was never really my thing. I had a teacher, Ms. Grady, who was young and hot and full of the notion that she could help me graduate. I use to go to her after school tutoring class just so I could watch her. If she wore one of those low cut numbers that day, I would be especially inclined to ask her a lot of questions and get "extra help." But even she couldn’t save me. I wasn’t interested in homework or grades, and eventually, I just stopped showing up.

Fights at school were my bread and butter. I was just looking for someone to look at me sideways. After getting my ass kicked for the first two years of high school, I finally learned how to fight, mainly by watching others. By the time I left school, dweebs would jump into their own lockers when I passed by them in the hallway.

I tried sports but I never really liked the coaches. I was a decent athlete, but the practices were a drag. So like my classes, I quit going. Funny thing I learned: they won’t let you play on game day if you haven’t shown up for practice during the week. I wasn’t gonna make that mistake twice.

Friendships were always transactional for me. You do for me, I do for you. I learned really fast that guys like Carp and his crew could do a lot for me.

And then there was Paola. Our relationship followed more of a non-traditional, on-again, off-again, pattern. These past few months we were in the off-again phase. She was probably the closest I’d ever come to loving someone, but love was just another thing I didn’t understand.

So here I sat, waiting for a score, weighing my life in the balance. “*Worth about five bucks,*” I muttered out loud, to no one.

I checked my rearview. A slight drizzle had dampened the road, the gray skies suffocated what little sunlight would be visible this time of year. Cars swished by, thin layers of rainwater spraying out from under their wheels. The drivers were distracted, unknowing of the havoc me and Carp’s crew were about to inflict on this city.

I glanced at my watch. The target would be getting close. I cranked the engine to life, using the screwdriver Grease had provided. The car was one of those Japanese-made hatchbacks. It was a piece of shit, but the motor purred to life. Even the radio worked, scratching out some type of talk-show. Some dude from Westchester was hilariously describing the differences between men and women. He was starting to become a big name and his radio show was all the rage now.

I only got to enjoy the rant for a few minutes when the walkie-talkie crackled, snapping me back to the present. Static hissed, followed by disjointed words. “…approaching the railroad tra…” Hiss. “…coming onto the parkway…” Hiss. They were getting close.

My heart thudded as I gripped the wheel, trying to steady my breathing. This was it.

The walkie-talkie squawked again, this time more urgent. “Ramsey, we’re almost there. Gray van, California plates.”

“Copy,” I replied, my voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through me. I checked my seat belt, my hand brushing against the cold steel of the gun on the passenger seat. It was a reminder of what this job might require.

Moments later, the radio erupted in a flurry of panic. “Jam ‘em, Ramsey! Jam ‘em! He made us!” Carp’s voice was frantic, laced with curses.

In my rearview mirror, I saw the van barreling down the rain-slick road, Carp and the boys trailing close behind. Water sprayed up in sheets as they veered onto the shoulder, trying to close the gap.

I slammed the accelerator, the hatchback lurching forward. Timing was everything. The van swerved as I pulled out, trying to dodge me and nearly colliding with oncoming traffic. Trucks flew by going the opposite direction, their horns blaring in warning and anger. The van corrected and got back to the center lane. It was gonna be a race.

I caught up quickly, moving to the left and straddling the center line as angry drivers swerved to avoid me in the oncoming lane. As I matched the van’s speed, the driver glanced at me, his face pale and panicked.

Carp’s voice crackled over the radio. “Go for the front! Go for the front, Ramsey! I’ll aim for the back.”

I didn’t hesitate. I veered into the van’s front left corner, the impact jarring me as I forced him toward the shoulder. Carp came in from the right, hitting the back of the van. The combined force sent the van spinning, its tires screeching against the wet pavement. It spun like a top before one of the front tires blew out, flipping the van. Metal groaned and glass shattered as it rolled twice, finally landing on its side. Smoke billowed from the hood, mixing with the rain to form a hazy cloud.

I pulled over, grabbing the gun as I stepped out. The rain was getting heavier, soaking me instantly. I jogged toward the van, keeping the gun low. The driver had crawled out, bloodied and dazed. He saw me and raised a hand, but I couldn’t tell if he had a weapon. I raised my gun, ready, but he collapsed before I reached him, face down in the road.

Traffic slowed as drivers gawked at the wreckage. I didn’t have much time. I moved to the back of the van and tried the doors. Locked. “Shit.”

I ran to the driver’s side, grabbing the keys from the ignition. Back at the rear doors, I tried the key. It snapped off in the lock. “Shit! Shit! Shit!”

The sirens were louder now, flashing lights reflecting off the wet asphalt. Desperate, I emptied the magazine into the lock. A series of pops rang out like fireworks. The final shot did it. The door swung open, revealing a chaotic mess of boxes. Cooking utensils, spatulas, and silverware spilled out.

“No, no, no,” I muttered, ripping through the boxes.

My mind was racing. The boxes had flown all over the back of the van in the crash, and I was randomly grabbing the ones I could reach.

The sirens were getting closer. The scene would be crawling with cops any second now. *Where the hell is Carp?*

Each box was more useless than the last. Then I spotted it—a box labeled “Secret herbs and spices.” My heart sank as I tore it open to find exactly that: herbs and spices.

The sirens were deafening now. I clawed my way out of the interior of the van and found the drizzle had turned to a downpour, making visibility even worse. Just on the edge of visibility, I could see a state trooper calmly getting out of his cruiser and approach the van.

I bolted, running toward the car. The cop shouted something, but I didn’t stop. By the time I reached my door, I turned to check on the cop. He had reached the van and was using his portable radio to call for backup.

I climbed into the hatchback and twisted the screwdriver. The engine cranked but refused to start. “Come on, come on!” I turned the screwdriver again. Still nothing.

The cop was standing over the driver, distracted by the wreckage. I gave one last glance over the interior of the car, making sure I didn’t leave anything incriminating behind. Screw it. My fingerprints were all over, so it wouldn’t matter even if I did. I ditched the car and sprinted toward a nearby warehouse, vaulting over a chain-link fence. The jagged wire at the top tore into my jeans and sliced my leg, but I didn’t stop. Blood soaked into my shoe as I ducked between forklifts and abandoned trucks, making my way to the back of the property.

More sirens wailed in the distance. I climbed another fence, this one higher, and perched at the top to get a final look at the scene. Two more cruisers had arrived. Their lights had become a blend of blue and red strobes, intermittently interrupted by sheets of rain. My car sat abandoned on the shoulder, a glaring clue to my involvement. As I dropped down the other side, the rain washed over me, cold and relentless, and I disappeared into the gray.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Paola had a way of commanding a room without saying much. Today, she looked particularly striking. Her raincoat, sleek and understated, framed her figure, and the hem of a gray pinstripe skirt peeked out just enough to suggest professionalism. Black heels clicked softly against the diner’s linoleum as she walked to the booth, her dark hair pulled back in a simple twist that only highlighted her angular cheekbones. Her eyes, sharp but softened by genuine concern, locked onto mine.

“What happened?” she asked as she lowered herself gracefully into the booth, her voice low but steady.

I took a sip of coffee, letting the bitter liquid settle my nerves as I scanned the diner. The familiar hum of clinking dishes and murmured conversations was a small comfort. My gun was stashed in the alley out back, and its absence left me feeling exposed. But the patrons were regulars, and no one seemed out of place. I leaned in closer, lowering my voice.

“We were supposed to make a score. Hitting a van that was running merchandise for Darien’s crew. We had all the intel,” I paused, a hint of bitterness creeping into my tone, “which turned out to be garbage. The van was a decoy.”

Paola’s expression barely shifted, but her eyes told me everything—pity, disappointment, and a trace of something she wouldn’t name. She shook her head slowly, her hands resting on the table, fingers twitching as if resisting the urge to reach out.

“You know Carp and two of his crew got arrested,” she said, her voice tinged with resignation. “Their car crashed into an oncoming vehicle. Killed the driver. A woman taking her kids to school.”

I nodded, my gaze dropping to the silverware. The heavy, unpolished flatware felt solid in my hands, a strange comfort amidst the chaos.

Her voice softened. “Ram,” she began, hesitant. “He thinks you stole the drugs.”

My eyes flicked up, caught off guard.

“They don’t believe the police report,” she continued, her fingers tightening around the edge of the table. After a pause, she straightened her skirt and met my gaze head-on. “Word is, he’s hired an enforcer to take you out.”

That tracked. If he thought I had the merchandise, it was the logical move.

“Who?”

She shrugged. “Some guy named Dozer.”

I couldn’t help it; a laugh burst out, sharp and incredulous. “Dozer?” I repeated, shaking my head. “You’d think he’d hire someone who’s actually competent.”

“Who’s Dozer?” she asked, her tone curious but wary.

“I pulled a few gigs with him. Let’s just say he’s the poster boy for ‘fat, dumb, and happy.’”

Her lips tightened, her concern deepening. “He’s dangerous, Ram.”

She reached into her coat, pulling out a small, navy-blue passport. The movement was deliberate, almost ceremonial, as if this single act could shift the trajectory of everything.

I opened it, flipping through the crisp pages until I found the name. “David L. Thompson?” I read aloud, a smirk tugging at my lips.

“What? You said vanilla,” she countered, her tone defensive but playful. “Can’t get more vanilla than a guy named Dave.”

I chuckled, closing the passport with a snap. “Just glad you didn’t go with something like Dick Boner or Homer Rectum.”

She rolled her eyes, the ghost of a smile breaking through her seriousness. Reaching into her pocket, she unfolded a piece of typewritten paper and slid it across the table.

“Here’s a list of ships leaving for Europe in the next two days. Names of the ships, captains, and their berths.”

I took the paper, my fingers brushing hers. “Thanks, Paola.”

Reluctantly, she let her hand linger for a moment before pulling back.

“You could come with me,” I said, the words escaping before I could second-guess them.

She looked away, her gaze drifting to the rain-speckled window. “My father is in this life. I didn’t have a choice. But the man I love… I want to be with someone who’s out of it. I’ve got a good job, and I’m moving up. This is my way out.”

I nodded, masking the sting of rejection with a casual shrug. “Suit yourself.”

“Where will you go?” she asked softly.

“Wherever this ship takes me,” I replied, tapping the paper. “Guess I’ll have to learn to speak European.”

She laughed despite herself, the sound light but tinged with sadness. “Europe’s a continent, dummy. They speak a lot of languages there. English is one of them.”

“Good. I’ll aim for the English-speaking parts.”

Her smile faded, replaced by a gravity that settled over her like a shroud. “Stay safe, Ram. If you ever get out of this life, look me up.”

The bell above the diner door jingled, and every muscle in my body tensed. Framed in the doorway was Dozer, his hulking silhouette blocking out the daylight. His massive bulk strained against the confines of the entryway, his beady eyes scanning the room until they landed on me.

“Paola,” I murmured, my voice low and urgent. “Go to the ladies’ room. Slowly.”

She hesitated, her sharp instincts kicking in. Rising gracefully, she leaned down and kissed my cheek. “Get out of this life, Ram. While you still can.”

I didn’t answer. My focus was on Dozer, who had spotted me and was grinning like a kid at Christmas.

“Ramsey!” he boomed, his thick Brooklyn accent cutting through the air like a cleaver.

I stood up, my hand closed around the butter knife, its weight reassuring. Dozer began making his way through the diner, his girth forcing him to sidestep between the counter stools and booths. With a flick of my wrist, I sent the knife sailing across the room. It struck him square in the forehead with a dull thud. He staggered, clutching at the spot where the handle had connected; dazed, but it wasn’t enough to stop him.

As he reached inside his coat, I vaulted over the counter and bolted for the back door. The kitchen staff yelled in surprise as I barreled through, slamming into the wooden exit with all my weight. Outside, I collided with a man in a black raincoat, his glasses glinting in the dim alley light. A silenced pistol was pointed directly at my chest.

I had never seen this guy before. His glasses made him look almost professorial, but his eyes were the eyes of a killer.

“Well, well, well. The enigmatic Ramsey,” he said, his tone calm and measured.

Instinct took over. I fell backward, hitting the ground hard and rolling into a cluster of rusted trash cans. The clatter echoed down the alley as garbage spilled out around me.

Dozer burst through the door behind me, his voice a roar. “Let me waste this asshole! He thunked me!”

The man in the raincoat didn’t even glance at him. “Shut up and get the car.”

Grumbling, Dozer obeyed, lumbering off toward the street.

I raised my hands in surrender. “Let me get up and face it like a man,” I said, my voice steady despite the adrenaline surging through me.

The man motioned with his gun for me to stand. As I pushed myself up, my left hand closed around the gun I’d hidden earlier. In one swift motion, I fired three shots, each one hitting center mass. The man’s weapon clattered to the ground as he flew backward, his open raincoat flailing out from his body like a garden hose stuck in a lawn mower.

By the time Dozer returned, I was gone.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

The captain moved with a measured limp, each step a testament to years of battering seas and an unsteady deck. His gait had a rhythm to it, almost like a metronome, steady but imperfect. His face bore the scars of his life on the ocean—a landscape of deep creases and sun-weathered skin, with a hint of salt in his scruffy beard. His eyes, though pale as the mist curling around the ship, carried the sharpness of a man who had outwitted storms and worse.

“You ever work a crew before?” he asked, his French accent laced with the grit of a smoker’s voice. His gaze swept over me, sizing me up, weighing my worth.

Work a crew? *Probably not the type of crew you’re looking for.*  I doubted that kind of experience would inspire much confidence here.

“Not on a boat,” I admitted, forcing my voice to sound steady.

“Ship,” the captain corrected. “If you want a boat, go take a cruise.”

“Sorry,” I answered. “No experience.”

He grunted, the sound heavy with resignation. “Merde. We are short-handed,” he muttered, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. He gestured down the deck with a weathered hand, his nails rough and cracked. “This side is port,” he said, pointing left, “and that is starboard.”

The ship groaned beneath us, its hull creaking as it swayed against the swell of the harbor. The air smelled of brine and rust, thick with the promise of rain.

“Crew berths up ahead. Bridge up top,” he continued, tilting his chin upward. A gull cried overhead, its voice cutting through the low hum of activity on the dock.

“Where are we headed?” I asked, keeping my tone casual, though a knot of unease had taken up residence in my gut.

“Cherbourg,” he replied simply, the name rolling off his tongue with an air of nostalgia.

I frowned. “Where’s that?”

He paused, turning to face me fully for the first time. A slow, bemused smile stretched across his lips, revealing teeth stained by years of strong coffee—or maybe something stronger. “Oh, it’s a lovely city. It’s in France.”

France. Of course. My luck was as dependable as a leaky lifeboat. “Do they speak English there?”

At that, the captain’s smile widened into a grin, his laugh a low rumble that seemed to echo off the ship’s hull. “Americans,” he said, shaking his head as if the word itself was a punchline to some cosmic joke.