

Storyboard-2

The wooden gate is off the side of the house, unguarded. Like Alex's and the other houses, the yard is large and I hear people talk. The tone is jovial. There are the cries of a baby, a child yells. Meat is cooked over coals.

The gate opens when I pull on it, and an older woman turns, hand raised to greet us, then stops, perplex. Her name is Helen Krobeck. She owns the house facing Alex's.

I smile and raise the twelve pack. "I brought beer. I hope that's okay."

"Of course," the smile is forced, but because I am acting the role of someone invited, she has to respond in kind. "You're the person living with—"

"Me," Alex says, stepping around me and taking my arm in his. "This is Tristan, my husband."

The news surprises her. For all her furtive attempts at discerning who I am, without revealing what she was doing, she gathered only surface information that watching me come and go as I rebuild my storage in the city allowed.

My assessment of her is far more in depth. Her husband died six years ago. What he left, her as well as the insurance, means she doesn't have to work. She lives alone and spends a large amount of time at the window, watching what goes on. When she steps outside, she speaks with her neighbors. Since my arrival, I suspect I have been the main subject of their gossip.

She looks me over, evaluation mixed in with suspicion. I'm the only black man in a wealthy neighborhood. She is questioning my motive. When she smiles again, it is surprisingly pleasant. "Well, good for you," she tells Alex. "I never thought you'd get hitched."

"Thank you," Alex answers, uncertain. Since he never bothered looking into who his neighbors are, he won't have found out that Helen has little to do other than watch who does what in the area.

"I'm Emil." Emil gives her a small wave as he walks around my other side.

"My son," I say, before she can start interrogating him.

"I had wondered who the young man I'd seen was." She turns. "Harriette! You'll never guess who actually left his house to socialize with us!" She looks at us again. "Come on, don't stand there. The beer's in the cooler by the table, the gray one, the blue one has sodas and the orange one juices."

"This is a mistake," Alex whispers in my ear, before Helen takes his arm in her and pulls him away toward Harriette Anderson, who is talking with a circle of women, the five of them wives of the men around the three barbecues.

"I guess I'd better go play the part of a kid," Emil said, his voice trembling slightly.

Boxes react to his. "Are you sure this is okay?" I hesitate to take control of them. "If this is too many people for you, you can stay—"

"It'll be fine, Dad." I bask in the way his box glows at being called that, before gently placing a hand on it. "I've been in larger and nastier crowds."

"But you can't hit these people."

He stares at me as I search through the boxes for where this came from.

Then he chuckles. "I'll do my best." He heads for the group of teens at the back, kicking a ball around. At their periphery are more teens, playing with their phones.

I head for the cooler.

"Here, let me take this from you," a man says, Craig Anderson, as he reaches for the twelve pack I hold. "You're Tristan, and you live with Bart."

"Alex." I had the beer to him.

He frowns. "I thought his name's Bart. That's what Helen said."

"It's his middle name. I take it Helen likes to get to know everyone."

Craig chuckles. "That's one way to say it." He lowers his voice. "She's a busybody with nothing better to do. Back when Will was alive, that occupied some of her time, but even then, if you didn't want something to spread to the neighborhood, you made sure she didn't learn about it. Non-alcoholic?" he asks, reading the can's label.

"I don't drink alcohol."

He nods and puts the pack in the cooler. "So, you've known Bart—"

"Alex."

"Right, that's going to take some getting used to. You've known him long?"

"A few months," I answer. Convincing Alex to keep our history as close to what really happened was difficult until I reminded him we'd already set that up with his grandparents. They are smart enough that if you spread something vastly different, they will become suspicious and investigate. I show him the band of silver and ebony on my ring finger. "We've been married two months."

"You and him? You mean he's..." He searches for Alex in the crowd, finds him with the wives. "I'd have never guessed. Tony, this is Tristan," he introduces me to the Hispanic man who walks by carrying a large platter of steaks. "He's Bart's husband."

"Alex," I correct again.

"Right, Bart's his middle name."

Tony is Anthonio Alcabu, Husband to Jennifer Alcabu, currently gushing over Alex's wedding band. He's a psychologist. She stays at home, but I suspect she runs a business from there based on the number of deliveries and pickups that happen. Alex should know what, based on the financial investigation he did on all of them. We will have to pool our knowledge after this.

"You're kidding," Tony says. "He's name is Alex Bart Crimson? Like that rich kid that made the news years ago."

"What are you talking about?" Adam Wexler asks, joining us. Adam works for a financial firm in Phoenix's finance district.

"You know the Crimsons, right?" Tony asks. "The magnates."

Adam rolls his eyes. "Like anyone working finances doesn't know about them."

"You know they had this kid."

"You mean the one making the tabloids every other week, or the one posing at all those shelters, making it look like she's oh so involved in helping the homeless?" Adam asks with derision.

“Not them, the other son, the one that got caught with the football player. He vanished from public view after that scandal. Nearly ruined that guy’s career the way I remember it. He’s named Alexander Bartholemew Crimson, just like our neighbor.”

“I thought his name was just Bart Crimson,” Adam says.

“Turn out that his middle name,” Craig says. “Helen got something wrong.”

“Big surprise there,” Adam says, then looks at me. “Well?”

I chuckle and pull a can of non-alcoholic beer from the cooler. “I can promise you that my Alex has nothing to do with those Crimsons.”

“You really think one of them would lower themselves to living here?” Tony asks.

“If he’s in hiding,” Adam replies, “they might not have given him a choice.”

“I think that if he was one of those Crimsons,” Craig says, “we would at least have noticed the parties and the guys coming in and out of his house. I don’t think those kids know anything about restraint.” He motions to me. “He’d be the first guy we’ve seen there, and they’re married.”

I sip at the can, listening and observing the others interact. There is tension between Jennifer Alcabu and Amelia Springborn. I still don’t know over what. Helen will be who to contact, but I will have to verify her information. There is also tension between Simkrit Kamon and Elizabeth Bauwen. They are working too hard at not looking at each other.

“So, what do you do?” Tony asks me.

“Information security,” I reply.

His smile is derisive. “We have ourselves and IT guys here.”

“It’s more involved than that. I’m the guy they call in when a company’s IT guy failed at preventing an attack. My job isn’t limited to fixing the problem, but I track down the culprits so they can face justice.”

“Shit,” Adam says, “are you the guy they called in when the firm lost have a bil to a cyber attack three years ago?”

“No. I was out of the state for most of that year.”

Tony asks Adam about that, about why he never mentioned it before. I walk away during the answer, to join another group. I see Emil talking with a girl at the edge of those kicking a ball; they are showing each other something on their phone. He isn’t completely at ease, but doesn’t look in need of a rescue.

The table I stop at has three men and a woman playing cards.

“You want to join?” Johnathan Wagler asks. “We could use a fifth player.”

“I’m afraid I’m not much of a card player.” Johnathan is why I pick this table to wander to. It’s been difficult accumulating information on all the people living at this end of the street. Thirteen families make for a large number of them, but I’ve found even less about him.

Johnathan Wagler is a paramedic and on the surface that makes him an anomaly for the neighborhood, where the median income is in the mid one hundred to mid two hundred dollars a year, according to my research. Paramedic don’t get paid a hundred thousand a year. I will need Alex’s research to find out where his money comes from. He lives alone, so it isn’t from a partner.

“It’s easy,” Wanda Cooke says, not looking up from her cards “even kids can learn.”

“Kids can’t play shit,” Francisca Dominguez comments. She and her husband, Paolo, are childless, and by the tone of her voice, it is by choice.

“What is the area like?” I ask.

“Quiet,” Beth Wexler answers, like her husband, she works finances, but at a competing firm. “With good schools. Safe.”

“If you don’t count the vandals,” Wanda says.

“I don’t,” Beth replies, “spray paint isn’t that hard to remove from mailboxes and walls.”

“There’s been a rash of graffiti in the area,” Johnathan says when I look to him. “Even your house has been tagged.” He pauses and thinks about something. “Although I think that was before you moved it. You’ve only been here for a couple of months, right?”

I nod.

“Yeah, the last time that house was hit was three months, I think. The next day there was a truck spray-washing the walls.”

“What did the graffiti say?” I ask, boxes reacting to the news Alex was a victim. “Slurs?”

“Not that I remember, and it’s only been art, really.” The man chuckles. “And good art at that. It’s too bad it’s on houses. Whoever’s doing could get good money for them if they were on canvas.”

“You’re into art?”

The shrug hides most of the tension the question causes him. “I like to think I know when something looks good.”

I step away. Is the tension because of the art angle of me prying into his life? Another anomaly, since everyone else seems comfortable talking about themselves.

I locate my target just as she sees me, and I don’t have to head for her. Helen is at my side before I’ve crossed a quarter of the distance.

“So, how did you and husband meet?” she asks before I can greet her.

I smile. “I’ll answer you if you can tell me about Johnathan.”

She frowns and studies me. “Tell me you aren’t thinking of cheating on him already. You’ve only been married a few months.”

“I’m just curious about him. He seems to like art, but was evasive when I asked.”

She seems unconvinced. “Well, it wouldn’t work, anyway. He’s as straight as they come. Three times a week, like clockwork, he comes home with a girl and he drives her home the next morning.”

“Really?” few people do anything ‘like clockwork.’ “The same woman?”

“I’ve never seen the same one twice.” She lowers her voice. “I’d never speak ill of anyone, but if you want my opinion, those girls are the kind you pay to bring home, if you get what I mean.”

“What range of price, in your opinion?”

My question surprises her. “The higher one. They were all very well dressed.”

“I didn’t realize paramedics made that kind of money.”

“He has investments, is the way I understand it. Enough, he really doesn’t need to work, but he likes helping people. Saving lives and working at homeless shelters are two of his passions.”

Investments can explain how he affords the area, as well as his call-girls. They are something that stains the perfect image he projects, like everyone here. Making him stand less apart.

Uncomfortably so.

I walk around with Helen at my side and learn more about everyone. She misses details that are obvious to me and misinterprets others. She thinks Simkrit and Elizabeth dislike each other, when it’s the opposite. The look they exchanged as they returned from inside the house at the same time, makes the disdain they show for each other now a mask each wears to hide their affair from their respective husbands. Helen’s knowledge outstrips mine due to how long she lived here and how intimately she knows those people. If I stay on her good side, she will be invaluable in adding to what I uncover.

I grab three plates with a mix of burgers and hotdogs and use taking them to Emil and Alex as an excuse to take my leave of her. I find Emil first, as Alex is now with a mix of men and women. He’s not on his own, watching the others play.

“How are you doing?” I offer him a plate. He takes one with two burgers, but exchange one for a hotdog, then shrugs. “Emil?” I ask gently.

“I’m okay. It’s just exhausting to listen to them go on about all the stupid stuff they get on like there is nothing more important than who’s dating whom on that show they watched last week.”

I settle the boxes. “I’m sorry you missed out on a normal—”

“I’m not.” He looked at me. There’s a flash of anger which he brings under control. “If I had a normal childhood, I’d never have had you as my dad.” He bites into the hotdog, chews as swallowed. Working out some of his anger that way. “And it’s not all bad. Jules’ smart and not as obsessed as the others about TV shows.”

Jules can only be Julie, Simkrit’s daughter. When I locate her, she’s glancing in our direction, eyes wide in surprise. She might not have realized who Emil’s father is. I give her a comforting smile.

“Please tell me you have knives on you,” Alex pleads, leaning against me.

“Only burgers.” I offer him a plate, taking the cup from his hand and sniffing it. It had contained coffee, of course. That he isn’t protesting tells me he has had many of them over the afternoon. His box creates a chain reaction I try to understand before silencing. This is a special occasion, so I should go easy on him.

“I guess I can eat my annoyance, if I can’t kill it.” He takes it and grabs a burger as I lean into his ear.

“And tomorrow morning, we can work off all that food.” Of course, Tomorrow, I can remind him who’s in charge.

He eyes his plate. “So, the more I eat, the more you have to work off me?”

“Please, not in the hallway this time,” Emil comments.

I smile. "You don't have to worry. This one will be planned, instead of impromptu."
"Should I get the cleaners ready?" Alex asks before starting on his first burger.
"No need," I reply, taking the one on my plate. "We're going to be doing it outside."
He pauses in the process of taking his other bite. "I hope the neighbors don't feel like climbing the fence then."
I grin. "I guess that's going to depend on how loud you get."