

Note from Kele:

This is a scene I wrote for the climax of *Crossing the Line*. Originally, I had planned to make it more blatant that Nova was behind the killing of Vaughn Davis and Tabitha's brother, Brett McMillen. And on a purely indulgent note, I kinda wanted to put Nova in a doctor's coat.

Why I cut it?

One, it's long, and *Crossing the Line* is already long. My publisher was absolutely frantic over the length of the book. I cut anything not vital.

Second, I knew I was going to write a sequel. So Tino's darkness was something I decided to save. When I wrote this scene, I wasn't exactly sure who was going to kill the two men, Tino or Chuito, but I decided early on it was one of them. I knew Tino was a hitman when I was writing *Star Crossed* and *Crossing the Line*, even if Romeo didn't. I think it was eating at me by this point. This scene was my attempt to spoil the surprise, but I caught myself and cut it.

Third, it's in Nova's point of view. I always TRY to tell the entire story through either the hero or heroine's point of view. I've had to make a few exceptions, usually for Nova. This one I decided to cut because it pulled away from Wyatt and Tabitha's love story and messed up the pacing. Plus, I liked the readers not knowing the dirty details. It kept *Battered Hearts* more innocent and saved the real darkness for *Untamed Hearts*. I absolutely agree I made the right decision, this was more for me than anything.

Did I mention Nova in a doctor's coat?

Nova ran his hands through his hair as he stared at himself in the mirror in the men's room. He tilted his head, deciding the look worked. At the very least, it wasn't the worst thing he wore trying to be something he wasn't. He put on the black frame glasses and widened his eyes.

*Cazzo!*

"Fucking Tino." Nova took them off and looked at the side, seeing that they were reading glasses. "Merda."

"Howdy, Doc."

"Yeah, hey," Nova said as he looked back to see a guy walk over to the urinal.

He shook his head. Only in this backwards place did guys greet total strangers while they're whipping it out and taking a piss. He had no idea how Romeo and Tino tolerated living here.

The small bonus was the security in this hospital was insanely lax. There wasn't anyone watching the video feed. It would probably be tomorrow before they discovered it was down, which made Nova's life much easier. If he was going down, it wasn't going to be in this hospital doing what he had to do.

He put the glasses back on, even if it made him half blind, and then washed his hands. Once he left the bathroom, Nova headed to the nurse's station, eyeing the two young nurses sitting behind the desk. They weren't the ones he'd been talking to the night before, which was a bonus. Without hesitating, he walked around the side and said, "Someone paged me for room 214."

“Oh, are you the psych consult?”

Nova smiled, deciding that would work as well as anything. “I am.”

“Let me get you his chart.”

“Thanks, darlin’.” Nova tried not to wince when he said it, hearing the twang of Wyatt Conner in his voice.

She handed him the chart and he winked at her.

The nurse blushed.

Nova looked at Vaughn Davis’ chart, and then lifted the page, pretending to take time to read even if he’d already memorized it the second he saw it.

“He’s under police supervision, correct?”

“Yeah, he shot at Garnet’s sheriff,” she said with wide eyes. “Can you believe that?”

“I can’t believe it.”

“And you ought to see that fella. Sheriff Conner’s like six-eight and he is *huge*.”

Nova looked up, staring at her over the rim of his glasses. “Six-eight? You sure about that?”

“I swear.” Her eyes were wide. “His sister just had twins. She’s over in room 234. I saw the sheriff go in and I thought, Lord, that boy must be crazy to shoot at a cop built like that and a sheriff besides. He’s lucky he ain’t dead.”

“That’s a lot of information,” Nova said with a chastising look. “And we don’t just go blurting out information about the sheriff’s sister, do we?”

“Why not?”

Nova shook his head. "Never mind."

He could not get Jules and his nephews out of this hospital fast enough.

"You wanna wait 'til the cops come back before you go in there? They're on break."

"On break?" Nova repeated in disbelief.

He was hoping the cops would step out once he got there, but this was even better.

"Yeah, they've taking turns visiting with Mrs. Wellings," the nurse explained. "That's the sheriff's sister."

Nova gave her a strained smile. "Right, I got that."

"But he's handcuffed to the bed."

"I think that'll be fine."

Nova tucked the chart under his arm and walked to room 214 like he was supposed to be there. He found Vaughn Davis with bloodshot eyes and his hair standing up in all angles. Both his wrists were chained to the bed, but he still had an infusion pump clicker in his hands and was pushing it repeatedly in the highly annoyed, frenzied actions of an addict who had been cut off from his drugs of choice for too long.

"This fucking thing isn't working," he growled. "I told you guys I need more medicine! I'm in pain. That ain't bullshit. I had a goddamn bullet in me!"

“Hello, Mr. Davis, I’m Doctor Carlton,” Nova said in a very diplomatic tone. “I’m here from the Psychiatric Department. How are you feeling today?”

“I know why they called you. I’m not crazy!” he shouted. “That fucking sheriff has it out for me! He shot me on purpose! He’s been giving me shit since high school!”

“I believe you.” Nova pulled up a chair and sat down next to him. “I think he does have it out for you.”

Vaughn Davis stopped futilely clicking his pain medication button and looked at Nova in surprise, “Really?”

Nova let out a cynical laugh. “Oh, yes, really.”

“Well, why don’t you tell these other fuckers that?” He tilted his head towards the hospital room door. “They’ve been treating me like shit. They even cut down my pain meds.” He clicked the button in his hand again. “That’s such bullshit!”

Nova sat back in the chair, studying Vaughn critically. “Have you talked to the investigators yet?”

“No, they wouldn’t fucking listen to me because of the pain meds, but it’s not like this thing works. First thing I’m gonna do when I get out of this place is call them. He’ll hunt me down. I know he will. He thinks--”

“What does he think?” Nova raised his eyebrows as he regarded him. “Does he think you raped his wife?”

Vaughn stopped fighting with the handcuffs and medicine pump to look at Nova. “Who told you that? Did he tell you that? He’s lying. He--”

“As much as I hate it, we’re about to get really cliché.” Nova leaned in closer and narrowed his eyes. “Here’s what’s going down. You’re not saying anything to the investigators that’ll implicate Wyatt Conner. You’re not pressing charges. You’re not gonna tell them what happened in high school. The only thing you’re gonna do is apologize for shooting at a sheriff and throw yourself at the mercy of Garnet County’s legal system. You made a mistake. You’re really sorry. That’s it.”

“Who are you? He sent you?” Vaughn looked around, as if searching for outside aid. “Is he out there? Did he send you?”

“I sent myself.” Nova put a hand on the bedrail and looked in his eyes, forcing Vaughn to hold his gaze if he wanted to or not. “I’m gonna make this very simple for you. If you rat him out I won’t just kill you, I’ll hurt you. For days. I will cut off your balls and fucking feed them to you, then I’m going to watch you choke on them while you bleed to death. Maybe you don’t know this about me, but when someone fucks with my family, they fuck me. That’s very bad for your health and mental wellbeing. It’s really a worse case scenario for you.”

Vaughn paled, and his eyes grew wide in understanding. “You’re that guy’s brother. The guy that married Jules Conner. The mafia guy. The guy who killed his own father. I heard ‘bout you.”

“That would be me.” Nova raised his eyebrows, because he hadn’t counted on his reputation helping him out here in bumfuck county. “And if I killed my father, just imagine what I’d do to you. I hated him, but I still

fucking exist because of him. Just to be clear, in case you weren't sure, I despise you with every fiber of my being and I don't owe you shit."

"I wouldn't say anything." He started clicking the button again as if he needed some relief from the anxiety. "I was just fucking around. I was just--"

"I don't give a fuck if you do or not," Nova held up his hands. "Either way it works out for me. I don't love Conner. Cops aren't my friends, but Tabitha is and I owe her a huge favor. Taking a piece outta you would make my whole fucking year. So do it. I dare you. His moral integrity is starting to peeve me anyway. He should've shot you the second time. That was really fucking sloppy. This is all a major pain in my ass."

"I didn't do it." He was still looking around wildly, as if expecting Wyatt to jump out of the woodwork. "I swear, I didn't. He's full of shit."

Nova stood up and brushed at the doctor coat he'd stolen. "You might wanna mention that drug problem you got to your doctors instead of lying about it. They'll give you something to help with that rabid paranoia you're suffering from. It'll take the edge off."

"It will?" he asked in a stunned voice.

"Yeah." Nova nodded. "Enjoy it while it lasts."

"I ain't saying anything," he said quickly. "I swear, it's just the fucking drugs. I ain't had anything in two days and--"

Nova rolled his eyes and turned to leave without another word. He made notes in the chart, looking past the rim of the glasses while he did it, and then handed it back to the nurse. He took the long route, and hung the coat up on



the same office door where he'd stolen it, and walked out of the hospital more than a little frustrated.

He got into the passenger side of Romeo's Ferrari and threw the glasses at his brother. "They're reading glasses, stronzo."

Tino picked up the glasses in his lap and looked at them for a moment before he turned back to Nova. "Plan A didn't work out?"

"No. Conner was right. He's too strung out. I scared him. He won't talk to the investigators, but he's a loose end." Nova dropped his head back against the seat. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to take advantage of your friendship with Garcia. I was hoping we could skip the next part."

"Chu didn't look too upset about it." Tino reached over and grabbed his shoulder, squeezing it affectionately. "Breathe, *Mio fratello*. It's gonna be okay."

"Last time," Nova whispered as he rubbed at his eyes. "I promise."

"Sure." Tino started the car.

"No, really," Nova said as he looked at his brother miserably. "I'd do it myself, but--"

"We all know what happens when you take care of loose ends," Tino cut him off with a dark look. "Never send a friggin' paper pusher to do an enforcer's job. The guy I took care of isn't gonna talk."

Nova jolted in fear. "Did you clip him?"



“Nah, I gave him a running head start.” Tino shrugged as he turned on the radio. “Maybe he’ll listen, maybe he won’t. If Chu doesn’t want to take care of it, I’ll just do it. Either way, it doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter,” Nova whispered miserably.

“Nah, it doesn’t.” Tino shook his head. “Knocking off some prick who sold his sister for drugs. That’s not gonna be the worst thing I’ve done in my life, is it?”

“I got you out. You don’t have to do this shit anymore. I’ll just take care of Davis myself.”

“Fuck off.” Tino snorted. “You do your job. Lemme do mine. It’s for family. That makes it okay. Forget about it.”

“You think Conner’s your family?” Nova asked curiously.

“Well, yeah.” Tino looked at him again. “Freddy and Charlie are gonna call him uncle just like they’re gonna call you uncle. That makes him like a brother, right?”

Nova considered that for a moment before he shrugged. “I guess.”

“Besides,” Tino said thoughtfully as he tapped his finger against the steering wheel to the beat of music playing. “I sorta like the idea of Wyatt getting his redhead. I never got mine. He should get his—without the bullshit.”

“Madonn’, Tino, you bring her up again and I’ll fucking slit my wrists.” Nova moaned and rubbed his eyes again. “Talk about loose ends.”

“I’m not bringing her up.” Tino turned back to Nova. “You wanna go home and change. Then we can come back and see the babies.”

Nova smiled. “Yeah, let’s do that. Takes for-friggin-ever to get back. There’ll be different nurses on rotation. Let’s go see the twins. Check on Jules. Give Rome a break. Sounds like plan.”

“I hope they get home in time for Thanksgiving,” Tino said hopefully. “You’re staying right?”

Nova nodded. “Yeah, I’ll stay for Thanksgiving.”

“What about Christmas?”

“Valentino--” Nova started.

“You gotta be with family on Christmas,” Tino sounded determined. “Ma would want you to be with us on Christmas.”

Nova huffed, knowing he was already defeated. “I’ll probably come back for Christmas.”