



BONES

K.L. SAVAGE

BONES

**RUTHLESS KINGS MC
NEW ORLEANS CHAPTER
BOOK SIX**

K.L. SAVAGE

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BONES

Wedding bells and happily ever afters are not for me.

I've watched my brothers fall to the most dangerous thing of all. Love. But that won't be me...

Except the new dance teacher at the youth center has got my attention. I've tried not to notice her. She's too sweet for me, not really my type.

Then one night I find her in trouble, and I'm the only one who can save her. After, I know I can't ignore her or this feeling brewing. I've got to protect this sweet little thing. But how can I protect her when I don't know who is after her and she won't tell me?

What is she involved in? And why does my chest hurt every time I think about her?

CHAPTER ONE



“**L**ike I said, keep your heads down and stay out of trouble,” Seer says in a serious voice. “I’m not sure I can bail you out if you get into trouble.”

“What do you think this is actually about?” I whisper to Hex, careful to not be overheard by our Prez. Talking during church is highly frowned upon.

“He’s just grandstanding,” Hex mutters under his breath. “He can’t really believe that he’ll wipe out all crime in New Orleans. What’s he going to do? Stop letting tourists visit next?”

I chuckle. Pocus shoots us a dirty look from the front of the room. If he were still in charge, we’d have to work on our off days. Seer is nowhere as strict as Pocus was, but he deserves our respect nevertheless. Still, it’s hard not to comment on the New Orleans mayor announcing a huge crackdown on crime just a few months before his reelection campaign starts.

“He must be worried about losing to that journalist,” I answer Hex. “It’s not like he’s made any life-changing improvements to the city while he’s been in office. This is all-out war, and he’ll lose.”

“What if he doesn’t?” Hex grumbles, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. “It was all well and good to lose our livelihood when I was single, but now I have people depending on me. What will Juliana and Charlie do if we get shut down?”

“You mean what will they do if Mayor Prudent has your ass locked up in jail?” I joke. “Come on, you know I have your back. I won’t let that happen to you.”

I feel for the guy, but then again, no one told him to go off and start a family. As far as I’m concerned, we were better off in the good old days before everyone partnered up and had kids. Sure, the kids are cute, but they’ve made my friends too soft. It used to be brotherhood before everything, but now the club comes second to everyone but me.

It started when Pocus met Abigail. Then, they all fell like dominos. Abigail popped out a couple of brats, Tori had a baby, even Hex adopted a little girl. When we were younger, we used to make fun of guys like that. Family men. We didn’t want any part of it. I guess the draw of family was too much to ignore.

I’d never say it to their faces, but I think it’s pathetic. There’s only one person I’m responsible for, and that’s me. Putting anyone else before number one is weakness. Not just because your enemies have something to exploit, but because now every decision has to be second-guessed. Can I go out drinking, or will my wife disapprove? Can I smuggle guns over the border, or will my kid be disappointed in me?

It’s stupid if you ask me, not that any of them did. Now they’re saddled with responsibilities and expectations while I can live however I want. I don’t envy them for one second, but I miss having people to shoot the shit with. Hell, even Snake settled down. I never would have guessed that one in a million years. He barely left the house as long as I knew him.

Now he and his wife are off galivanting around Europe while we work extra to cover for his absence. Just like everyone else, he’s put his personal life above the club. But does Seer care? Nope. He wants us to be happy and find love like he has. How can he not see how vulnerable it makes him? Just last year he had to send his family away to protect them from a threat.

What would he do if he didn’t have his visions? If I had to bet, I’d say he would pick his family’s safety over ours every

time. I don't blame him for it, anyone in his position would. But that's the point, isn't it? My brothers have different priorities now. They can't protect the club as well as they should. It all comes down to me.

"Bones," Seer calls, pulling me from my thoughts. "We've got a big shipment coming into the port tonight. You and Gator should plan to be there by ten to coordinate the pickup."

Gator. There's a son of a bitch who I can count on to stay single forever. I can't picture him with a woman. He loves his exotic pets a little too much.

"And remember," Seer continues.

"I know, I know," I groan, already bored by the discussion. "Stay off the grid and don't get caught."

Nothing new here. So what if Mayor Prudent wants to declare war on the gangs of the city? It's nothing we haven't faced before. The previous leadership in this town hasn't been welcoming to us. We've always been a blight on the city, but we used to be more carefree. It didn't matter if we did get caught because no women would be at home to lecture us at the end of the day.

I look around the room at each poor sod who's been locked down by love. I'm glad as always that I'll never be one of them.

"Wow, you're tall," the blonde girl at the club slurs her words as she eyes me up and down.

I see the excitement and trepidation in her eyes as she examines me. I know what she's thinking, what most girls think when we hit it off. They're wondering if my height means I have the cock to match. The answer, of course, is yes, but I prefer to let them find out on their own. I love the way their eyes light up when I take my pants off for the first time.

"And you're beautiful," I say in her ear, loud enough over the music that she can hear me.

Her body shudders at the close proximity, and she presses herself closer. It's a classic move, one that's served me well for the last decade. She's tiny in comparison, probably only five-four, but I see the determination in her eyes. She'll climb me like a tree if she has to. I'm already semi-hard thinking about it.

"My name is Trina," she offers without being asked.

Like most girls, she's probably already let her imagination run wild. I see it unfolding behind her eyes—a whole future she's concocting this very moment. We'll hook up tonight, and in the morning, she'll make me breakfast. She'll find a way to convince me to stick around, then we'll start an earnest relationship, but she'll lie to her friends about where we met.

In reality, I'll be long gone before breakfast. Poor Trina has no idea that I couldn't care less what her name is. I want to make her feel good while she makes me feel good, and that's where my interest in her ends. I'm a pro at extracting myself from these situations. Still, I won't be rude. She has to at least believe that the two of us could have a chance after we leave this bar.

"My friends call me Bones," I tell her.

She eyes me again, appreciatively, her eyes lingering for a moment too long at the crotch of my pants. She can probably see the outline of my dick, and she licks her lips seductively.

"Why is that?" she asks, her pupils dilating. "Is it because you're good at—"

I kiss her quickly on the lips to stop whatever inane nonsense was about to come out of her mouth. I like my women to be at least a little coy when we first meet. Well, unless I go to the biker bar. There, I don't expect women to say a single word. That gets old quickly, though. I like the thrill of the chase, the small doubt that a woman might reject me. It keeps each new conquest more interesting.

I buy her another drink and we sit together at the bar, our hands casually exploring one another as we flirt. It's always like this, so effortless it's almost boring. I can walk into any

bar, into any club, and immediately find a girl like this to seduce. They make it so easy for me, like they have a neon sign on their foreheads that says *screw me*. I'm more than happy to oblige.

This is exactly what my friends are missing out on. Sure, maybe there's less thrill in it now than there used to be. When I was younger, I had to work a lot harder for a piece of ass. Regular sex was no guarantee, but that never stopped me from trying. Back in the day, Hex came out with me most nights, sometimes even Seer. Pocus could be persuaded once in a blue moon, but his taste in establishment tended toward more chains and whips than cheap beer and loud music.

Those were the days.

Most nights now, I'm forced to go out on my own, without a wingman to rely on. I've had to get very good at picking up women on my own since I've been abandoned for matrimony. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if none of these women had ever entered my friends' lives. Would we all be out like this, trying to find our next lay?

No, I can't solely blame this on the wives. My friends were wired for commitment long before, whether they knew it or not. I should have known they would eventually cave. Still, losing Hex to Juliana was a hard blow. I thought we'd be wingmen for each other for the rest of our lives.

These days, he badgers me to meet a nice girl and settle down. As if. For one, nice girls have no business settling down with someone like me. It's not like I'm a prime candidate to bring home to mom. And that's not who I've ever wanted to be. I chose this life for a reason. Fast bikes, fast women. That's all I've cared about.

But my asshole best friend insists that I'll crack one day. I lean closer to my catch of the night, nuzzling my face into her neck, as if I'm protesting him. I kiss her sensitive skin there and hear her gasp as she winds her fingers through my hair. I run my tongue around her collarbone as I move my hands up her legs, clutching her hips.

Settle down and miss this? My friends are idiots. I'm bringing this woman to her knees, and I don't know her name. There's a thrill in that, in the chase. Can I unwind her enough to get her to take me back to her place? Hell, at this rate, even a quickie in the bathroom would be enough. How can my friends be content screwing the same woman every single night? Where's the fun in that?

"You're really good at that," the woman breathes, her voice barely audible over the noise.

Her chest rises and falls quickly. She pushes me away slightly so she can capture my lips with hers. She slides her tongue into my mouth, and I show her exactly how good I am. Our tongues intertwine, battling for dominance that I eventually win. I always do. She moans into my mouth, egging me on. We need to find our own space fairly quickly or we'll be seriously putting on a show for the other patrons in the club.

"Bathroom," she moans against my lips. "Right now."

She slips out of her stool, and not very gracefully. I know the routine. She'll go first, make sure the coast is clear. Then I'll follow her in a few minutes. If anyone else is still inside, I'll pretend I drunkenly walked into the wrong bathroom. It works every time. I watch the woman saunter off. Her hips sway seductively as she goes. I'm about to get up and follow her when my phone vibrates in my pocket.

I pull it out and see a text from Seer. I groan in frustration.

Cops got tipped off, shipment moved to tonight to avoid suspicion. Need you at the docks in half an hour.

It's bad enough that Hex wants me to settle down, but now the Prez is literally cockblocking me. It's supposed to be my night off. I should have as much time as I need to bring that gorgeous woman ecstasy. If it goes well, I'll add her to my contacts and call her on nights when I don't feel like putting in all this effort. If it doesn't go well, I'll just never see her again.

Apparently, though, it won't happen at all. It'll take at least twenty-five minutes to get to the docks from here, and even

I'm not that good. I slam my phone face down on the counter and pull out my wallet, leaving cash on the bar for my drink and hers. It's the least I can do. I pick my way through the crowd, staring longingly toward the bathroom as I head toward the door.

She'll feel slighted and confused, but that's not my concern. My only regret is leaving the club without scratching my own itch. She probably would've been a great lay, too. Fuck Seer for his awful timing.

CHAPTER TWO



Melissa

I draw a deep breath and let it out slowly as I guide my students through the stretch. The relief on their faces is evident with the knowledge that class is almost over. Some kids are sweatier than others. Others have looks of determination on their face that make me laugh. A few younger girls take dance very seriously.

“Stretch up to the sky,” I tell them in a soothing voice, reaching my hands up as far as I can, feeling the telltale burn of muscles in my shoulders. “And let it go.”

The sound of twenty students dropping their hands to their sides and letting out an audible sigh of relief fills my ears. I turn to face them and nod, letting them know they’re dismissed. A few students run to the door, ready to get away from the hell that is their hour-long dance class.

“Miss Melissa,” one of my students, Daisy, calls in her sweet, quiet voice. “Do you think I’ll be ready for the recital?”

A wave of trepidation washes over me, something I haven’t completely gotten used to. Daisy is nervous, and she’s projecting it to anyone nearby. It’s her gift. She has the ability to manipulate emotions, but she’s too young to control it. At her age, everything she feels, I feel.

“You’re doing so well, Daisy,” I assure. Immediately, the pressure of her anxiety lifts off me. “You know the dance moves better than anyone else in the class!”

Her face breaks out into a warm smile. I feel the happiness course through me like a wave. To be seven again and have all

your fears eased by a kind word from an authority figure. Those were truly the days. Daisy thanks me and grabs her things, then scurries into the hallway to her waiting mom. Abigail smiles and waves at me through the glass wall. I wave back, pleased with myself for making the girl's day.

Truthfully, I had no idea what I was signing up for when I applied for the job at the youth center. I thought it was a normal rec center full of underprivileged kids. I made it through three rounds of interviews, including a lot of personality testing, before the director, Meredith, met with me and told me the deal.

Growing up in New Orleans, I was always somewhat aware of people with extraordinary powers. You can throw a rock and hit a witch, not that I recommend it. They might curse you if you do. But to be in a place full of gifted children, that was something I never expected. My parents don't know the full extent of where I work, and I've had to sign several NDA's to keep it that way.

In my three short months here, I've come to love it. I was nervous at first, thinking I'd be in over my head, but I quickly realized that, apart from supernatural gifting, these kids were no different than the children I'd taught since I graduated from college in dance performance.

Most of the kids have very specialized gifts that don't affect me at all. A few young ones, like Daisy, don't know how much their gifts impact the adults around them. Thankfully, I can commiserate with a full staff. I can talk to therapists if it ever gets too much. I have to hand it to Meredith, she's created something special here.

I check my watch and see that I have half an hour until my teen hip hop class. It's both my favorite and most stressful class. On the one hand, the kids are all very talented and seem to enjoy the choreography. On the other, gifted teens come up with creative ways to bully one another. I have to be extra watchful during that class.

I don't mind. I still feel a huge thrill whenever a kid masters a new move or comes to me with a choreography idea

they'd like to show. Of all the recreation teachers at the center, my classes fill up the quickest. I've added extra classes to accommodate them all, not wanting any kids to feel left out.

I walk down to the staff break room and refill my water bottle at the fridge. The art teacher, Daniela, is talking to the basketball coach, Wade, about a child who's exhibiting a lot of aggression in his pieces. I don't mean to eavesdrop, but she's speaking loudly and gesturing wildly with her hands while Tom stands in front of her stone faced with his arms crossed.

"I'm just saying," she tells him in an overly dramatic voice. "He would benefit from more time on the court. I think your benching him is causing serious psychological repercussions."

"He's been through a lot, Dani," Tom says in a calmer tone. "I hardly think that time on the bench is what's causing his ... what did you call it?"

"Artistic outburst," Dani answers.

I try very hard not to giggle at her tone and turn to leave, thinking I'll spend my remaining break coming up with new choreography. But I stop dead in my tracks when I see him. Is it 3:00 already? I glance up at the breakroom clock to confirm it.

James Marrow walks into the breakroom, ignoring all of us. He heads straight for the snack station, grabbing a bag of chips and a candy bar before turning around and walking right back out. He's going to Meredith's office, I'm sure. Every Friday at 3:00, he meets with her for half an hour, then leaves with an envelope in his hand. No one really knows who he is or what he takes, but the water cooler gossip about him is salacious.

Mary, the gymnastics coach, thinks he and Meredith are having an affair. But we all know her husband, Dr. Graves. He stops by way too much for Meredith to be having an affair, and I've seen him and James talk before like they're old friends. I don't give this theory any thought because I would be devastated to think James is sleeping with my boss. With anyone, really.

Since the first time I saw him, I've had a huge crush on him. I do everything I can to make him notice me, even coming to Meredith's office sometimes when he's there, but he hasn't looked at me once. Just like when he came into the breakroom and acted like none of us were even there. It's like I'm a ghost when he's around. I could probably scream in his face and he'd ignore me.

I try not to let that bother me as I walk into my hip hop class. The enthusiastic faces of the kids encourage me, helping me to banish the thought of James Marrow for an hour. By the end of the class, I'm sweatier and sore. Thank goodness this is my last class of the day. I have nothing left in me. It's the end of the week. I've more than gotten my workout in for the week.

Watching the kids improve makes it all worth it. It must be how my instructors felt when they were teaching me as a kid. I didn't take to dance immediately. When I finally did, I was determined to be perfect. They coached me to the perfect form and award-winning movements. I danced in competitions and won.

Of course, all that had to end. At least teaching helps me feel connected to my roots. Since I can't spend my days on stage anymore, it's just as good to inspire the next generation of dancers. It makes the years of sacrifice feel like they were worth something.

I lock up all my equipment and close down the dance room, grateful for the weekend to rest my body and get my head together for the next week. Too soon, it will be Friday. James will be back, taunting me with his movie-star good looks. When I took this job, I naively hoped I might meet a handsome man who's passionate about changing the world. After all, nobody works at a youth center for the money.

It became clear to me after my introductions to the staff on the first day that no eligible men waited for me here. At first, it was a real bummer, but it helped me to focus better on my job. I had almost gotten through my first week when James walked through the door for first time.

Originally, I thought maybe he was a parent. I tried to casually ask one of the other teachers whose father he was, and she laughed and said he was Meredith's friend. A little more digging revealed, well, nothing. Apart from the fact that he was gorgeous, didn't wear a wedding ring, and didn't have a kid at the center, I couldn't find out anything more about him from the staff. So, naturally, my brain latched on to him and concocted wild plans to introduce myself.

It's been three months, though, and I've made zero headway. I've tried everything I could think of, but he's clearly not interested. I should move on and forget the whole thing, but I can't help the way my heart skips a beat every time I see him. I purposely scheduled the youth ballet class to end at precisely 2:55 so I'd get a glimpse of him when he comes in.

My cheeks flame at the ridiculousness of it all. I'm not usually the girl who pines after a guy she has no chance with. I know I'm pretty and that's not just me being vain. There are plenty of men in the city who would probably feel lucky to share the same air as me. But something is so intriguing about James, so enticing.

As I walk by Meredith's office on the way out of the center, I see that her light is on. Before I can lose my nerve, I poke my head into her office.

"Hey, Melissa," she says brightly when she sees me. "How's everything going? I've been hearing great reviews of your classes!"

I really like Meredith. She's only a few years older than me, but she's clearly got her life together. She's married to a gorgeous doctor, and she conceived this place all on her own. She's living out a dream she's clearly passionate about.

"Things are great," I respond just as brightly. "I've enjoyed all the kids, and the staff and I are getting along really well." I take a breath, debating what to say next, but the words come out on their own, without my permission. "I just wish your friend was a little nicer to us."

That wasn't subtle. Maybe she'll think of it as a genuine complaint and not me fishing for more information about him. She cocks her head and squints her eyes, likely trying to think about who I mean. Understanding dawns on her face and she has to suppress a chuckle.

"Oh." She laughs. "You mean James. I'm sorry about him, he's not really thrilled that he has to come here every week."

"Has to?" I ask, surprised.

"It's nothing," she says, waving her hand. "His boss helps out a lot and likes to get a report of his volunteer hours every week. But, yes, Bones...James isn't the friendliest."

"I feel bad for his girlfriend," I say in a dismissive tone, hoping again that she won't see through my thinly veiled interest.

She simply throws her head back and laughs again. "That would be the day," she says, unable to control her laughter. "I can't imagine him with a girlfriend. Gosh, I've said too much. Listen, if he bothers you just stay out of his way. Not that he will. He looks a lot more intimidating than he is. He'll never go out of his way to upset you, I promise."

I nod and quickly make my excuses to leave. That conversation taught me exactly nothing. I needed to just move on.

CHAPTER THREE

Seer

Apprehension grips me as I get off my bike at the very fancy restaurant near the outskirts of town. This isn't a place I would ever be caught dead. I can tell the other patrons in the area feel the same way I do. I catch a few wary stares as I pull off my helmet and walk toward the restaurant. It's one of those joints where the entire restaurant is hidden by a wall so the only person you see when you enter is the host. He has a list, of course.

"You must be Mr. Abner," the man says with a heavy French accent, though I suspect he's never set foot out of Louisiana. He looks me up and down as if I've somehow brought down the whole value of the restaurant by entering. Never mind that I was invited personally. Summoned, more like.

"Nicholas is fine," I say through gritted teeth.

Usually, I don't like to use my real name. The only person who ever uses it is my beautiful wife, Tori. Out of her mouth, it sounds like an incantation. But whoever invited me here addressed me by my full name, so it's best to see who they are and what they want from me.

The host escorts me through a door and into the crowded restaurant. It's dim inside. I immediately know this is the kind of place where big deals go down. Half of the decisions about the fate of New Orleans are probably made in this room on a daily basis. Dozens of eyes stare on me as I'm led to the back of the room to a private booth.

The message in their eyes is clear. I don't see them, and they don't see me. My entrance into this restaurant was the equivalent of signing a non-disclosure agreement. If word gets out that I saw the chief of police having dinner with the richest club owner in the city, people might speculate. The men in here are practiced at keeping each other's secrets. I better quickly learn to do the same.

"If it isn't the famous leader of the Ruthless Kings," a man stands up and greets as I approach. His voice is at a normal volume, but in this small room, it's like he's shouting it from a rooftop. I turn to glare at the patrons, reminding them of our unspoken agreement.

"Davis Thompson," I say flatly, sitting down across from him at the booth. "I have to admit, of all the people I imagined had summoned me, you were not high on the list."

The man chuckles and swishes a dark red wine around in his glass. Davis Thompson is a notorious journalist in the city, best known for his shady methods of getting a story. He's a "Gotcha" journalist at best and a ruthless shark at worst. I'm beyond intrigued by his invitation to have dinner with him.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Nicholas. You're a legend in my world," he says with a twisted smile.

I think back to his articles I've used as packing material and remember he's covered a few of our take downs over the years. Most of the time, we've gotten no acknowledgment in the press for the part we played in those situations. It's a hazard of the occupation. No one wants a motorcycle gang to be the hero of a story.

"I wish I could say the same," I quip, not wanting to betray how uncomfortable I suddenly feel. I can't imagine what the man wants. Whatever it is, it won't be good. He'll want a scoop for a story or information that I'm not at liberty to give. Knowing him, he'll find a way to twist whatever I do or don't say into the story he needs.

"I understand your hesitation," he answers with a smile. "I've had to do this all very cloak and dagger, which isn't my

usual style. But I have a proposition for you. This isn't a conversation we could have over the phone."

"And what conversation is that?" I ask curiously.

"The one about me running for mayor," he says quietly, leaning over the table so he can't be overheard. "I officially announce my candidacy on Monday."

"Congratulations, I guess," I tell him, unsure what that has to do with me.

"The thing is, Mayor Prudent is well beloved in this town. He's got a high approval rating, and I need a guaranteed way to take him down."

"Knocking off politicians isn't in my skill set," I deadpan, offended that's what he thinks of my brotherhood. We have a strong sense of justice that doesn't include murder, unless absolutely necessary.

Davis laughs a loud, cheerful laugh that makes me like him even less, if that's possible. Something about him rubs me the wrong way, though I can't quite put my finger on it.

"No, no, no," he says through his laughter. "I would never suggest such a thing. Could you imagine? That wouldn't only end my political career before it begins. It would ruin the rest of my life. I don't need anything violent. I need help finding information on him that could possibly paint him in a less than favorable light."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't you a journalist?" His request takes me by surprise. Why would a man in his position and with his skillset need me to dig up information?

"I'm a great writer, I'll admit," Davis says with a small chuckle. "I know how to take information and weave it into a compelling web of prose. When it comes to the actual research, I prefer to outsource the work."

Somehow, this doesn't surprise me. Davis strikes me as someone who coasts by on good looks and charm. It would be too much to ask that he do any real work to get by. He probably grew up with a silver spoon in his mouth, bossing people around his whole life.

“While this certainly is an interesting offer, you surely must have other people you could turn to. How hard is it to dig up information on a politician’s past?”

Davis taps on the table twice. A waiter appears out of nowhere, clearly summoned. He takes our orders, but I’ve lost my appetite. I’ve been in this situation before, on the cusp of helping a local official. Several years have passed since I worked with the former chief of police to stop child trafficking into the New Orleans gangs. I let him send an undercover cop into my home, and he ended up being the perpetrator.

This situation is different. Back then, I had a much larger stake in what was happening in the community. My son, Nicky, was in preschool at the time. We’d considered sending him to the very preschool a gang shooting took place. In desperation, I thought with my emotions instead of with my head. If I’d been thinking more clearly, maybe I would have seen who Damien, the undercover cop, was.

People had been hurt. I still can’t be around Hex and Juliana’s adopted daughter, Charlie, without thinking about what she went through due to my mistake. She and Graveyard’s wife, Meredith, were kidnapped by Damien. Charlie was forced to use her gift to bring Graveyard back from the brink of death. All because I wasn’t thinking with my head.

I’ve grown as a leader since then. I hadn’t been in charge of the Ruthless Kings for long when I made that mistake. The experience has helped me to learn and adapt, and I have a pretty good idea of who Davis Thompson is. He’s an enthusiastic upstart who thinks New Orleans needs a breath of fresh air. He has money and charm, but no substance underneath. Still, he’s paying for dinner. I’ll probably never have the opportunity to eat at a place like this again.

We order our food and wait. He prattles on about the things he plans to do as mayor. He reminds me of the preppy boys in my boarding school gunning to be prefect. They said the right things, pinning down the problems they saw with the school. Once they were given power, it was clear that they only had

one aim. They didn't want to fix anything, they only wanted the title and the prestige.

Being in charge of the Ruthless Kings has taught me that leadership is more than what you say you'll do. It's about actions and wise decisions. I've known since the first course of this meal I won't be doing any of Davis's dirty work. Once the dessert course arrives, he dangles a carrot. I can tell by the look of glee on his face that he's been saving this last bit of information.

"Let's face it," he says through a mouth of chocolate cake. "Mayor Prudent has outdated, old-fashioned ideas about how to help this city. He truly believes the gangs are the problem, not the corrupt politicians and businessmen. You have experience with that."

I stare him down, indicating for him to get to the point.

"If Mayor Prudent wins," he continues, "he'll keep coming after you and your men. He wants you to disappear so he can say he did something good for the city while he was in office. If I win, I'll make sure the Ruthless Kings get immunity for all crimes. Past, present, and future. I know, much more intimately than Mayor Prudent, all the service you've done for this city."

I bristle at his offer. He's handing me a literal Get Out of Jail Free card. I couldn't ask for a better deal. The second I consider saying yes to his offer, I get a flash of Damien. I see the wall in his trailer with all the gifted children he was going to exploit for his gain.

Everyone has an agenda. No matter what Davis says, I can't guarantee his agenda will truly benefit the place I call home. He could have terrible intentions for the citizens of this city. He could be a madman, drunk with power. He could back out of our deal and screw me over in the end.

Then again, he could be an honest man who feels like this is his only real shot at winning the election. Everything he's offering could be legitimate, and I'd be a fool to turn him down, but it's not something I'm willing to take a gamble on. Not this time.

“It’s a tempting offer, Davis,” I tell him. His face brightens, as if he knows he’s got me right where he wants me. “Unfortunately, I’m saying no. I wish you the best of luck with your campaign. Hell, I might even vote for you.”

His face falls. A look of desperation flashes in his eyes. But he doesn’t let his guard drop for a second. He plasters his politician face back on and holds his hand out.

“Well, Nicholas, I appreciate you taking the time to have dinner with me this evening. At least we got a fantastic meal out of it.”

I shake his hand, noticing his grasp is too firm for my liking. For a split second, I consider how unwise it was to come to this meeting without backup. Then he releases my hand and taps on the table again. The waiter reappears and offers to walk me out. I leave feeling baffled by the entire interaction.

CHAPTER FOUR



The sound of pool balls hitting against each other reaches my ears as I step into the hazy bar. The sweet smell of nicotine fills my nostrils. I have half a mind to pull out my pack and start chain smoking. I usually wait until after a lay to light up, aware that some women don't like kissing a guy who's chain smoked for the last hour. I've gotten enough notes over the years.

Tonight, I'm too wound up to care. Without any conscious thought, I pull a cigarette out of my pocket and ask the bartender for a light. I pull in a long drag and fill my lungs with the smoke. It immediately eases the tension in my shoulders. Ever since Mayor Prudent's crackdown, business has slowed down. Our best clients in New Orleans refuse to see us. It's creating a huge dent in our earnings.

Across the bar, a woman catches my eye. She's dressed in shorts that are much too short. They show off the bottom curve of her ass. My hands itch to touch her. She looks at me underneath full, thick lashes. Her eyes tell me she's ready for some fun. She gets up from her seat and walks over to me, her intention clear in her face.

That's why I chose this bar. The women who hang around are usually a lot easier to, shall we say, converse with. Sometimes all it takes is a wink and a nod and you're in business. She approaches me but shows no sign of slowing. Instead, she runs her hand along my collar and walks toward a door marked *Employees Only*. She looks back at me meaningfully, indicating I should follow.

Christ, I haven't even ordered a drink yet, but this will be a much better way to relax. Then my damn phone vibrates for the second time this week that I've been in this exact situation. What are the odds? Of course, it's Seer. I should ignore him and follow the stranger into the back office, but part of me reminds me I need money. It's not a good idea to hang up on my boss right now.

"Yeah?" I answer gruffly, taking another drag of my cigarette.

"I need a huge favor," Seer says, annoyed. "I'm at a meeting and I totally forgot I'm supposed to teach a mentoring class tonight at the youth center. Do you think you could cover for me?"

I exhale the smoke, watching it rise toward the ceiling.

"Can't someone else do it?" I ask. "You owe me this night off, Seer."

"No one else is available, Bones. I'm sorry, but it has to be you. I"

He's my leader and I should let him off the hook. I should tell him I'm happy to do it and he shouldn't worry about it. That's not close to how I'm feeling. I feel like Seer's psychic powers have extended to knowing the moment I'm about to get laid. He has a knack for interrupting.

"Fine," I say through gritted teeth. "You have no idea how much you owe me. A woman is basically throwing her panties at me right now and I'm willingly walking away from her."

Seer chuckles, not too concerned about my sex life. And why should he be? He's getting it on the regular from the woman he's vowed to spend the rest of his life. He doesn't know what it's like to not know where his next lay is coming from. He has no idea how privileged he is. Of course, call the single guy when you can't fulfill your obligations.

I hang up. Once again, I leave the bar dissatisfied. I grumble all the way to the center, annoyed I have to go because I'm the highest-ranking member without a family. How is that fair? This isn't a job for Gator or Hemlock. If

Knix or Snake were in town, they could probably cover it fine. Then again, they're both married now too. They'd probably be too busy with their wives.

In my irritation, I barely register when I drive by the center. I have to double back, irritating myself more. I'm in a mood that amplifies every small inconvenience. I don't want to spend my evening with prepubescent brats, telling them to stay in school or whatever. Why does Seer do this? It's not like we're pillars of the community. He can't have much to offer to future high school dropouts.

The keypad turns green as I hold up my key fob. Ever since the center was vandalized, Seer upgraded Meredith security system. Now, every teacher and volunteer has a key fob specifically assigned to them. If they come outside of their scheduled time, they won't be able to get in. Parents have a key code that only works during certain hours. Meredith, Graveyard, Seer, and I are the only people who have unlimited access to the center. I only do in case of security emergencies.

Honestly, it's a genius system, not that I'll admit it. In general, I try not to praise the center too much, otherwise, Seer might make me come more. I don't hate kids. Well, I don't hate them much. I'm just not eager to spend my free time teaching them random stuff. I never signed up for this, but as Seer's top security guy, it's my job to protect assets he has a vested interest in.

I breeze through the center, avoiding any interactions with the staff. They know me well enough to ignore me. Except for the dance teacher. I feel her watching me through the glass walls of the dance room as I pass by. Since she started, she's been fascinated with me. I don't encourage unwanted attention, so I've been careful to ignore her more than anyone.

When I reach my assigned classroom, I see a group of ten boys sitting at a round table and waiting expectantly. When they see me, they shrink a little, clearly expecting the jovial face of Seer. What do I talk to them about for an hour? I hate Seer for putting me in this position.

I take the empty seat at the front of the room. Then I stare back at them, unsure of what to say. I clear my throat and search my brain.

“What’s up, dudes?” is all my stupid mind can come up. Do teenagers even use the word *dude*? Damn, this is such a bad idea.

“Is Mr. Seer okay?” a small, young boy asks. Though he’s the runt of the group, he’s the bravest. The rest won’t meet my gaze.

“He was attacked by an alligator,” I deadpan. “The doctors say he may not make it. If anyone here knows how to heal, that would help a lot.”

A smattering of unsure laughter comes, but a couple of the boys go pale, not understanding that I’m just kidding. These kids love Seer. The fact they were here on time and are so well-behaved shows me that they have a lot of respect for him. The least I can do is show them the same amount of respect.

“So, tell me,” I say seriously. “What do you guys talk about with Seer?”

The silence is deafening. Then the same small boy pipes up. “He tells us how we can use our gifts to help society.”

I’m surprised me. What the hell do I know about that?

“Well, I don’t have a gift,” I tell them. “But I have a lot of friends who do. A lot of my friends’ kids do. This might not be like your regular class with Seer, but I’m curious. Tell me your favorite thing about your gift and your least favorite thing.”

It takes a moment, but a calm settles around the room. The boys start opening up. I sit on the edge of my seat, rapt with attention. The hour flies by, and I’m genuinely surprised when the same boy from earlier raises his hand to let me know it’s time for them to go home. I look up to see a few faces in the window, waiting for their children to be dismissed.

When the last boy leaves, I exit. The center is dark already. I realize I’m the last person there. Well, almost the last. I see the light in the dance room on. I creep by and see the dance teacher packing up her things. I slowly back up and wait in the

dark hallway until I hear her leave. The last thing I need is for her to see this as an opportunity to talk to me.

The door to the room opens and I see her exit, turning the light out as she goes. She walks boldly through the dark hallway toward the front door, unaware I'm there. I roll my eyes, annoyed by her lack of caution. The fact that she didn't sense that someone else was near shows that she's never dealt with any serious altercations. She has the air of a privileged princess. Even more reason to avoid her.

Once she's out of the building, I wait two minutes, sure that she'll get into her car and leave right away. When I walk out, I see no sign of her and sigh in relief. I head straight to my bike and pull my helmet on, only belatedly realizing another car is in the lot. It's not my problem. But then I hear a muffled scream.

It's sharp and quick, but it's undeniably a woman. I look around the parking lot and see nothing. Now I'm on high alert. I close my eyes and listen, picking up the sound of shoes scraping against asphalt. Sighing heavily, I hop off my bike and investigate, hoping it's an animal. My gut tells me it's something more serious. Someone's in trouble, and I'm the only one around who can help.

CHAPTER FIVE



Melissa

When I was in college, my dad forced me to sign up for self-defense classes. He didn't like the idea of me leaving the house and being out of his protective grasp. He was also staunchly opposed to me learning how to shoot a gun. Instead, he took me down to my campus gym and signed me up for self-defense classes. He drove me twice a week. Then he made me show him what I'd learned, to be sure I paid attention.

Now, I can't remember a single thing I learned. In fact, I can't remember anything at all. My body is useless and has been since someone grabbed me as I walked out of the center. I should've called a friend to come meet me. I'm never the last person at the center.

Worse, I have no plans with anyone because I was working so late. No one will miss me until tomorrow. I could be dead by then. The thought courses through me. I already see the headlines, mourning the tragic death of a young woman murdered too soon. Tears spring to my eyes and I cry out.

A hand clamps down on my mouth, covering my nose so it's hard to breathe. I struggle against the figure, recalling that assailants don't like someone who puts up a fight. I might not be able to remember a single self-defense move, but the more fight I put up, the less interested this man will be. I assume it's a man. I haven't seen his face since he grabbed me from behind, but he's larger and stronger than me.

I let my body go slack and we both fall to the ground. He releases my mouth as he tries to regain control. With my

mouth free, I draw a deep breath and let out a loud, long scream for help. No one is around. The center is on two acres of land. The closest building is a business that closed three hours ago. Maybe if I scream loud enough, the person trying to grab me will get spooked. Theoretically, it's a great plan.

Unfortunately, he clamps his hand over my mouth again and pulls me back up to a standing position. I can't tell if he's got a weapon. Considering how hard he's gripping me around the waist and holding my mouth, I assume he's unarmed. That's good, I think. I try to kick at him, but I can't find purchase. He pulls me backward, probably toward a vehicle I didn't see before.

Words dance through my head.

"Don't let your assailant take you to a second location."

My college instructor's face is clear in my head as she says this, looking at me with a stern look.

"If he takes you to a second location, you're as good as dead."

Back then, I thought she was being dramatic. She was a very stern, dramatic woman in general. My class friends and I would snicker, rolling our eyes at how much she catastrophized our potential attacks. We were too young and naïve to believe something so horrible could ever happen to us.

Now, though, fear courses through my body. I realize she was trying to genuinely warn us. She was a cop who'd seen a lot of terrible things. She'd probably been called in for dozens of poor girls who'd been taken to a second location. I wonder, nearly hysterically, if she'll be the one to find my body. If she'll use me as a cautionary tale one day to a new generation of students.

"I tried to warn her when she was a college student," she'll tell them. "I told her not to let herself get taken to another location, but she laughed at me. I'm not saying it's her fault, but..."

No. She wouldn't be that cruel. More importantly, she won't have the chance. I have to fight back. I have to stop this person before it's too late. If I take every ounce of my strength, I'll stop him from putting me in his car and driving me away. I'll give him hell.

The sound of approaching footsteps puts my thoughts to rest. I wonder if the other person is here to help me or my attacker. I pray it's the former. Based on how my attacker strains to pull me harder, nearly dragging me away from the sound, I feel a small glimmer of hope. A large man quickly reaches us and lunges at my attacker.

I'm released suddenly. I fall to the ground, scrambling away. I should run, get in my car, and drive the hell away from here. But when I turn to get a look at my attacker, I see a man I recognize. James. He has the stranger pinned to the ground, and he's punching him. A pool of blood gathers around the man's head. I realize he must have hit his head when James tackled him. My stomach turns and I throw up right there in the bushes.

The sound distracts the two men. My attacker, taking advantage of the reprieve, scrambles away from James and runs to the back of the building, where he must have parked his car. James stares at me in concern. I see the wheels turning in his head. He's deciding if he should go after the man. The sound of a car door slamming and an engine starting pulls his intense gaze away from me and we both turn toward the sound.

A pair of headlights comes on, then quickly cuts away. The sound of tires squealing against the pavement hurts my head. I wince. With nothing left to do, James approaches me carefully.

For the first time, I notice how scary he looks. I've always been too distracted by my attraction to notice. He's tall, but he's incredibly muscular. The look on his face while he beat up the man was furious, almost murderous. For the first time in the three months I've known him, I wonder if he's murdered someone.

It's such a random, ridiculous idea, but I know it's true. Maybe he's killed a lot of people. A chill runs through me. I back away, terrified. I don't care if he is Meredith's friend. He's clearly dangerous. The other man's blood seeps into the pavement, but it catches the security light and shimmers. I'm going to be sick again.

I stumble, but he's there, holding me up. A look of concern is etched on his face, the one I'm familiar with. There's the handsome man who's been the object of my imagination since my first week here. I'm being silly, and I know it. I'm probably in shock, that's all.

“Are you okay?”

I can't begin to answer that question.

Am I okay? Let's see, I was just grabbed and nearly kidnapped by a man who was almost certainly planning to murder me. The person who saved me is the man I've been crushing on for months, despite the fact he hasn't indicated that he knows I exist. And, for a split second, I thought that man might be a serial killer.

In response, I laugh, earning another look of concern. James steadies me on my feet and we walk toward the parking lot. I'm surprised my legs work. They're so shaky underneath me that I feel like I might collapse at any moment. But James has his arm around my waist, keeping me upright. His steps are steady and sure, and he's able to keep us both moving forward. We reach my car in no time at all. As I fumble through my purse for my keys, I realize my hands are shaking.

“Should I call you a car?” he asks, noticing my hands at the same time. “It's no problem, I can wait with you until they come.”

His voice is much deeper than I would've imagined. I hear a kindness to it. It's smooth and comforting, though maybe that's because I need that right now. Maybe I'm imagining the concern because I need to hear it. Maybe he's cold and calculating, trying to figure out how long he has to put up with me before he can dump me off on my own.

No, the worry in his face is genuine. He runs a hand through his short-cropped hair and lets out a long breath. I haven't responded, I realize, so he's probably frustrated. I simply can't make myself speak. Every ounce of brain power I possess was pushed out the second I was grabbed.

I shake my head slowly, indicating that no, I don't need him to call me a car. I'm capable of driving. I think. I turn toward my car and unlock it, but I drop my keys when I try to open the door.

"Okay, look." He picks up my keys and pockets them. "Meredith would kill me if I let you drive right now. You've been through a serious trauma. You shouldn't be alone right now. Can I call someone for you?"

I stare at him blankly and slowly blink. Someone to call? My best friend is on a date with her new boyfriend. She'd drop everything to come take care of me, but she likes the guy. I can't make her drop everything just to babysit me. My parents are out of the question. If my dad finds out about this, I'll never be allowed to leave the house again. Definitely a bad idea.

"I could call the police," he suggests, waiting for me to answer. "Hell, I probably should call the police even if those pigs are worthless," he mutters.

That snaps me out of my reverie. Cops will tell my dad. I can't let that happen.

"No cops," I say firmly. "Really, I'm fine. I'll go home and take a hot bath or something."

I'm talking very quickly, sounding almost manic. He must think so too because he stares at me like I'm a lunatic.

"Then let me call Meredith. Her husband's a doctor. He can check you out and he'll keep it on the down low. At least you'll have somewhere to go."

I shake my head again, thinking of how mortifying it would be to crash at my boss's house. I've never met her husband. I couldn't impose like that.

“I’m fine,” I whisper half-heartedly, feeling tears gathering in my eyes. “Just let me go home.”

His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. Hesitation shows in his eyes. He grips my keys tightly, his knuckles turning white. It’s exactly like I’d imagine for three months. Despite his tough, cold exterior, he’s actually a nice guy. He doesn’t want to let a psychotic woman drive away and be on her own. My heart swells at the thought despite everything else that’s happened. My pulse picks up as I realize belatedly that this is the first real conversation we’ve ever had. And I’m royally screwing it up.

“Could you please hand me my keys?” I try to speak at a normal pace and volume. “I want to go home and be alone.”

“You know what?” he says, ignoring me. “I need a drink right now, and I have to imagine you do too. Why don’t I take you to get a drink? Then, if you’re feeling better, I’ll think about giving you your keys back.”

CHAPTER SIX



This has to be, by far, the dumbest thing I've ever done. The dance teacher fluctuates between mute and manic. The danger's passed, but I can't leave her alone. She's in no state to drive. She needs to get something into her system. Alcohol, food, whatever. I meant what I said, Meredith will kill me if I let this girl get in a car and drive off. In her condition, she'll probably drive right into a tree.

I grab the girl gently by the elbow and guide her over to the passenger side of her car. She doesn't protest, further proof that she's unable to drive. She slides into the seat numbly, quickly putting on her seatbelt. Satisfied, I walk over to the driver's side and get in, then put the key in the ignition.

I know nothing about her, not even her name. Maybe I shouldn't have put so much effort into ignoring her over the last few months. Too late to worry about that now. She's too clean cut and prim. She probably won't like the places I frequent. Anyway, in her state, she doesn't need loud music or creepy men leering at her.

I pull out and drive to a nearby brewhouse. It's basically a chain restaurant with decent drinks and food. She needs that most. And company. I'm not thrilled at the prospect of being said company. My plans for the night have already been ruined. What's one more inconvenience?

She says nothing on the drive, nor does she comment when we pull up to the brewhouse. She silently unfastens her seatbelt and opens the car door. Then she trails behind me as we enter the restaurant. The hostess is chatty, telling us that it's

happy hour for a few more minutes before listing all of today's specials. I barely listen, focused on the girl behind me who seems half catatonic.

"Are y'all celebrating anything special?" the hostess asks, clearly mistaking us for a couple.

"Just a night out," I say with a curt smile, accepting the menus she holds out.

She leaves us be while we wait for a waiter to come take our order. Not many people are here on a weeknight. It's early, but it's off season. This place is probably packed with tourists in season. I assess the tacky décor and the neon signs hanging above the bar.

Rise and Rosé, reads one.

Tequila o' Clock, reads another.

I roll my eyes and turn my attention toward the sticky plastic menu. I flip through it to find an array of burgers and sandwiches. My stomach grumbles loudly. I actually am pretty hungry. The girl looks up at me and snickers. I chuckle too, caught up by the ridiculousness of the entire night. Two hours ago, I was about to follow my conquest of the night into a bathroom for a dirty romp. Now, I'm sitting at a family-friendly restaurant with a girl whose name I don't know.

"I'm thinking about a burger." I'm unable to think of anything more interesting to start a conversation.

"That sounds good," she answers quietly, speaking for the first time in fifteen minutes. "They have these huge strawberry margaritas here. That sounds really good right about now."

I wrinkle my nose as I flip to a picture of said margarita. It's frilly and girly, something I would never be caught dead ordering. But this meal isn't about me. She needs to calm down. If this disgusting looking drink will help her, so be it.

"How about some food to go with it?" I suggest. "Whatever you want, it's on me."

My words surprise me. I didn't mean to offer to pay, but I feel badly for her. I dragged her here. The least I can do is pay

for her dinner. I can't remember the last time I offered to buy a girl a meal. Sure, I've ordered takeout after a long night of sex, but that was just as much for me.

"The salmon looks good." Her eyes are trained on her menu.

Of course she thinks that. She's a dance teacher, probably a health nut. She has a body that alludes to carefully counted calories and hours of exercise every week. Not that I've been looking at her body. That isn't the point of this interaction. Maybe under different circumstances.

A young, overly cheerful waiter comes to take our order. I order a bourbon with my burger. A real drink. Once he's gone with the menus, we have nothing to look at or focus on. We awkwardly sit across from each other, staring at our hands.

"Shit," I say. "I didn't ask your name."

"Melissa." She doesn't look at me.

"It's nice to officially meet you, Melissa." I feel slightly absurd saying that.

"Imagine what happens when you stop ignoring people," she says, meeting my eyes. A look of fiery determination shines in her eyes, as if her earlier experience shook something loose in her. "You've only seen me once a week for the last few months."

Her tone takes me by surprise. Irritation drips from her words. I wonder if the feeling is meant for me, or if her brain is now processing what happened earlier. I decide I can take her frustration if it means she'll calm down enough to take care of herself.

"A lot of teachers work at the center. Too many people to get to know."

"We all know each other," she argues. "And we all know about you. Well, we know your name, at least. Apart from that, you're the subject of a lot of rumors."

She surprises me again. I'm suddenly very curious. Never once have I considered what the teachers at the center think

about me. Now I'm dying to know. I wonder what she thinks about me.

"Please, do tell," I prod.

She tells me the rumors about Meredith and I having an affair, which makes me laugh harder than I have in ages. I can't wait to tell Graveyard. He'll probably want to punch me in the face, but he knows better. I'll kick his ass if he thinks about it. She also shares a rumor that I'm connected to the mafia, which I guess isn't too far from the truth.

"What's your opinion?" I ask her boldly, realizing her defenses are down.

"You're obviously attractive." She gestures toward my face. "But you don't seem to care about anyone else. It's like no one else exists at the center except for Meredith. I guess that's why everyone thinks you're sleeping together."

I laugh again, glad our drinks haven't arrived yet, because I'd definitely spit mine out. When they come, I take a long sip of my bourbon, letting the heat coat my throat and fill my stomach.

"We are definitely not sleeping together," I assure her. For some reason, it's important to me that she believes that but I'm not sure why. "Her husband is one of my closest friends. Besides, she's not my type."

She eyes me suspiciously and takes a large sip of her own drink, squeezing her eyes shut as the alcohol hits her system. She laughs as she sets her glass back down on the table and looks at me shyly.

"I can't believe I'm telling you this," she says, already sounding more relaxed. "Of all the things I thought we'd talk about, I didn't imagine I'd spill the employee secrets."

"You imagined what we'd talk about?" My interest is piqued. Once again, I realize how fit she is, how pretty her face is. I suddenly can't believe I've been so insistent on ignoring her all this time. She's gorgeous. And she's blushing.

"I mean, I never thought we would ever have a conversation," she backtracks. "Like I said, you only ever talk

to Meredith. I don't think I've seen you smile at anyone else."

"I don't like smiling," I admit. "It's a sign of weakness."

She snorts into her drink, then blushes deeper, clearly embarrassed.

"You're not in danger of looking weak," she says, covering up the action. "I don't think anyone's ever looked at you and made that mistake."

I smile at this and catch her eye. For a moment, we sit there grinning at each other like idiots. This isn't me. Not the smiling or the innocent banter. I save my rare smiles for girls I want to sleep with. Even then, they're less than genuine. It's been forever since I've smiled at a woman because she's genuinely made me happy.

No, I can't fall into that trap. Melissa the dance teacher is only a girl who needed someone in a specific moment. I was the poor bastard who happened to be around. Yet, I'm mesmerized by the way her lips pucker after every sip of her drink. I've already memorized the way her eyes light up when she's said something she thinks she shouldn't have. I imagine those eyes staring into mine as I bring her to the peak of pleasure.

I shake my head and look down at my hands, eternally grateful when the waiter shows up with our food. Whether I should sleep with this girl isn't the question. It's more a matter of when I'm going to do it. How much time needs to pass after an event like this for it to be appropriate? There's also the matter of her being the polar opposite of any other girl I've hooked up with.

She won't be the type I can flirt with in the club, or one of the bar women who knows it's going down from a mere look. She's classier, more refined. She'll need to be wined and dined, and not out of responsibility.

I also have to consider she absolutely would be one of those girls to imagine our future. She's already admitted she's noticed me and has been thinking about me. If I sleep with her, she might take it the wrong way. She might assume I want

something. More than I do, and she'd be disappointed when I don't give it to her. I can't avoid her.

Seer's assigned me to the center every Friday afternoon. I can't avoid her if this goes wrong. Damn him, once again cockblocking me. Then again, I could go back to ignoring her if it went wrong. I've been doing it for the last three months. She might be upset, but it's not like that's bothered me before.

"How are you feeling?" I ask after she's had a few minutes to enjoy her meal.

She swallows and holds up her hand, examining it carefully. It's steady now, not shaky at all. I could leave it here, consider this a fluke. I'll go back to ignoring her, pretending she doesn't exist. She's fine now. I've done my duty.

Only the thought of ignoring her after this feels hollow. How can I overlook her now when I'm so attuned to her voice, her smile, her eyes? No, ignoring her isn't an option anymore. I screwed up, thinking I was doing a kind thing for a friend's employee. I should have driven her home and had her call a friend to come stay with her. I've undone years of careful avoidance and feigned indifference now by getting involved more than I should have. There is a niggle in the back of my head that says Melissa will be impossible to ignore now, and that can only mean trouble.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Pocus

Thursday mornings are my absolute hell. It's almost the weekend, but not near enough to feel relieved. It's also the day I have to take care of both kids. Abigail has meetings all morning. Usually, we split the work, her taking Benji to daycare and me taking Daisy to school. On Thursdays, I'm in charge of both. Neither of my kids makes the morning very easy.

When I wake up Daisy, she's immediately upset about the outfit Abigail picked out for her. She screams and cries until I cave in and let her pick her own outfit. I leave her to get dressed while I wake up Benji. Benji who's fully in the throes of his terrible twos and doesn't sleep much through the night. Naturally, when I try to wake him up, he screams bloody murder because he's so tired.

Honestly, on days like this, I miss having guns shoved into my face. Better a gun than a screaming kid. I get Benji ready, blocking out the screams and moving through his morning routine. Change diaper, change clothes, brush his teeth, get him downstairs for breakfast. Daisy is already sitting at the kitchen table, demanding I make her pancakes. A quick glance at the clock shows me we have exactly enough time for cereal and yogurt. Besides, my pancakes always come out lumpy.

Abigail will back over me with her car if she sees what Daisy's picked out to wear. She's wearing swim shorts and a princess t-shirt with mismatched socks and flip flops. Her hair is in a messy ponytail, knotted on top of her head. I pour out

her cereal and open a yogurt for her, then hand Benji his usual breakfast of applesauce and milk.

He has to eat breakfast in front of a cartoon or he'll scream, but Daisy isn't allowed to watch TV with him because it makes her concentrate less in class, apparently. Today, rules be damned. I have to run upstairs to get the magic hair spray that detangles her hair and find a better pair of shorts and shoes to match her shirt.

I do this all as quickly and efficiently as I can. When I get downstairs, both kids are in tears. Cereal is all over the kitchen floor. It has to be a later problem. I have exactly ten minutes to get Daisy changed and manage her hair before I wrestle them both into the car. She fights me the whole time. She screams at the top of her lungs when I brush her hair, no matter how gently I try to do it. It doesn't help that I feel all her emotions. She's projecting them onto her brother. She can't help it, but her time at the center is making it better. I let her stay in her mismatched socks, letting her display some of her personal style.

Getting into the car is another fight I'm too exhausted to deal with. Benji tries to bite me as I strap him into his car seat. Daisy says she's too big to be sitting in a booster seat.

"Daisy, my love," I say in my calmest possible tone. "I agree that you're a big girl. And as a big girl, I need you to understand that sometimes you have to do things you don't want to. Your booster seat is one of those things."

She crosses her arms and glares at me, waiting for me to come to her side of the van and buckle her in even though she knows how to do it herself.

"Another thing big girls have to do is set a good example for their little brothers," I tell her gently as I strap her in. "It would help Daddy if you could help Benji calm down."

She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, frustrated but compliant. A serene look comes over her face. Benji immediately stops fighting. I hate manipulating Daisy to use her powers on her brother, but on days like this, it's the only way to maintain my sanity. With both kids quiet and calm, I

drive them to their respective locations. I drop Benj off first, knowing the second he's away from Daisy's influence, he'll start screaming his head off.

Thankfully, for the next eight hours, it's his daycare teacher's job to calm him down. On our way to Daisy's school, I put on her favorite kid's station and smile at her little voice singing along to the nonsense songs. She does dance moves along to the words. She loves dancing. I'm glad it's offered at the center now. It's helped her chill out the last few months.

"Daisy bunny," I say as we pull up in front of the school. "I want you to have a great day, okay?"

"Okay Daddy," she says in a much sweeter voice than she had earlier. Away from her brother, she's in a much better mood.

I walk her to her teacher and wave goodbye. I'm grateful to be done with the hardest part of my entire week. Every Thursday, I hope it'll go more smoothly. I'm always disappointed when it goes the same. I turn the car on and a bright, childlike voice immediately fills my speakers, telling me to clap my hands. I change the station, finding a local news station for my drive back home.

"In local news, we've gotten reports that the notorious Bayou Reapers gang was raided last night," a serious voice says over the radio. "The raid was a joint effort between the police force and the mayor's office. It's the first major bust we've seen since Mayor Prudent announced his crackdown on crime organizations in the city."

I turn the radio off and pull over, my mind reeling. The Bayou Reapers are the most notorious gang in New Orleans. They've been wreaking havoc on the city since before I was born. They go underground every few months when their crimes get too high profile. Unlike our club, they've got a reputation for being incredibly violent and destructive.

When I was a teen, one of their recruiters reached out to me. They saw an angry kid on the street and offered me money and protection. Coco would have never forgiven me if I joined them. She didn't like their method of getting things done, and I

can't blame her. The Ruthless Kings were much tamer by comparison, even all those years ago. They had their illegal activities, sure, but they weren't blowing up government buildings and spreading anarchy.

Back then, we were low-level gun runners. Now, we've become the largest arms dealers in the state, but we're very careful about who we sell to. The leader of the Bayou Reapers tried to buy a large stock from us years ago, but I wasn't having it. I didn't know what they needed them for. I didn't want to be part of whatever they had planned. To this day, it haunts me.

They've kept a lower profile in the last decade, but their threat persists. Their name is spoken through hushed tones and in reverent disdain. The mayor taking them down shows that he's beyond serious about his war on crime. I'm sure this bust was brewing for months, but who's to say they aren't working on an investigation on us?

I hate being in the dark about these things. We used to have Snake here to keep an eye on police chatter and let us know if anyone was looking into us. But he's been traveling around Europe for months, with no apparent plan to return. He has to come back eventually, I'm sure, but now isn't a great time for him to be on an extended honeymoon. Hex and Juliana have paused their yearly trip to Brazil.

Things in the city have been tense for the last few weeks. All the gangs have felt it. It's quiet on the streets. Maybe we deluded ourselves into thinking Mayor Prudent wanted that all along. It's a false sense of security. He's coming for all of us.

I should go back to my house to clean up the spilled cereal and try to organize the disaster my children created this morning. But the words of the news anchor spin through my head. All I can think about is my brothers. We're screwed if they pin us to the wall. It won't be a huge feat from there to get us.

As I approach my house, I bypass it entirely, driving straight to the clubhouse. The mess inside can wait. I have a much larger mess to help clean up. I'm not sure if Seer's heard

the news yet. He'll be in a fit the second he does. He'll need me there to talk it over.

After I pull in, I walk up to the house, taking the porch steps two at a time. I head straight for Seer's office. I find him there alone, as I'd suspected I would. He looks up at me in surprise, knowing it's my hell morning. I usually come to see him much later on Thursdays.

"Did Abigail take off work today?" he asks in confusion, checking his watch.

"No, asshole," I grumble, plopping into one of the chairs across from his desk. "Did you hear about the Bayou Reapers?" I'm bursting at the seams to share what I've learned.

"What have they done now?" he asks in a wary tone.

"They've been raided."

The color drains from his face. He turns to his computer, furiously typing something. A second later, he turns the screen toward me so we can both see the news story. No new information than what I heard on the radio, but we know what this means. Either we import flowers instead of guns, or we're screwed.

"How long do you think they've been planning that raid?" He looks at me with trepidation.

"A few months, at least," I guess. "Maybe a year. They probably had to bring the feds in on it."

"There goes our hard-earned tax dollars," he jokes. His face is still pale.

"I don't know about you, but I'm way too sober for this conversation." I stand and head toward the door.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Seer

Pocus and I sit at the bar while Buffy makes us old fashioned. I drop my head in my hands and massage my temples. I'm stressed about the news of the Bayou Reapers. Mayor Prudent isn't screwing around. Other mayors would have announced a crackdown on crime and worked their way up to the Reapers. Not Prudent. He took out the big dogs first.

"We're fucked," I groan, my eyes trained on the bar. "Seriously, Pocus, I wouldn't be surprised if the FBI busts down the door any second."

"They won't find anything," he says in a calm voice.

I don't know how he's keeping his cool right now. It baffles me. "You keep everything offsite. The most they'll find is a dusty computer that hasn't been touched in months."

"How is Snake?" Buffy interjects, handing us our drinks.

"I got a postcard from Rome," I tell him, then take a much-needed sip of my drink. "It just said *Much love, Snake and Francesca*. So I have no idea when he's coming back. If he's coming back."

"What about that kid?" Pocus suggests, referring to Data.

He was an incredibly helpful asset last year when Snake was taken. He's a gifted kid from the center who can communicate with technology, like Francesca. When Ronan Burke and the Cuatros Locos took down our security system, he was instrumental in getting it back up. Since then, he's helped here and there with small projects. He's only turned

fourteen. I'm no hypocrite. I won't use a child to help us with the business. Not after everything I did to stop Damien.

No, Data strictly does small upgrades and shows me how to use certain apps. Apart from that, I don't let him anywhere near here. We're managing without Snake. We'll continue to do so until he comes back from his well-earned break.

"While we're at it, why don't we let Daisy help us move guns?" I deadpan, giving him a serious look. "Data's barely twice her age. It's not his job to hack into the police database."

"Well, we have to do something," Pocus complains. "Or are we going to sit on our asses and wait for Mayor Prudent to knock on the door with a warrant?"

"It's about the reelection." I slowly blow air out of my mouth. "He's trying to win. Once he does, he'll back off. That's what these politicians do. He's trying to show the citizens of New Orleans that he's not offering empty promises. As soon as he wins his second term, he'll do just that."

Pocus laughs. "Remember Mayor Franks?"

We reminisce on the bumbling mayor who got elected on the platform of city improvement. He gentrified one neighborhood, leaving hundreds of residents without affordable housing. Then he came down hard on welfare recipients. He created a problem, then punished the very people he'd displaced. He only lasted one term, but it was a long four years.

"Dempsey was my personal favorite," Buffy chimes in. "What man thinks he's going to be successful banning alcohol in one of the biggest party cities in the world?"

"That was a good term for us, don't forget," Pocus says with a smile. "We were importing a lot of cheap alcohol and selling it for top-shelf prices. We were flush with cash."

"He didn't make it a full term," I remind my friend. "He got caught with that prostitute, remember?"

"So much for family values." Buffy laughs, pouring himself a shot of vodka. "To all the shitty New Orleans mayors. May they continue to disappoint."

“Hear, hear,” I agree. “Let’s hope that’s what Prudent does. The more he disappoints on his promise, the better for us.”

“And in case he does fulfill his promises?” Pocus asks, clearly wanting to play Devil’s advocate. “We can keep our heads low and our noses clean for three months until the reelection, but we won’t survive four years. Either we sell off our stock immediately and get into a more legitimate business or...”

He trails off, unable to voice the worst-case scenario. I can’t imagine what that would look like. We could try to live on the straight and narrow. But it’s not like people pay the same money for imported fabric as they do for imported guns. It’s been a good business, and we’re good at it. It keeps my men fed and taken care of. We live a pretty good life. If we have to leave the arms game, we’re finished. My men will quit, plain and simple. Maybe we’ll move to Houston to start over.

“No.” I interrupt my own thoughts. “We’ve built a reputation for ourselves. We won’t surrender. That’s not an option. We keep our heads down for three months and hope he’s either full of hot air or he loses.”

Pocus scoffs.

“His only serious competition is Davis Thompson. You think that guy has the balls to beat Prudent?”

“Prudent has the highest approval rating of any mayor in the last fifty years,” Buffy says, unhelpfully. “No way he’s losing.”

I sigh heavily, debating if I should tell them about Davis’s offer. I already told him no, but I doubt he’s found someone else to help. He has serious ambition. He won’t give up. I could go back to him right now and tell him I’ve changed my mind.

“What aren’t you telling me?” Pocus asks, sensing my hesitation.

Damn him and his gift. We have no secrets, even when I desperately want to keep things from him. I have no option but

to spill the beans and let the chips fall where they may, so to speak.

“Davis Thompson called me for a meeting,” I tell him reluctantly. “Summoned me.”

“You’re shitting me,” he says, a gleam of curiosity in his eye. “Way to bury the fucking lead. What did he want?”

“He wants to win.” I shrug. “He thinks Mayor Prudent is too old and too out of touch with the New Orleans of today. Some shit like that. He wants us to dig up dirt on Prudent so he’ll have an advantage.”

“Damn,” Pocus says with a low whistle. He takes a swig of his old fashioned and swallows hard, contemplating this for several minutes. His wheels are turning. He’s already thinking about the advantages.

“I told him no.” I doubt myself for the first time since the meeting.

“What did he offer?” Pocus turns to me. “He wouldn’t ask you for a favor like that without big compensation.”

“I said no. It doesn’t matter what he offered because we aren’t doing it. That isn’t how we operate.”

Pocus scoffs again and rolls his eyes. His face is shut down, a clear sign that he’s annoyed with me. He probably wanted me to consult with him before I made a decision, but that’s not how I operate either. Not anymore. In the early days of my leadership, I ran to him with every problem, but I’m more established now. It’s my job to make the difficult decisions and commiserate about them later.

I pick up my glass and swirl it around, watching the contents slosh against the side of the glass. I throw back the remaining liquid in one gulp and feel the familiar burn of the bourbon. Buffy used the good stuff for this drink. It’s smooth and warm. No cheap stuff for the Prez and his best friend. I hope Pocus is still my friend after this conversation. I see his anger simmering under the surface.

“What did he offer?” Pocus asks again, his tone low and dangerous.

“You remember Damien, don’t you?” I ask sarcastically. “You remember when I made that deal with the chief of police to help him investigate the child trafficking happening in the city. You told me I was a dumb ass to make that deal, and you were right.”

“This is different.” He glares at me. “You did that for your own reasons.”

“And this wouldn’t be?” I ask, incredulous. “Pocus, the last thing I want to do is make another half-baked deal with a city official. It almost ruined us.”

“Mayor Prudent will ruin us,” Pocus grumbles, finishing his own drink. “You think the Bayou Reapers wouldn’t jump at the chance to have the future mayor in their pocket? Davis Thompson doesn’t give a shit about what we do. In fact, our take-downs have made his career. He’d turn a blind eye for a small price.”

“Snake isn’t here,” I remind him. “Who exactly would be digging up the dirt on Prudent? It’s not like we’re technical geniuses.”

“So get him on a plane!” Pocus barks. I know he’s barely hanging on. “Bring him home right away and help the club out. Davis will probably be a shitty mayor, but he’ll leave us alone. And he’ll owe us big time. There’s no reason not to do it.”

“Will it always be like this?” I ask, suddenly furious. “No matter what decision I make, you’ll always second guess me. It’s exhausting, Pocus. I can’t abide by it anymore.”

“Shove off, Seer,” He stands up suddenly. “This isn’t about me questioning your leadership, it’s about me questioning your sanity. You have the opportunity to get this man, the future Mayor of New Orleans in your pocket and you...what? Just decided not to? Don’t be an idiot.”

“I’m not being an idiot,” I tell him calmly.

I stand up too, facing him at my full height. We’re nose to nose, close enough that I feel his breath on my face. I look down to see his fists clenched, but he won’t hit me. That

would be insubordination, best friend or not. He knows he can't fly off the handle without consequences anymore.

"It's a stressful time. And you've had a bad morning. I think maybe you should go home and calm down before you have to pick up your children from school."

"Don't be like that." Tension drops suddenly from his shoulders. "Don't shut me out, Seer, I'm sorry. You're right, I'm stressed. I'm not trying to be an asshole."

"You never are." I turn and head for the door. "I never hold you accountable for it. All's well, Pocus, just go home. I have a lot of work to do."

He thanks Buffy for the drink, something he never does, and brushes past me as he goes to the front door. When he reaches it, he turns and looks at me.

"See you tonight for dinner?" he asks. "Abigail is making lasagna."

"I wouldn't miss it," I tell him sincerely. "Enjoy your afternoon."

He nods and leaves. I let out a sigh of relief and go to my office. Tension radiates through my body. I know Pocus means well. It can be hard to take a step back and focus on family. When Tori's out in the bayou with Mama and I have to take care of Nicky, it's tough.

At his core, I'm not sure Pocus will ever truly get over not being the Prez anymore. I felt sorry for him for so long. I needed him for even longer. I second-guessed myself so much, thinking that I should step down and let Pocus take the reins again. That's not the case more.

I'm good at what I do. I know that I'm right. For once, I don't have any qualms about my decision. Davis might be a good mayor, but I won't utilize my resources to help him get there. As for Mayor Prudent, we'll have to wait and see what happens. Who knows, maybe it won't be as bad as we fear. Of course, it could be much, much worse.

CHAPTER NINE



Melissa

The morning after the attack, I wake up with a huge hangover. I immediately text Meredith and tell her I'm sick, praying she'll believe me and not ask questions. She texts back a sad face and tells me she hopes I feel better soon. I lie in bed for a long time, replaying the whole scene for the millionth time. I barely slept, plagued by nightmares about my attacker.

After dinner, James drove me back to the center and made sure I was sober to drive back home. How could I admit that after spending time with him, I was completely fine? That would have been way too mortifying. Instead, I drove home and drank half a bottle of vodka straight.

It's come back to bite me in the ass. I feel like I'll throw up any second. I run to the bathroom and dry heave into my toilet for several minutes. When nothing substantial comes up, I remember how I threw up in the bushes, right in front of James. Embarrassment washes over my body and mixes with the hangover. I could curl up and die on this bathroom floor. Everything about last night was so bizarre and surreal. I don't even want to think about it.

Unfortunately, my mind hasn't gotten that memo. It replays the whole night in a loop. Did I really tell James that everyone thinks he and Meredith are having an affair? Or that he's in the mafia? Fuck my life, he probably thinks I'm psychotic. I was acting crazy last night. I blame the trauma of being attacked, but that feels like a cop out.

I told him so many secrets, even that I'd been watching him for months. In addition to thinking I'm a psycho, he probably thinks I'm a stalker. Fantastic. As far as first impressions go, that's the worst one I could have made. I'm such an idiot. I finally throw up, ashamed by everything that happened in the last twelve hours. I crawl back into bed and throw my comforter over my head, unable to face the day.

I sleep most of the day, only waking up to eat a couple of times. By the next morning, I'm refreshed, though still mortified. It's Friday, the day James stops by the center. I decide I'll skip my break today so I won't have to see him. Hey, maybe he'll go back to ignoring me. That would be great. I've never wanted him to ignore me so badly.

I breeze through the center, popping into Meredith's office quickly to apologize for yesterday. She tells me she understands and she's glad I'm feeling better today. I smile brightly and head to the dance room, getting set up for my first class.

During weekdays, the center functions as an a la carte daycare. Rather than having age groups for the kids, we have classes the parents can sign the kids up for. There are about twenty preschool-aged gifted kids, apparently a huge amount. I've learned so much from Meredith since I started.

"It's truly unusual," she'd told me during our hours-long interview. "When I was younger, a handful of gifted kids existed in the whole state. In the last few years, I've met hundreds of gifted kids in New Orleans alone. It's like a mutation, getting stronger with every generation."

"It must be good for business," I'd joked, slightly uncomfortable with the whole thing. Everything I'd learned in that interview challenged my worldview. It took a while for me to realize she wasn't kidding.

"I made this place for them," she said with a bright smile. "I spent a lot of time running and hiding, helping them find people who loved them and would take care of them. And when it wasn't necessary to run anymore, I wanted them to have a safe community of their own."

I'd left that conversation in a daze, wondering how many gifted people I may know and not even be aware. Regardless, the center got an influx of young children exhibiting extraordinary gifts. Meredith had the ability to sense these gifts. She made sure that we created a safe place for them as well. Thus, the day classes were scheduled.

"All right, my tiny ballerinas," I call out to the group of girls assembled in front of me.

We decide the best thing to do with this group of preschoolers is to split them up in groups of four. We found that with any more, they would get distracted. So, my four little ballerinas stand in front of me now, hands on hips, as they wait for further instruction.

They're so much more focused and serious than some of my older students. I'm reminded that this is the perfect age for kids to start taking dance. They have little, sponge-like minds that are perfect for learning all the different dance moves. I walk them through several steps, then let them play a fun game called Freeze Dance. Basically, I let them dance however they like, then stop the music and make them freeze. It helps them get their energy out, and it's so entertaining to watch.

I'm in good spirits when my preschool classes end. We have the kids in rotation, trying out all the classes with a naptime in between. We've been doing this since I started, but it's a fairly new concept for the center. Meredith keeps a watchful eye on the program to make sure it's succeeding and not causing too much stress on the kids.

After a quick lunch, I visit her in her office to update her about my preschool classes.

"The three-year-olds are doing a lot better than I expected," I tell her. She smiles and writes down several notes in a notebook.

"My biggest issue is getting them to not run to the bathroom every five minutes. And when one goes, they all have to go."

She laughs and nods at this. “I’ve heard the same from the other teachers,” she says while she writes a few more notes. “Apparently potty training is a big deal at normal daycares. Maybe I should bring in a few trained daycare staff to help with that.”

She says this more to herself than to me, so I hum in agreement. Meredith juggles a million things every day. I don’t get surprised when she throws out a random thought. I know it’s not for me to grab, I just watch it as it passes by.

“Otherwise, everything is going well?” she asks, looking up at me. “You’ve been here for three months now. How are you settling in?”

The questions are harmless, but I’m rattled from my experience from the other night. I asked James not to tell anyone, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he blabbed about it to Meredith. I hear no sign of suspicion in her tone, though. She seems genuinely curious.

“It’s going much better than expected,” I admit. “I was nervous at first, but you were right about the kids. They’re so loving and kind.”

She smiles brightly again. A look of adoration crosses her face. She treats each and every child as if they’re her own. I’m aware that she’s known many of them for years. A knock sounds on the door. I look up to see Charlie standing there, waiting apprehensively.

Of all the kids, Charlie is clearly the closest to Meredith. I don’t know the full extent of their history, but I’ve gotten the sense that they’re basically family. Charlie is nearly thirteen and just started puberty. She ran out of my class crying one day because she found a pimple on her cheek. My heart goes out to her. These are the worst years of every young person’s life.

“Hi, Miss Melissa,” she says with a braces-clad smile. “Are we learning that new choreo in hip hop today?”

“We are,” I confirm. “Have you been practicing what I taught you last week?”

As an answer, she shows me the move, and I applaud enthusiastically. It's a proud moment watching her shine. I look back at Meredith, who looks like she might start crying. She does that a lot where Charlie is concerned.

"Meredith," she says, turning to my boss. "Can we talk for a sec?"

I take that as my cue to leave and get ready for my beginner ballet class. I look at my watch and see it's nearly 2:00 PM. My heart drops in my stomach. James will be here in an hour. I'll stick to my plan and just ignore him. He probably wants to forget the whole thing too.

My students file in. I lead them through stretches, trying very hard not to look at the clock. I put the time out of my mind as I teach the students the basics of ballet. It helps that Daisy projects happiness and calm to the whole class. I'm beyond grateful for her gift in this moment as it helps calm my nerves.

Too soon, though, class comes to an end. I purposely turn away from the glass wall, pretending to work through some choreography. I blast music loudly, letting my body move to the rhythm. I close my eyes as the sound washes over me. It guides my movements. When I create a move I like, I go back and run it again, cleaning it up until it's perfect. I don't realize how much time passes until the teens file in for hip hop.

My plan worked perfectly. James will be leaving the center in a few minutes while I'm busy teaching my class. Part of me regrets missing my chance to see him this week, but it's good for the moving-on process. It's better for me to quit him cold turkey and pretend that the other night never happened.

When the class ends, I confidently grab my things, grateful I've survived the day. Getting over James will get easier as time passes. I'm sure the embarrassment will pass and it won't be so mortifying to come back into work and worry if he'll bring up the things I said. I pack my workout bag and walk to the kitchen, filling my water bottle for the drive home. I breathe a sigh of relief and prepare to clock out for the day.

As I'm leaving the kitchen, though, I see Meredith's office door open. She and James step out. Smiling, she reaches up to hug him, thanking him for his time. I look at my watch and realize he's been in there for over an hour. Panic grips me as I imagine what they were talking about. I'm afraid it was about my attack. If he tells her what happened, she'll want to get the police involved. That can't happen. I back into the kitchen and wait as he walks down the hallway, stepping out the second he passes.

"Hey," I say as casually as I can muster. So much for avoiding him.

"Hey," he responds, smiling. I curse my heart for skipping a beat at the sight. This isn't helping with my plan to get over him in any way.

"This is awkward," I say slowly, looking down at his scuffed-up work boots. "I just wanted to make sure you didn't say anything to Meredith about the other night."

"About the rumors of our affair?" he asks with a laugh in his voice. "Your secret is safe with me, scout's honor."

I look up to meet his eyes and see the mirth in his eyes. I wish I could feel the same amount of joy, but tension grips me.

"Actually, I meant about the attack," I say quietly. "It would suck for that to get out. I'm so embarrassed."

He looks at me in surprise, though I can't decipher why. "I didn't tell her about it," he confirms, and I sigh in relief. "That's your business to share. Or not share, I guess."

"Right," I answer awkwardly, feeling more embarrassed for assuming his conversation with Meredith would have anything to do with me. Self-obsessed or what? Suddenly, I feel the push to smooth this over. "I feel like I owe you for everything. Would you like to go out dancing with me?"

I wait anxiously as he considers my offer.

CHAPTER TEN



The bass of the music is so loud when we enter the club. I feel it pulsating in my chest. It's not my scene, but neither is agreeing to a date with a girl like Melissa. She grabs my hand and leads me through the crowd, comfortable here. This is her scene, her show. I'm merely a participant like the rest of the patrons.

She smiles and waves at acquaintances, a regular in this place. She yells over the bass that she used to dance here on weekends to pay rent. Piece by piece, her story comes together. It occurs to me that I don't know what my conquests do for a living. I never ask. Most of the time, I don't want to know, not wanting to create any connection between us.

If I know where a woman works, I might think about her when I pass by that place. I might frequent it to see her. Then our interactions would go from a casual hookup to something more substantial. That's not in the cards for me. I don't want to give a woman the impression that it is.

Melissa is no different. She's just a bit more complicated. To start, I already knew where she worked when we met. She happens to be employed by one of my good friends' wives. That comes with a built-in excuse for why we can't be more than friends and possibly have any benefits on the side. If I know women at all, she'll get frustrated with the concept and stop talking to me after a few weeks. No matter what, this will stay casual.

We go to the bar and order drinks. She gets something frilly and girly again, while I opt for a beer. I'd go for

something stronger, but my head is already pounding. The sooner we finish this portion of the night, the better. I can't be the one to make the first move, though. She asked me here. She's in charge. If we're hooking up, it has to be her idea.

With a beer in me, I grab her hand and pull her onto the dance floor. After all, this is what she wanted to do. Never mind that I hate dancing. I'd rather do anything else but dance. But she'll be doing all the work. I only have to stand there and sway to the music. Simple as that.

Sweaty bodies press against us, but I'm focused on her. The way she moves her hips and the hypnotic way she pulls me against her is electric. She's magnetized. I'm incapable of resisting her pull. I put my hands on her hips and press myself closer against her body. She smells like cinnamon and sweat.

Her hands reach around my neck, winding into my hair. She knows what she's doing. With her eyes closed and her body moving to the music, she's in control of herself. She wants me as much as I want her, maybe more. After all, she told me the other night that she's been thinking of me.

Her face is a few inches away from mine. I duck my head, closing the gap slightly. I want her to know that I'm here, that I'm ready for whatever she's ready for. She reaches up on her tiptoes. A split second passes where she seems unsure of herself. The music changes, but I barely register it. The world around is me solely focused on her proximity. When I can't take it anymore, I capture her lips with mine.

Her body relaxes against me, allowing me to pull her closer and feel every inch of her. She's taller than most girls I've been with but short compared to me. I hold her tight so she doesn't lose her balance as her lips crash into mine. I feel the anticipation in her touches, the feeling that she's wanted this for a while. Something about the way she kisses me is much sweeter than any girl I've been with before, but I won't dwell on it. Tonight, she's here to fulfill my needs. That's all this can be.

Her tongue slips into my mouth as she winds her hands through my hair. We've given up any pretense that we're

attempting to dance. Our bodies grind together in rhythm, but it's a rhythm we've created. It doesn't match the beat. My senses become too heightened, too sharp. The music is loud. Other patrons are too close. All I want is to get out of here and be alone with her in a quieter, more intimate space.

"Let's get out of here," I say, breaking away from her lips and speaking in her ear.

"Your place or mine?" she responds, again taking charge.

She leads me back through the crowd, toward door. Finally, I'm not leaving a place alone. For good measure, I reach into my pocket and turn my phone off. Seer promised not to need me tonight, but I won't take any chances. I'm laser-focused on Melissa's small hand in mine. I follow her confident steps as she leads me into the night air, down the street, and to the car we were in two days ago.

The difference in her is stark. She isn't traumatized and scared. She's sexy and sure of herself. She isn't struggling to put words together because no words need to be said. We've crossed a threshold. We've made a decision together. I drop her hand briefly so I can walk to the passenger side of the door and get inside. The second the door is closed, though, I grab her face and pull it toward mine.

Our kiss is frantic, longing. She moves toward me, as if she's going to climb on top of me, but this isn't what I want with her. We're not going to have sex in her car, parked on the street where anyone can see us. For one, I don't need a cop busting us and taking me in. That's not a phone call I want to make with Seer.

The other thing is that, despite what I've promised myself, Melissa is different. She isn't a girl to have a cheap screw with. She's not the girl I'd meet in a dirty bathroom or in a stock room. She's not a back-of-the-alley and behind-the-dumpster sort of hookup. We didn't lock eyes across a dirty bar. We came to the club together. For her sake, this will be more special.

"Your place," I whisper, answering the question from what feels like hours ago. "I live with a bunch of guys, so definitely

your place.”

She giggles as she pulls back, quickly putting on her seatbelt and starting the ignition. She carefully pulls out of her parking spot and takes off, driving to an unfamiliar part of town. I won't question how a girl who works at a dance teacher at a youth center can afford to live in a swanky neighborhood. I won't wonder how much her rent costs, considering she has private parking and a security entrance. It's not my business how she manages to live alone. These are relationship questions, and we're definitely not in one.

The second we're inside her apartment, she launches herself at me, her hands running underneath my shirt to pull it off. She initiates contact, wasting no time at all. It's not like I haven't been with my share of confident women, but it's unexpected coming from her. I expected her to be more shy, less aggressive. I'm not complaining, I'm only catching up to who this woman is.

I reach behind her back to fiddle with the zipper holding up her too tight dress. It shows off every curve on her body. I'm tired of being teased. I want to see her fully. She reaches back to help. Soon, her dress is discarded on the floor. Her perfect, smooth skin is on display. In her strapless bra and lace panties, she's more tempting. I pick her up and throw her over my shoulder, causing her to scream and laugh.

“Put me down.” She giggles, but I stride toward a slightly ajar door where I see a half-made bed.

I push the door open and step inside. My senses are overtaken by the sheer amount of pink. She's so ridiculously girly. If I had time to think about it, I'd roll my eyes. But I gently place her on the bed and cover her body with kisses. I only care about the color of the garment on her body. Dark red. Sexy. She planned this.

I'm proven right when she moves up the bed toward her nightstand and picks up a box of condoms. She opens the box, clearly brand new. I get a glimpse of it. Extra-large, ribbed for her pleasure. Cheeky thing.

“I wasn’t sure...” She looks at me with apprehension for the first time. “I mean, I hope these are the right size.”

A laugh rips through my chest, taking me by surprise. I take the box from her hand and pull out a silver packet. Then I rip it open with my teeth. I quickly pull down my pants so she can see what I’m working with. Her eyes go wide as she takes me in. Her pupils dilate as she unconsciously licks her lips.

“Good guess,” she whispers in a daze.

I roll the condom down my shaft. Then I crawl back up her body, pinning her underneath me. I kiss her slowly, torturously considering I’ve been hard for her since the second we left the club. She wriggles underneath me, taking off her skimpy underwear. I pull back to really look at her.

Her body is slim but muscular. Her breasts are on the smaller side, but they perk up at my attention with erect nipples. Her skin is smooth and blemish free, pure somehow. I reach down to kiss the top of her left breast. Then I slowly take her nipple into my mouth. She gasps in pleasure, her body coming off the bed.

I touch, taste, and ignite every inch of her skin. I slip my fingers inside her, feeling my way to ensure we can do this. It’ll be a tight fit, but she moans loudly with each new touch. She’s begging me after a few minutes of my exploration, ready for more. I recapture her lips with mine and position myself at her entrance.

The heat radiating from her skin warms mine. I enter her slowly, carefully, watching her eyes close as I inch myself inside of her. She’s so damn tight, so warm. If I were less experienced, I’d probably come undone the second I entered her. Thankfully, my stamina hasn’t been questioned in years.

I give us both time to adjust, for our bodies to get used to this new situation. It’s been a long time since I’ve worried about how a woman feels against me, but I want her to be comfortable. I want this to be good for her. She opens her eyes and stares at me expectantly. She’s waiting for me to take charge before she does it for me. Her gaze is all I need to

thrust against her, feeling her hips move up to meet me. I'm spurned on by her cries of pleasure.

We get lost in each other, consumed by our bliss. She tenses around me, and I know she's close. I kiss a sensitive spot on her neck and she moans deeply. I bring her over the edge, chasing after her with my release. I collapse against her, intoxicated by her warm embrace. Normally, I'd pull out immediately and kiss my conquest goodbye. But I lie there for a long while as she strokes my hair, unsure if I want to leave.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hex

Charlie groans as we pull into the community center, surprising me.

“What’s wrong, bug?” I ask, turning around to look at my teenage daughter. She’s definitely gotten moodier over the last few months. It’s terrifying. “Aren’t you excited about your classes today?”

I’m met with an eyeroll. *Shudder.*

“Of course I’m excited. I just hoped we’d finish the podcast before we got here,” she answers, crossing her arms and looking out the window, a look of frustration coloring her features.

Right. The true crime podcast that I mostly tune out whenever we’re in the car. She’s completely obsessed with it. Juliana and I have talked to her about it on multiple occasions, about how our whole lives are a true crime, so we don’t need to listen to the podcast so much. Of course, that led to a huge meltdown, which none of us enjoyed. So, now we just let her listen to it whenever she wants, figuring she’s seen enough in her life that this won’t give her nightmares.

“Tell you what,” I say. “We’re early. Why don’t we finish the podcast, then I’ll walk you into class. If you’re late, I’ll blame traffic.”

She doesn’t uncross her arms or make any indication that she’s heard me, apart from a small, subtle smile. I’m sure she doesn’t mean for me to see it. But I turn the podcast back on and close my eyes for a few minutes, waiting for the music to

tell me it's over. These are the little things that keep the peace in my family.

When it's finally time to go into class, I open the door for her, and watch as she reluctantly marches toward the center. I follow a few paces behind, too afraid to get in her way. The last thing either of us needs is for me to be the reason for any embarrassment. I would rather face down the barrel of a gun than make this girl upset.

We reach her classroom and I go to kiss her on the forehead, but of course that earns me an angry hiss of, "Dad, stop!" I wonder if it's going to be like this for the next five years, or if she'll eventually mellow out. I miss the sweet girl who was always trying to make us laugh. She's been replaced with a demon who wishes we would disappear rather than embarrass her. Hopefully Meredith will have some insight, because I feel like a complete failure of a father.

Once Charlie is safely in her art class and looking more at ease, I slip away to find Meredith. To my shock and confusion, I run into Bones on my way to her office. There's a mild look of panic in his eyes, but it's quickly replaced by his usual surly indifference. He's never here if he can help it. He's said on multiple occasions that volunteering here is a waste of good drinking time.

"Bones," I say with a nod, as if it's the most normal thing in the world to see him, even though it's the strangest.

He simply nods back and looks more passive than ever. To anyone else, that would be enough to get them to move on. Most people don't like to be around Bones for too long anyway, too intimidated by his stature and general grouchiness. I know him well, though, and his silence is deafening. I've caught him with his hand in the cookie jar, but I'm not entirely sure what I've caught him doing.

"I'm just here dropping off Charlie," I say nonchalantly, hoping he might open up about what he's doing here. "She has three classes here on Wednesdays. It's a scheduling nightmare."

“Sounds awful,” he comments in a bored tone, trying to use his indifference to get me to go away. He should know by now that’s not going to work.

“Everything okay?” I ask, thinking maybe Meredith needs extra security. That would explain his presence, but not his embarrassment.

“I guess so,” he replies with a shrug. “Listen, I gotta go. Drinks this week?”

I nod in agreement, watching his back as he goes. I expect he’ll go toward the front door, but to my surprise, he takes a right toward the dance studio. Part of me wants to follow him, but the sane part of me is reminded that we’re all entitled to our secrets. Maybe he found out he has a kid he didn’t know about. Who knows? I head toward Meredith’s office to see if she can give me any insight into Charlie’s recent behavior.

An hour later, I’m walking out, shell-shocked and a little overwhelmed. I clutch about a hundred pamphlets in my hand, along with some business cards for her colleagues. My expectations were clearly too low when I went into the meeting. I thought, at most, she’d give me a talk about how bodies change at a certain age and I’d feel uncomfortable for a few minutes.

At least I have some resources and some other people to turn to about all this. I can’t imagine trying to figure this out on my own. Even with Juliana’s help, I feel completely unprepared for the shitstorm that’s brewing. We’re just at the beginning of a very complicated time in her life. In all of our lives. Even with the thousand pamphlets, I don’t think I’m even a little bit ready for what’s about to happen.

In the meantime, I head back to my car and hide the pamphlets in the glovebox. Charlie will have a full-on panic attack if she even suspects I was talking to someone about her hormones. That’s just another thing I’ll have to stumble through with Juliana’s help. How do we even broach the subject with her? The whole thing makes me feel sick to my stomach. I put on my favorite music and try to take a nap while I wait for Charlie to finish with her classes.

At some point, I hear the roar of a motorcycle and I look up to see Bones's retreating back. In all the embarrassment of my conversation with Meredith, I'd completely forgotten about our run-in. Now he's leaving and I'm more curious than ever. I can't wait to tell Pocus about it, he'll lose his shit. Bones never does anything interesting, apart from getting sent to the hospital a lot. I'm dying to know what he's gotten himself into now.

But my curiosity is once again squashed when I look at the time and realize I need to go inside to get ready for Charlie. Her last class of the afternoon is basketball, and she's always in a bad mood after. I keep telling her that she doesn't have to take it if she doesn't like it, but she keeps arguing back that I shouldn't stifle her interests. There is absolutely no winning when there's a teenager involved.

Just as I thought, Charlie is a sweaty, frustrated mess, and doesn't speak to me at all on the way home. I put on classic rock just to get her to respond somehow, but she doesn't say anything at all, just crosses her arms and stares furiously out the window. I'm grateful it's a short drive, because I can't take much more of the silence. It's enough to feel physically uncomfortable.

When we get to our apartment, she stomps into the bathroom, and I hear the sound of the lock clicking. I glance over to the kitchen where Juliana is already cooking dinner. One look at me and she pauses what she's doing to grab me a beer. She pops the top off and hands it to me as I sink down onto one of the kitchen stools.

"Rough afternoon?" she asks, though she already knows the answer.

"Rough few months," I answer with a sigh. "Were you like this when you were thirteen?"

She laughs to herself. "Oh, honey, I was much worse. My dad hid in his room for an entire six months just to stay out of my path."

She sighs wistfully and gets that faraway look she always gets when she talks about her parents. It's been years since

they died in a car accident, but sometimes it hits her fresh, like it just happened. I set down my beer and go to stand behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist and nuzzling my face into her neck.

“Any advice?” I murmur in her ear, hoping to take her mind off the pain.

“Wear a cup.” She laughs, turning to me and swatting me with a spatula. “I’m fine, amor,” she adds, reaching up to kiss me on the lips. “Help me set the table? Since it looks like Charlotte won’t be available for a while.”

We work in tandem, her getting dinner finished while I set the table. It’s been very important to us to always have family dinners since Charlie came to live with us. We knew she’d never had a traditional, loving family. Hell, neither had I. But Juliana had wonderful parents, and she works so hard to make us both understand what that feels like. It’s been amazing to uphold this tradition every night, even if sometimes Charlie comes to the table in a bad mood.

When she emerges from the bathroom freshly showered, though, it’s like she’s a new person. She goes to the kitchen and kisses Juliana on the cheek, thanking her profusely for dinner. She grabs cups out of a cabinet and starts filling them with ice, bringing them all over to the table and setting them at our respective places.

“What would you like to drink, Dad?” she asks sweetly, and I want to vomit from the whiplash. I look over at Juliana desperately, but she just smiles and shrugs.

“Tea,” I reply warily, hoping my choice of beverage won’t set off another round of rolled eyes and annoyed sighs.

We sit down for Juliana’s homecooked fajitas and Charlie is animated and sweet again. I think about what Meredith told me earlier. That Charlie is still, fundamentally, who she always was, but now she’s got hormones affecting her moods, and I just have to take advantage of the good times and be sensitive during the bad times. Given Charlie’s unique gift, she’s even more prone to mood swings and bursts of anger. But tonight,

she's a happy kid, telling us all about her dance class and how much she loves her teacher.

"I'm so glad she's working out," Juliana says. "I've been wanting you to try dance for a while. I was going to take you to my old dance studio if Meredith couldn't find someone."

"What's your favorite style?" I ask, wanting to engage in the conversation, but also not knowing the first thing about dance.

I'd even forgotten that Charlie had dance class today. She goes to the center so much and has so many classes it makes my head spin. Juliana is so much better at keeping up with her schedule than I am, but Meredith reminded me today how important it is that I show an interest in all of Charlie's hobbies. It will help strengthen our relationship.

"I really love hip-hop," she says thoughtfully through a mouthful of rice. "But I think ballet is my favorite. I feel so graceful and pretty when I do it."

"You're always beautiful, querida," Juliana says, taking Charlie's chin in her hand and squeezing gently. Charlie bats her away, but there's a hint of a hint secret smile on her lips. "I've been meaning to stop by and meet the new teacher," Juliana goes on. "I've been thinking of asking her to hang out sometime."

Charlie and I both look at her in shock. Me, because Juliana doesn't generally like making new friends, and Charlie because she's horrified that her mom would hang out with her teacher.

"Why would you do that?" I ask, putting both of our concerns into words.

"You may remember, amor, that I am still young and fun. And I love to dance," she replies with a smile, shimmying toward me.

Charlie rolls her eyes and makes a gagging sound, causing us to break out in hysterical laughter.

"Besides, I want to get to know her better," Juliana continues. "I think she'd get along great with everyone. There

might even be a certain bachelor in the group she should get to know better.”

“Please don’t set my teacher up with one of your weird biker friends,” Charlie groans, causing us to laugh harder. My brain lights up at her words, though, and there’s a thought in the back of my mind that’s trying to claw its way out. A realization I can’t quite name. But, for now, I push it aside and take Meredith’s advice. I’m just enjoying the good times.

CHAPTER TWELVE



“**A**nd plie, plie, relevé,” Melissa instructs, walking through the pristine line of students and observing their movements.

Her expression is sheer concentration, completely focused on her students’ posture. She gently corrects anyone who isn’t perfectly postured, and helps those who are struggling to get the moves just right. She doesn’t shame any of them or reprimand them for not being perfect. She simply tells them how to do it better. If I’d had teachers like her when I was in school, I probably would have graduated. Of course, if I’d had a teacher exactly like her, we probably would’ve been caught screwing around.

She catches my eye through the glass wall and a small smile tugs at her lips. But she doesn’t wave or acknowledge me otherwise, which drives me fucking crazy. She knows exactly what she’s doing to me. If we were in a different place, say a bar, I’d probably be pulling her into a dark corner and sliding my tongue against her throat. Instead, I grab my toolbox and head toward the gym.

I’ve assembled a small group of kids to help me build the set for Melissa’s dance recital in a few weeks. Meredith thought it was a great idea, giving the kids hands-on learning in a useful trade. She barely questioned why I would willingly volunteer to do this. She’s been so busy lately, she doesn’t have time to question much. That’s to my advantage, because I absolutely can’t have anyone knowing that I’m doing this. The guys would give me major shit for it.

There was already the close call with Hex yesterday. I can't even begin to imagine what he thought about me being there. Thankfully, he's kept his opinions to himself so far. I haven't heard a peep out of him since our run-in. But I can't hold him off forever. If he sees me here again, he'll have questions that I don't particularly want to answer.

Questions like, "Bones, why did you agree to build the set for the dance recital?"

When the answer is: I didn't agree so much as the whole thing was my idea. I'm a complete jackass for doing it, but I knew it would give me more time with Melissa. For the first time in my life, I actually want to spend time with a girl after we hook up. So when she mentioned her dance recital, I offered to do this, thinking I would spend hours watching her move her body in tempting ways.

What actually happened is that I'm stuck in a whole other room of the youth center with half a dozen prepubescent boys who like to use their gifts to prank one another. They're much less interested in carpentry or learning how to hold tools correctly, but I haven't lost hope in them. Yet.

"Marcus," I say, calling to a young kid holding a hammer backward. "It works better if you turn it around and hit the nail with the flat part."

He holds the hammer a good distance away, examining it as if it's a bomb that's likely to go off at any second. Then, he turns it around to face the right direction and gingerly hits it against a nail. I sigh heavily and go over to help him, sure he's in real danger of injuring himself. These kids could definitely use a few more life skills classes.

"Okay, guys," I call out to the others. "I want you to watch how I do this."

All eyes are focused on me as I position a nail into a piece of wood and start hitting it with the hammer firmly until it's all the way in. I show them how to hold the nail so they don't smash their fingers, and have them all try practice hits so they don't end up leaving the nails completely out of the wood. It's an exercise that both grows their ability and tests my patience.

Eventually, I decide we're just going to have to put the pieces together with hot glue.

"Good work," I say as kindly as I can manage after an hour.

We all stand back and assess our creation. It's ... not great. A few wooden panels hot-glued together that still need to be varnished and painted. Eventually they'll make a skyline, but I'm not quite ready to give the boys paint. I can't imagine how they'll mess it up, but they're guaranteed to find a way. I've learned that lesson very quickly.

"Same time next week, okay?" I say, grateful to be done with this draining experience. I don't have to come back here for three more days, though my feelings about that are mixed.

I hear footsteps approaching and turn hopefully toward the door, but it's just Meredith approaching and beaming at me. Ever since I told her I'd like to volunteer more, she's been a whole new person. In all my dealings with her thus far, she's been shrewd and curt, but now that I'm helping her out, she's much kinder and more pleasant to be around.

"How's the stage design class going?" she asks brightly.

I groan, which causes her to laugh and look at me knowingly.

"I get it," she says. "The preteen boys are the worst, especially when they're in a class together. It's all dick jokes and blaming each other for farting."

"Boys are disgusting," I affirm.

"And they don't really grow out of it," she says with a chuckle. Her eyes scan the plywood we've been working on. "The set looks ... like I didn't have to pay anything for it. That's always nice."

I rub the back of my neck and feel my ears warm slightly. There's a buzz in my body from my head to my toes that I can only describe as embarrassment. It's ridiculous that I would be embarrassed. After all, I'm doing this for absolutely free, and I have nothing to prove to anyone.

Except I do want this to eventually look good. Sure, it's the kids' moment to shine more than mine, but part of me wants Melissa to look at it and think about me the way I'm thinking about her. I shake off the thought and try to focus on anything else. I'm not the kind of guy to catch feelings. Whatever is going on between me and Melissa is purely sex and nothing more.

"Wow," she says as she enters the gym, joining Meredith and me. My heartbeat immediately speeds up and my palms start to sweat. What the hell is that about? "This is really ..."

"Free labor," Meredith repeats with a laugh. "We're very glad to have your help, James, seriously," she says.

It's strange to hear her call me James, but I know she's only doing it because Melissa is around. Meredith tries very hard to keep our club identities separate from our volunteer identities. But she's never called me James before, and I suddenly have this ridiculous urge to correct her. Then she'd definitely know something was up between Melissa and me and she'd blab it to Graveyard.

He and the others are already working overtime to get me to join their little "marriage club." Frankly, I have no interest in being like them. It's not on my to-do list ever. I would rather build a million shitty dance recital sets with a billion gross preteen boys than settle down with someone and be part of their stupid fraternity.

Meredith's phone rings, pulling me from my thoughts. She excuses herself and walks out of the gym, leaving Melissa and me by ourselves. It's the first time we've been alone since I took her back to her apartment and ravaged her. I'm itching to do it again now, to pull her in my arms and kiss her senseless. That would be totally inappropriate, of course. Anyone could walk in here and see.

"I really do appreciate your help," she says at the same time I say, "I'm sorry they aren't better at nailing."

She bursts out laughing, leaving me perplexed. Then I realize what I've just said and I feel my ears warm again. This is shit ridiculous, this isn't who I am. I've said much worse to

women just to make their panties drop. And even though I've seen her naked and been inside of her, something about being in this gym making innuendos is too much for me to handle.

"I'm sure you're a good teacher," she says with a wink, and I do feel slightly guilty that I'm not a better teacher. That I took the easy route instead of helping them learn.

A silence settles between us and the air feels thick with anticipation. She's looking up at me with those damn innocent eyes, and it takes everything in me not to have my way to her. I know she has a class in a few minutes, though, and a group of teenage boys is going to come in here any minute and help me with another part of the set. I could make it work, probably, but the second I make my move, Meredith will probably burst back in and bust us.

"Well, I should probably get ready for my next class," I say with a small smile. "This set won't nail itself."

"Neither will I," she whispers in my ear, making my jaw drop.

She saunters away, swinging her hips more forcefully than necessary. She wants me to look, to watch her walk away. I'm more than happy to grant her wish. She looks back at me as she exits the gym, winking as she goes, and I know I'm screwed. My phone rings, but it takes me a while to hear it because I'm too focused on the place she just vacated.

"Yeah?" I ask, not even looking to see who's calling.

"Where are you?" Seer asks curiously. "Do you think you could go do a run for me?"

I sigh into the phone, thinking of all the women I've had to walk out on in the last few months because Seer called me. My next class is much less important to me than that, but something grounds me to the spot. I don't want to disappoint those kids, or Meredith, or Melissa. I want to see this through.

"Actually, boss, I'm tied up right now," I say as two boys enter the gym and eye me warily.

"Literally?" he asks with a guffaw.

“Shove off,” I say quietly, aware of the slightly impressionable ears. “I’m at the youth center. I’m about to teach a class.”

“Really,” he says, shock coloring his tone. “And that’s not a euphemism for—” “Seer, I really have to go,” I say, cutting him off. Two more boys come in and start rifling through the power tools. They look as perplexed as Marcus did with the hammer earlier, and I can already picture one of them slicing their finger off. I turn my phone off and pocket it so I can give this new group my full attention. They seem to need it more than the preteens.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Seer

“**B**east, it’s good to see you again,” I greet the leader of the Houston Kings as he steps in the door with half a dozen of his men.

“Seer.” Beast nods solemnly. “I heard this house was nice, but I had no idea!”

He smiles as he takes in the large entryway of the house, and I think back to my time in Texas. Since we opened up relations with the Houston Kings last year, our two clubs have gotten closer and closer. A few months ago, Hex and I went out to Houston to view their facilities and meet with their leadership. Beast is the Prez of their club, though ironically, the man is built like a beast.

Their operation down in Houston is impressive, to say the least. Their club is double the size of ours, and their market is much less saturated. They aren’t competing with a dozen other gangs, nor do they get as much push back from the city. Their government has a little too much else to be worried about, so they mostly fly under the radar.

Their clubhouse is a ranch-style house that sits on at least ten acres of land. One of the founding members inherited the land from his family and decided he wanted to build something incredible on it. Thus, the Houston Kings were started.

One of their biggest enterprises is smuggling drugs in cowboy boots. I laughed out loud when I saw their operation at work. On their huge plot of land, there’s a manufacturing

factory where they legitimately employ hundreds of migrant workers to put together beautiful, handcrafted cowboy boots. They sell the boots for a decent profit, but the real money is in the drugs. It's genius. It makes me want to build our legacy into something more creative.

Beast was duly impressed when he heard about our arms industry. It doesn't have the same panache as his drug front, but it pays the bills and keeps my men well taken care of. Considering how many people in Texas carry guns, I could almost see the dollar signs in his eyes as I told him about our business. He also really liked hearing the retelling of the shootout we had with the Cuatro Locos.

"Man, those fuckers had the wrong ones." He laughed when I told him the story. "They came in guns blazing and left in body bags. How's that for karma?"

Now I walk Beast, Sin, and a few of their members through our home, showing them the setup we have here. I'm proud of our home, even if I didn't have the privilege of building it myself. Dozens of good, strong men have come through the front doors in our club's history, and we've built our legacy on the backs of their hard work and sacrifice. We aren't just our current members, but every person who ever has or ever will be a Ruthless King.

"Tell you what, I'd trade the ranch house for this one any day." Beast laughs. "You ever want to trade clubs, you just call me. I could use a view like this."

When we walk out to the bayou, he whistles lowly, eyeing a few alligators sunbathing on the other side.

"Never mind," he says, growing paler. "I don't fuck with alligators. Give me an armadillo any day, but you can keep your crazy-ass wildlife."

We all laugh as I take them back out to the front and we get on our bikes to ride over to our warehouse, the true base of our operations. The New Orleans Kings have been smuggling guns for at least as long as I've been part of the group. We've sold to a lot of big clients, but we're selective about our

customer base. We have greater restrictions than most gun stores, especially since Pocus took over.

He always said that our reputation was attached to our business, and we couldn't be held responsible for some of the greater evils in this world. If a gangbanger kills another gangbanger, that's one thing, but if a madman goes to shoot up a grocery store, it won't be with a gun he got from us.

I've maintained the same principles since I've taken over, and our reputation remains spotless. I may not be making cowboy boots, but anyone worth their salt who needs an illegal gun knows where to go. We've even gotten into assembling some models ourselves, finding that the parts are cheaper than buying the guns. Our customer base spans as far north as Canada and as far east as Florida. We're running most of the eastern seaboard.

"Not to be an ass," Beast says as he analyzes our stock. "I notice you've got a huge stockpile problem right now. Is business bad?"

I shake my head and sigh. "It's not business that's bad," I tell him. "It's the city politics. Our mayor has decided to crack down on crime in a big way. They've just taken down one of the oldest and most dangerous gangs in the city. So we're sitting on this until the situation cools off a bit."

There's a spark in his eye as he walks through the racks and racks of stock we have. "We might be here at the perfect time," Beast remarks, a bit in awe. "We want to get in the business and you have stock you can't move. We'd pay you well for it."

That would be a huge weight off my shoulders, knowing the warehouse would be empty if it were to be raided. It's one of the many things that keeps me up at night. It's taken me a while to really fill this role, to step out of Pocus's shadow. I've been terrified of being known as the Prez who gets the Ruthless Kings arrested or kicked out of New Orleans for good. I can't let that be my legacy.

"Beast, you have no idea how much that would help," I tell him earnestly. "Let's go back to the bar and discuss the

logistics. And here,” I say, handing him one of my favorite models. “This one’s on me.”

We all head back to the house, where Beast dismisses everyone but Sin and the three of us sit at the bar discussing business. For the last few months, Knix and Evanescence have been living in Houston, getting to know the group there a little better and strengthening our communication channels.

If he didn’t have a criminal background, I’d recommend Knix run for mayor. He certainly knows how to play the political game and get people to hear what they want to hear. Because of the foundation he and Evanescence have lain, our two groups have created a bond that didn’t exist before. The Houston Kings were always our brothers in arms, but not necessarily just our brothers. Our relationship was much more transactional than it is now.

Over drinks, Beast and I work out a plan for Sin and another member of their team to stay in New Orleans and help get our stock safely to Houston without putting up any red flags. Sin is said to be a world-class smuggler, so I’m excited to have the opportunity to learn from him while he’s with us.

With all the details worked out, I feel a huge burden lifted off of my shoulders. There’s something comforting about knowing that I have a bigger network than I once thought. The Houston Kings have become like an extension of us in the last few months, and I’m excited about the future of our two organizations. Then, of course, there’s the fact that Beast is going to take care of my biggest problem right now.

We shake hands and draw up a contract, giving them three months to fully get the stock out of New Orleans. I also give him my contact who brings us guns from South America. Adding another port in Houston will help maintain our working relationship while we wait out the shit storm that is Mayor Prudent.

When we finish our drinks and I show the men to their facilities for the night, I feel accomplished. This was one thing that Pocus was never able to do, and it makes me feel proud of myself. This relationship is going to be my stamp on the club,

my contribution as the Prez. However long I get to stay in power, this will be the thing that defines me, washing away the fuck-ups from the past. I text Pocus to come over, meet Beast, and have a drink. Selfishly, I want him to see me succeed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Pocus

A wave of excitement washes over me as we pull up to the youth center. It isn't my excitement, but rather Daisy's. She's bouncing around in her booster seat, buzzing with the anticipation. My gift makes it hard for me to fully appreciate hers. I feel her emotions whether she projects them or not. I know it's been hard for her to learn how to navigate her own gift over the last few months.

When Daisy is happy, which is most of the time, everyone around her is happy. When she was first born, Abigail and I just assumed that we were so in love with her that we couldn't help but be happy around her. Similarly, we assumed that when we got overwhelmed by her screaming and crying, it was just the growing pains of parenthood. It didn't occur us until we met Meredith that Daisy had a gift that made her like this.

The problem now is that she's experiencing a lot more emotions all of the time. She's too young to fully comprehend or control them, and she's definitely too young to have any control over her gift. When we're together, I can't fully appreciate how powerful Daisy's gift is because, to me, she's just experiencing the normal emotions of a little girl. Abigail, on the other hand, is constantly overwhelmed by them. She does the best she can, but when Daisy is having a tantrum, her own feelings become escalated.

Before I had Daisy, before I met Abigail, I didn't really consider what it would be like to be a father. I wasn't sure that I wanted a wife or kids or any of it. I was doing just fine on

my own, running the club and staying in trouble. Abigail hit me out of nowhere, but once we were together, it was a no-brainer that we would have kids. We loved each other so much, and we wanted to bring some good into the world.

I thought the scariest moments in my life, the hardest ones, were all behind me then. I'd fought so many battles and took down so many adversaries, it never occurred to me that having a child could be so much more terrifying. First it was how difficult Abigail's pregnancy was. There were a few times I thought I would lose her for good, and that nearly destroyed me.

Even that couldn't compare to the way my stress would skyrocket through the roof whenever Daisy would cough or get a snuffle as a baby. Some nights, I snuck into her room just to make sure she was breathing. I'd wait until I was sure Abigail was sound asleep and I would creep in, sit on the floor next to her crib and listen to her breathe for hours. It became such a habit, I started to have a hard time sleeping whenever she wasn't around. The times I had to send her and Abigail away were hell.

Then Benji came along, and I had two pieces of my heart living outside of my body. Thankfully, most of my first-time parent jitters were gone with him and I didn't worry so much about every single germ in the universe. But then it became clear that Daisy's ability to affect people's moods was more than just her charming personality. Soon, we all realized that she has the ability to literally bring us to our knees with her emotional projection.

The first time Meredith sat her down to assess her, she was in a horrible mood. Meredith had to reschedule because she couldn't stop crying. Meredith, not Daisy. Daisy was just horribly grumpy and making everyone in the vicinity feel terrible about their lives. In the last year and a half, Meredith has advised that the best thing we can do for Daisy is get her enrolled in a lot of classes to help her work out her emotions.

Thankfully, being friends with the executive director meant we could get the pick of any class we wanted, even if it was full. Daisy spends every afternoon here, taking art, dance,

team sports, and swim lessons. We were worried getting her involved with so much would lead to more meltdowns at home, but we trusted Meredith's wisdom. Sure enough, Daisy is always in a good mood when she arrives and when she goes home. This is her safe space, and she gets to interact with other kids who have the same issues.

Not that being gifted is an issue. If I could redo my life though, I think I would choose to live without mine. They made everything more complicated when I was young. I was nothing but a freak and a blight to my family. There was no love or compassion coming my way back then. If nothing else, I'm glad I can make my daughter's life fuller by showing her all the love I never experienced myself.

It doesn't hurt that Abigail is such a fantastic mom. Even when she's in the pits with Daisy's emotions, she's able to succeed in ways I could never even imagine. That woman is my salvation, what keeps our family functioning. If I didn't have her, I truly don't think I could survive.

I get Daisy out of the car and walk her inside, feeling her energy bouncing around everywhere. I smile and listen as she tells me all about her friends in her painting class and how they're helping to paint something for the dance recital. I make a mental note to ask Abigail when this supposed recital will be and how much it's going to cost us. When we signed Daisy up for dance, Abigail warned me that we'd have to buy her costumes and special shoes. Shoes that she constantly grows out of.

I sigh heavily as I walk her all the way to her class. There's a kind-faced woman standing at the door waiting for her, and a group of parents mingling around in the lobby across the hall. This is my least favorite part of Daisy's busy schedule. The parents of kids in her age group are encouraged to stay on premises just in case there are any serious behavioral issues. I don't mind staying, but I don't like the mingling part.

Abigail keeps getting on my case about making new friends, but I'm not like her. Apart from a gifted child, I have nothing in common with these people. Some are foster parents, some middle-class families, and some nannies of the parents

who are too rich to bring the kids themselves. They're all clean-cut and square. Even if I wanted new friends, these are not people I would choose to spend my time with.

So, rather than joining them, I pace the hallways, not sure what to do with myself. I'm sure Meredith would scold me if she saw me out here, but her office door was closed when I passed by. She's either not here or in a meeting, so she has no say in how I choose to spend my time. I wander down the halls, scanning the student paintings on the wall. Some of the kids are so talented, I feel like I'm at a real museum.

I meander past the gym where a mixed group of kids is playing volleyball. Daisy isn't old enough for that one yet, but it's one of her favorite sports to play. There's a door open down the hall where I can hear a group of students practicing their projection and enunciation. The dramatic voice of the acting teacher fills my ears and I turn in the other direction. She's kind enough, but she's a lot. And she's always trying to rope me into playing a character in one of her productions. That will happen when hell freezes over.

I'm walking past the glass walls of the dance class when I see something that truly shocks me. In fact, I don't believe my eyes at first. I rub them a few times and squint just to make sure that I'm seeing what I think I'm seeing. Sure enough, there's Bones standing there, smiling at the dance teacher.

That can't be right, can it? I've never actually seen Bones smile at anyone. He's a sarcastic smirker, at best. I've seen him flirtatiously grin at women across a crowded bar, but I have never, in all the years I've known him, seen him smile at someone. It makes him look like an entirely different person, a guy who would never be caught dead in a motorcycle gang.

He looks younger somehow and definitely less intimidating. This is not a man who could singlehandedly take down an entire group of thugs. This looks like a man who would help grill the meat at a neighborhood barbecue. I fucking eat up the sight. Because, whether he's willing to admit it or not, Bones is smiling like that at a woman.

After all the shit he's given us about being an eternal bachelor, he sure looks pretty cozy with the teacher. I immediately take a picture and text it to Seer, knowing he would never believe me. Then I text Abigail to remind me the teacher's name so I can really lay it on thick with him. He still hasn't seen me, so I move out of the view of the windows and wait for either of them to respond. This is so fucking rich, I can't help but laugh at the situation. Bones, smiling like he's head-over-heels. I never thought I'd see the day.

Seer: Oh, you're fucking joking me. This explains so much. We're going to give him so much shit about this.

Abigail: Her name is Melissa. Why?

I better respond to her text first, because her mind is likely already thinking of a million reasons why I would ask her that question. And she hates to be kept waiting. I press her contact picture and the small phone icon next to her name.

"Because you'll never guess who I just saw getting cozy with her," I say into the phone, a shit-eating grin on my face.

"Who?" she asks, a conspiratorial tone to her voice. She loves good gossip more than anyone else I've ever met.

"No, seriously," I say. "Try to guess. You're going to get it wrong."

"It's Bones, isn't it?" she asks, once again proving how wrong I always am. "Because you wouldn't sound so scandalized if it were anyone else."

"What if it were the mayor of New Orleans?" I quip, trying to be coy.

"Well, that would be weird, he's old enough to be her dad," she concedes. "But you wouldn't have texted me about it if it were. You saw one of your guys there, and there's only one who would genuinely shock you."

Damn, she knows me so well. That's nearly a decade of marriage for you.

"One day I'm going to tell you something you don't already know," I say with a laugh, my smile wider than

Bones's. That's the effect this woman still has on me.

"That's as likely to happen as you agreeing to be in one of those nutty plays the drama teacher puts on." She giggles. "Bring home something for dinner, okay? I don't feel like cooking."

I promise to do just that and turn my attention to my text from Seer. While I've been on the phone, he's sent half a dozen texts freaking out about the picture.

Seer: How much do you want to bet they'll be engaged in six months?

Seer: I'm putting \$50 on it, you?

Seer: Do you think they've been banging since she started working there?

Seer: No, couldn't be, he's been way too surly. It must be recent. I'll pay for the wedding myself if we can get him to admit to it.

Me: I'm sure Tori will love that use of your hard-earned savings. Maybe just cover the bachelor party.

I hear the sound of a door opening and realize the dance class is letting out. Which means the art class is probably also letting out. I run down the hall, hoping to both get to my daughter on time and avoid Bones. I don't want him to know I know just yet. It'll be a lot more fun to make him admit to it himself.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Melissa

James walks me to my car after my last class. He's been doing it ever since the night we went out. If you'd told me six months ago that this would happen, I'd say the apocalypse was more likely. Frankly, I didn't think he would ever look at me, let alone have sex with me. Although there hasn't been any more of that. Not even kissing. Honestly, it's been giving me a bit of a complex.

If he just wanted to just hook up with me, why would he still be spending so much time with me? Most guys would cut and run after getting what they want, but he's still here, being incredibly sweet and helpful. He offered to help with the sets for the show without even being asked. He's walked me to my car every day without being asked. He's always hanging out with me after class without being asked too.

It doesn't make a lot of sense to me, but I'll take what I can get. I refuse to be one of those girls who gets obsessed with a guy after sleeping with him. I also refuse to throw away what's becoming a solid friendship just because I can't stop thinking about how soft his mouth is or how perfectly he fits inside of me.

For the record, it was the best sex of my life. Mind-blowing, soul-crushing, the kind of sex I thought only existed in romance novels. He was an expert at reading my body, though I've tried not to linger too much on where he got all of his experience. It isn't my business, apart from knowing that he's clean and I'm not going to catch anything from him. This

isn't a relationship. We're just weirdly close friends who happened to have sex one time.

Oh, who am I kidding? I'd do it again in the supply closet if he made a move. But he hasn't. Which, of course, is making me feel completely self-conscious and on edge. Was it not as good for him as it was for me? I find that hard to believe, because if it wasn't good, he wouldn't still be hanging out with me, right? So why hasn't he made his move? He's truly one of the most baffling men I've ever met.

It keeps me awake more than one night, and I find myself working on more and more choreography during the day, for a release of nervous energy. I really like him, more than I imagined I would. Sure, I thought he was attractive before, but getting to know him and spending time with him has been so eye-opening. He isn't remotely who I imagined he would be. I thought he would be this cold, calculating lothario who would hit it and quit it. Lately, he's been making me wish he'd hit it a little more.

I'm considering all of this after class one afternoon when Charlie's mom, Juliana, interrupts my thought pattern.

"My daughter really adores you," she tells me when she comes to pick Charlie up. Charlie's run off to Meredith's office, or I'm sure she'd be mortified to hear this. "I really feel like your class has been giving her more confidence. I catch her practicing all the time."

My heart swells at her words. That's one of my favorite things about teaching dance to young girls. They get to utilize their bodies and learn to express their frustrations in a creative way. Knowing that Charlie is going home and working on her moves is exactly the reason I show up and do this every day.

"She's such a special girl," I tell Juliana honestly. "She's always such a help in class, and I can tell already that she has strong leadership skills. That girl is probably going to run the world one day, and I can't wait to see it."

Juliana throws her head back and lets out a long, happy laugh. The sound reverberates around the studio and lifts my

spirits tremendously. Her laugh is so vibrant and full of life, I can't help but laugh with her.

“Me either,” she says. “I wish I could take any credit for it, but she came to us with that same strong will and natural ability. We just do the best we can to make sure we're giving her a safe and nurturing environment to become whoever she wants to be.”

“You're doing a great job,” I tell her earnestly.

“Thank you, that means so much.” She smiles warmly, her eyes getting slightly glassy. “Anyway, as much as I love talking about Charlie, I actually wanted to talk about you. This might sound weird, but I was wondering if you ever go out to the club. My husband only ever goes to humor me, and I would love to hang out for once with someone who actually enjoys being there.”

Her question does take me by surprise, but I'm also deeply flattered that she would consider doing something social with me. For the first time, I realize that she and I aren't far apart in age, and I'm always down to make more friends.

I try not to read more into the situation than that. Like the fact that I know that James and her husband are close friends. I'm sure this isn't something he put her up to, but there's this eternal hope in the back of my mind that wonders if maybe he's mentioned me. It's ridiculous, probably completely false, and I say yes because I truly do want to hang out with her, not because it may have deeper implications. And it's been forever since I've had a good girls' night.

We agree to go out on Saturday night after I finish my classes. When I meet her at the club, she's nearly unrecognizable. Again, I'm struck by how young she is. I knew Charlie was adopted, but I just assumed her parents were in their mid-to-late thirties. Juliana always comes to the center dressed professionally and wearing very little makeup. Everything about her screams “mom.” But tonight, she's dressed in a tight black dress and her makeup is much heavier than I've ever seen her wear.

“Can I just say, you look hot,” I gush, giving her a quick hug.

“Aww, thank you!” she beams, looking more like the person I’ve gotten acquainted with over the last few months. “I so rarely get a chance to get all dolled up anymore. All my closest friends are moms and we’re usually too exhausted to put in this much effort. Sometimes I forget I’m only twenty-nine.”

“I totally get that,” I tell her as we get in line for entry into the club. “The second I turned twenty-seven, I felt like the best years of my life were behind me. It’s fun to remember I’m still young and can look hot as hell when I want to.”

“Yes ma’am!” She giggles. “God, it’s nice to just be a girl at a club tonight. I love Charlie with my whole heart, but it gets hard sometimes to be only known as ‘Charlie’s mom’ by people. I have a whole identity apart from being a wife and a mother. I’m still a person, you know?”

I do know, though I can’t directly relate. I’d love to have what she has, a husband to come home to at the end of the day and a daughter to raise and love on. I know it’s going to happen for me someday, but it gets so hard to be patient. So many times I’ve questioned if New Orleans is even where I want to stay and meet someone. Being here brings up a lot of baggage about myself that makes me feel like I’ll never find love.

“Well, you look amazing,” I repeat. “I have a feeling we’re not paying for drinks tonight.”

We laugh and chat some more as we wait for the bouncer to let us in. She tells me all about meeting her husband and how unexpected it was. She clearly loves him a lot and says that he saved her in so many ways. She tells me all about her family in Brazil and how her family travels there in the summer when Charlie’s out of school. Before they adopted her, they would spend months at a time there, always wondering if they’d come back.

“It’s hard because I don’t have family here,” she tells me. “Besides Hex, of course,” she amends. “And in my culture, it’s

unusual to raise a kid without any help. Of course I didn't give birth to Charlie, and we've only had her a few years, but it would be nice to know that she has a support system and cousins she can play with. I want her to really feel like she's part of the family, you know?"

"I love that," I tell her as we get closer to the front of the line. "I'm an only child and I just have my parents here as well. We're not as close as we used to be, so it's hard to feel like I have a community, you know? I would love to have more family around, to know that there are people who are obligated to spend time with me."

She laughs heartily and throws her arm around my shoulder.

"Well, I may not be obligated to spend time with you, but you're always welcome to hang out with us whenever you like," she says kindly.

We finally make it to the door and show the bouncer our IDs. We immediately go to the bar to get drinks, and just as I suspected, someone immediately offers to buy. We give each other a knowing glance and accept the drinks. I flirt with him a little, just to stroke his ego and thank him for the gesture. Juliana watches with a smirk, slowly sipping her drink.

Then, we hit the dance floor, and I see that she's a pro. She works the floor like it's her only job in life. We lose ourselves in the music, helping each other ward off any unwanted attention from overbearing men. She shows one man a picture of her husband and that's enough to send him away. I ache to show someone a picture of James and tell him that I'm taken. It's become more clear to me that Juliana hasn't associated me with him at all. She hasn't brought him up once.

While I wish she had, I'm not going to be the one to broach the topic. We're out to have fun and forget about our personal problems. I'm not going to just admit that I've got it bad for one of her husband's close friends. But we talk about everything else in between trips to other clubs. When one place starts to feel stale, we just walk down the street to find somewhere else that fits the vibe.

It's nice to get to know her. She's not what I expected, especially for a mom, and I realize I need to start checking my assumptions. This is exactly what she wants, to be seen as an individual and not as Charlie's mom or Hex's wife. When no one offers to buy us drinks at the next place, I get hers myself. I want her to enjoy what's probably a rare night out.

A man approaches me and asks me what I'm drinking. He's not even a little bit my type, and I'm over the random creep part of the night. I'm having too much fun with Juliana and I just want to focus on that.

"Let me pay for your drink," he says greasily, almost insisting, rather than offering.

"It's okay," I tell him. "It's for my friend, and she's very happily married."

"Aww, come on," he pouts, looking like a petulant child. "Don't be like that, sweetheart, I'll be your friend, too."

I roll my eyes and walk away, handing Juliana her drink and trying not to think about it. But he's back in my space in a matter of minutes, trying to grind on me during a fast song. I shake him off and grab Juliana's hand, pushing us through the crowd to get away from him. She eyes him with a look that would wither any man, but he doesn't seem to be remotely fazed.

We lose ourselves again in the beat, and I try to brush the whole experience off as another creepy club guy. But there's something about him that isn't sitting right with me, and my body is on high alert. I tell Juliana I need to go use the bathroom and she comes with me, fully cementing our new bond of friendship.

The second I leave my stall, though, there he is, standing by the sink and leering at me.

"Dude, what the fuck?" I scream. "Get out of here!"

He tries to make a grab for me, but my self-defense instincts kick in this time, and I knee him in the groin. He goes down quickly, groaning in pain. Juliana hears the commotion and runs out of her stall, looking between us in mild horror.

“Let’s go,” she says urgently, grabbing me by the shoulder and leading me out of the bathroom.

I’m in a bit of a haze, unable to process what just happened. No man has ever followed me into a bathroom at a club before. It’s terrifying. Juliana takes charge of the situation, finding a bouncer and telling him where to find the man. Then she drags me out of there and walks me toward her car a few blocks away.

“I’m driving you home,” she tells me, not leaving any room for debate. “That should not have happened. What a disgusting creep! Are you okay?”

I nod, unable to speak. I think I’m okay. I’m trying very hard to focus on my breathing and not freak out. I somehow manage to give her my address and focus on my breathing as she drives me to my apartment. She goes on and on about how men feel they’re entitled to women’s bodies, and how that’s the one thing she doesn’t like about clubs. I make agreeable sounds, only half-listening.

When we finally pull up to my building, I thank her for the night, despite how badly it ended.

“And, this is going to sound really weird, but can you please not tell anyone that happened?” I ask. Because I know if she tells her husband, he might mention it to James. And he’s the last person I want to know about this.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



“Hey, James,” Melissa calls, pulling my attention away from the set piece.

In the last few days, my little gang of boys has made good headway on the backdrops, and the art classes have chipped in, adding their own little touches. I find that I’m a little disappointed at how close we are to being completely done. I’ll still do some mentoring at the center, but I’ll have less of an excuse to just stop by. Then, I’ll either have to admit that I have feelings for Melissa, which is absolutely not going to happen, or I’ll have to stop seeing her so much. That last option doesn’t sound any better.

I look up to see her watching me, a bemused look in her eye. Hell, I’ll admit it, I’m proud of the set. We’ve worked hard on it over the last two weeks, and I’ve never worked on anything like this before. It’s actually been fun to try something new. I didn’t even know I was capable of creating something this beautiful.

“Hey,” I call back to her, feeling nervous suddenly.

I can’t place the feeling and decide not to try. When it comes to Melissa, everything I’m used to has been turned on its head. If I take the time to psychoanalyze it, I’ll just talk myself into running away. I don’t really want that either.

“I’m showing the boys how to do lifts today, and I was wondering if you’d be able to help,” she tells me confidently.

I know there are other men here who could probably help, but she didn’t ask any of them. She asked me. And damn if my

hands aren't itching to touch her again, even if it's for totally professional reasons. I nod and follow her through the halls to the dance room.

The kids file in, some of the boys are those I've worked with on the set. They give me high-fives and ask me if I'm a dance teacher too. I laugh at the absurdity of it. I dance like a drunk chicken, but I don't tell them that.

Instead, I follow Melissa's lead as she tells the kids about the proper way to do lifts. My palms are sweaty and I wish we'd had time to practice this before I demonstrated it to the class. Melissa asks me to stand behind her, a prop in her class. She grabs my hands and puts them on her hips, and I feel an electric spark pass through me. This isn't the time or the place, so I shove it aside and try to focus on what she's saying.

She has the kids pair up, and tells them to follow our lead. She gives the boys a very stern warning about where they put their hands, and I can't help but laugh. I've put my hands all over her body, and I've been dying to try again, to see if the first time was just a fluke. But for now, I focus on setting a good example for the boys, showing them that I'm also sternly watching where they put their hands.

She comes back to stand in front of me, and she positions my hands again. She whispers back to me quick instructions about how to support her, and I know that there's nothing I'll intentionally do to let her fall. She's light as a feather, but that's not what makes it easy for me to agree.

"Now," she says, her instructor voice on full display. "You're going to watch Mr. Marrow and I do this. You're just going to watch, okay?"

The kids all nod back in agreement.

"Then, I'm going to walk around and make sure you're all doing it correctly," she goes on. "Otherwise, we're keeping our hands to ourselves, right?"

"Yes, Ms. Melissa," the kids say in unison, perfectly trained and obedient.

It's honestly amazing. I can't get the boys to stop making fart jokes, but she has them standing at attention, focused on her and unwilling to do a single thing she doesn't explicitly instruct them. She has such a way of commanding the room, of getting people to listen to her and respect her. She's a natural at this.

She grips my forearms and counts to three, her body springing into the air as if gravity didn't exist. Except, of course, that I'm the one keeping her up. I hold her there for several seconds, and wait for her cue to put her back down. When she gives it, I gently place her back on the floor, where she lands gracefully and does a quick bow. The kids all clap, and anxiously await their turns to try the same thing.

They're all a little clunky at first, a little stiff. It's clear some of the girls don't trust their partners nearly as much as Melissa trusted me, but the boys really do try to be on their best behavior and keep the young ladies from injury.

I stay and watch, ready to step in if Melissa needs me, and helping to keep the boys focused on the task at hand. This is definitely not the situation for a poorly given fart joke, and I know from being around Charlie how fragile young girls can be at this age. All too soon, though, the class comes to an end and I no longer have a reason to stay.

When Juliana walks into the room with Charlie, though, I kind of wish I had left earlier. She stops short at the door when she sees me, shock on her face. She looks between Melissa and me and raises one sharp eyebrow. Charlie, oblivious to any of it, goes to sit on the floor and change her shoes, and I give her a fist-bump, trying to escape Juliana's questioning stare.

Fuck my life. She's going to text Hex about this the second she leaves the room, I just know it. I tell Melissa I'm going to go and she thanks me profusely for all of my help, gaining me another sharp look from Juliana. This is bad, this is really, really bad.

Seer's already been dropping hints about me spending a lot of time here. When I've gotten the chance to see him between

my volunteering and his work with the Houston Kings, he eyes me with a knowing glint in his eye. He hasn't said anything directly about it, but I can tell that he knows I have a reason for all the time I'm spending here.

This is going to be the nail in my coffin, the thing that makes them all start questioning my intentions. Next thing I know, they're going to be planning a bachelor party and badgering me about setting a date. No, that absolutely can't happen. That's not what this is, and I'm not ever going to join their stupid marriage club. I quickly leave the room, intent on never returning.

I've let this go too far. Hell, seeing Melissa after I slept with her was taking it too far. I should have done what I usually do. Completely ghosted her and moved on to the next. I haven't even been to a bar since I met her, instead opting to drink at the clubhouse. It's been nearly two weeks since we slept together and I haven't even so much as looked at another woman. This isn't who I am, and I'm not about to change my entire personality for a woman... Right? No. This has gone far enough.

Resolute, I decide to tell Meredith that once the set is finished, I really need to turn my attention back on club-related business. I'm going to quit and get Seer to make someone else pick up Meredith's payroll forms at the end of every week. I'm going to go drink this woman out of my system and then find another woman to replace her with.

I nearly run to Meredith's office, ready to be free of the whole thing. My friends won't give me shit anymore. There won't be anything for them to give me shit about. My heart is racing as I knock on Meredith's door, hoping she's inside. It's time to rip the Band-Aid off and get this over with. I hear her call, "Come in" and I go inside, the words positioned on the tip of my tongue.

"Oh, Bones," she says happily, no hint of any sarcasm or relationship-related glee. "I'm glad you stopped by, I wanted to say thank you."

“Thank you for what?” I ask stonily, ready to get set up for a punchline.

“I’ve been getting rave reviews from parents about you!” she answers, beaming. “I have to admit, I was a little skeptical about you doing mentorship classes, but they really love you. Micah’s dad told me he’s been helping to build a treehouse since you showed him how to use a hammer.”

My cheeks flush slightly, and I realize that my work here is about so much more than just some girl. I can’t give up on these kids just because I’m embarrassed about what my friends might say. Maybe I can find a way to keep my distance from Melissa and still help out.

“And Melissa is so grateful for all of your help with the sets,” she goes on. “She’s been really impressed with what you’ve done. Frankly, so have I.”

There isn’t a hint of sarcasm or innuendo in her voice. She’s genuinely thanking me for my help, either unaware about my friendship with Melissa or genuinely uninterested. I always knew she was my favorite of all the wives. She doesn’t meddle as much.

“Thanks,” I tell her, the fight knocked out of me. I know I’m not going to quit, not after all that. “I just wanted to thank you for taking a chance on me,” I lie. “It means a lot that you’ve trusted me to help.”

She bats me away and shrugs. “I know people would think it’s weird that you guys are so involved in the center. No offense, you aren’t exactly the pillars of society,” she says quickly, to which I shrug myself. “But I think it’s good for you. For all of you. You’re doing more good for these kids than you can possibly imagine.”

I nod and turn to go, feeling slightly stupid for wanting to give up this opportunity out of embarrassment. Melissa and I are just friends, right? I’m allowed to have female friends without them becoming something more serious. I can help out the dance teacher in a completely platonic way.

“Are you going by the dance room by chance?” she asks as I turn to go. “Melissa has a package, and I was just about to head out. It’s probably something for the recital, so you may need it anyway.”

“I’m the world’s best mailman,” I deadpan.

I grab the package from her and go back to the dance room, waiting for Melissa to finish up her last class for the night. I already know I’m going to walk her to her car tonight, just like I have every night. And I know I’ll probably want to kiss her, but I’ll fight the urge because we’re just friends. It’s good for me to have female friends. It’s helping me mature and shit. It doesn’t mean we have to have sex again. We’re definitely not going to end up married.

Juliana comes back to pick up Charlie, smirking at me once again, but this time I ignore her. Why should I care what she thinks? She used to be a ghost.

When all the kids are picked up, I hand Melissa her package and wait for her to open it, thinking it probably is something I’ll need for the set. But the second she has the box open, she screams bloody murder and drops it. I look at her curiously and pick it up off the floor, wondering what could have scared her so badly.

Inside the box is an ugly voodoo doll with a knife stabbed through it’s heart. And her name is stitched into its chest.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Melissa

It takes a lot for me not to cry when I see the doll. My whole body is trembling and I feel the hot tears forming in the corners of my eyes. But there's still a part of me worried about self-preservation and not letting James see me cry. He examines the doll closely, curiously, as if it isn't the vilest thing to ever exist.

I don't mess around with voodoo. When I was a kid, I was told that if I didn't believe in it, it couldn't hurt me, but it's always terrified me. I've seen too many strange things growing up in New Orleans to not believe that there can be some truth to it all. And now someone's used my worst fear against me.

"It's okay," James says softly, finally looking up at me and realizing I'm not okay.

I must look awful, because there's a concern in his eye that I haven't seen since that first night. The night that I was attacked. And now this. I feel sick to my stomach, and I'm worried I'm going to throw up on him. That would absolutely be the least flattering thing I've ever done. He'd never look at me the same way again.

Since I can't bear the thought, I grab the doll from him and put it back into the box, closing it up tight. I never want to see it again, but I know the image is going to be etched onto my mind for a long time. My stomach rolls again and I walk out of the room, leaving him to turn out the lights. I walk quickly through the halls until I reach the bathroom. I immediately

stuff the package into the trash can, burying it down under the discarded paper towels. Then I run to a stall and puke.

When I'm finally able to stand, I feel shaky and weak. Why would anyone send me that? I try to be a good person. I mind my business and color inside the lines. I teach dance classes to a lot of underprivileged kids and I don't sleep around. I've never stolen anyone's boyfriend or cheated on my taxes. But, of course, I know why someone would send that. I know why that man attacked me.

I splash water on my face and try to take deep, calming breaths. When someone knocks on the bathroom door, though, I nearly jump out of my skin. I walk over to it and wrench it open to find James standing there holding my workout bag.

"Let's get you home," he says reaching out his hand and grabbing mine.

His hand envelops mine completely and he's so warm, so soft. He doesn't look like he'd be a man with soft hands, but they aren't overly calloused or blistered like other guys I've been with. They're slightly smooth, just right, his fingers long and gentle. I know well what those fingers are capable of, though I don't have the emotional capacity to think about that just now. I can only focus on taking deep breaths and not throwing up again.

For the second time, James grabs my car keys and puts me in the passenger seat. He doesn't need to be reminded where my apartment is, and I vaguely wonder if he's just good with directions or if our night together meant as much to him as it did to me. Even if he's barely looked me in the eye since, and definitely hasn't touched me the way I would like. A part of me still foolishly hopes that he enjoyed being with me.

Even when I gave him the perfect opportunity to make a move—learning how to lift me and holding me tightly around the waist—he was perfectly respectful and professional. It made me want to scream. That wasn't the purpose of the lesson. I wanted to see what he'd do. Of course, he is driving me back to my apartment now, so it wasn't a total waste. I just

wish we were going back to explore each other's bodies and not because I can barely function.

I walk him into my apartment and immediately analyze everything that's wrong with it. But that's not why he's been avoiding me. It's not a slightly messy living room or dishes in the sink that's been keeping him away. The simple fact of the matter is he doesn't want me. And I have to be okay with that. He's here now, supporting me as a friend, and that's going to have to be enough.

"Can I get you something?" he asks. "Water? Vodka?"

"In the freezer," I tell him, indicating to the latter. "And a couple shot glasses. They're in the cabinet above the microwave."

I sit down on the couch while I hear him rifle through my things. If I were in a better mental state, I'd do it all myself. My mother trained me to be an excellent host and to never make people lift a finger when they're guests in your home. But I suppose James isn't a guest anymore. The first time, maybe, but he's been here before.

His large frame does look even bigger in my tiny place. His presence takes up every extra square foot of space, and I have the ridiculous notion that he could wear my apartment like a glove. I get the image of Alice in Wonderland wearing a house as a dress and it makes me laugh. Then I think of him doing the same and I laugh harder. He must think I'm totally insane when he walks back into the living room with the vodka and glasses.

Rather than saying a word, he just sits down next to me and pours us shots of straight vodka, no chaser. This is exactly what I need right now, something quick and efficient to numb all of these things I'm feeling. It's the fear and anticipation and hope that maybe he'll see me as something other than a coworker, something more than a friend.

"Have you pissed off any parents lately?" he asks, only half-jokingly.

I grab the bottle from him and pour another full shot, gulping it down in one breath. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and shake my head firmly.

“My dad is ...” no, I don’t want to have this conversation. “He’s someone who pisses off a lot of people,” I finish. That was a close one.

“So you think someone sent this to you to mess with him?”

I nod slowly. “Mess with him, mess with me, it’s truly all the same thing. The only difference is they know I won’t retaliate. I’m not even going to tell him. That’s the ridiculous part about it. He’s never going to avenge what he doesn’t know about.”

“Is that why you don’t tell him?” he asks carefully. “Because you think he’s going to make someone pay for trying to hurt you?”

“No, I think he’d tell me that I need to be more careful and it’s my fault for choosing to work at a youth center. He thinks I work with like ... hardened criminals or something.”

He laughs sharply, the sound settling into my senses and soothing my worries. If he laughed all day long, I’d never be afraid of anything. The sound of his laughter would get rid of all the monsters hiding in my closet.

“That Marcus really is terrifying,” he jokes. “I once watched him use a saw upside down. Like a sociopath.”

I giggle, feeling the alcohol warm my body and work its way into my bloodstream. I didn’t expect to feel so easy around him. Though I wish some things were a little easier. Like crossing that physical boundary again. I’m dying for him to close the space between us and kiss me like I’m a heroine in one of my mom’s guilty beach reads. It’s obvious he doesn’t want that. Even now, with me in a vulnerable position and getting drunker by the minute, he’s keeping several inches of space between us.

I decide then and there that I’m not going to waste any more time having feelings for someone who doesn’t have feelings for me. If he just wants to be friends, then we will just

be friends, and that will be enough. I do like having him around, so I'll take him however I can get him.

He grabs the remote off the coffee table and flicks on the TV. The sound fills the space and overwhelms my senses. I realize belatedly that we've just been sitting in silence and my ears are ringing from the quiet. The news is on, of course. It's always on. My dad would disown me if I didn't watch the morning and nightly news. Sometimes he'll ask me questions about the stories just to make sure I'm really watching.

An anchor signs off and commercials start. There's one for a hair loss treatment, then immediately one for erectile dysfunction. Apparently, men in my father's age bracket are the target demographic for this news program. James shifts uncomfortably and I notice there's a slight pink tinge on his ears.

Then the worst commercial of all starts. There, in life size, is Davis Thompson smiling his politician smile and making promises about what he'll do to help protect New Orleans if he's voted mayor. I grab the remote and change the channel, already tired of his face. James looks at me in surprise, but I just shrug.

"I'm not a huge fan of politics," I tell him. "I hate this time of year, when every other commercial is some politician trying to lie to me about what they believe in or bashing their opponent. It's exhausting."

He just hums and focuses on whatever 90s sitcom is on. I don't bother looking for anything else as we start to lean into each other and focus on the canned laugh tracks. The vodka is starting to go to my head and I feel sleepy. It would be easy to just close the gap between us and lay my head on his shoulder. He'd probably put his arm around me without even really thinking about it. That would be totally within the realm of friendship, right?

There's a sharp rap on my front door and I snap back to my senses, my heart racing. I didn't order anything and it's nearly 10 p.m. There's no way my elderly neighbor across the hall is stopping in for a social visit. I look over at James, my eyes

wide, and he takes my cue. He stands up and walks to the door.

I cower in my seat, too afraid to see who it might be. I'm being silly, I know that, but I still can't get that voodoo doll out of my mind. With my luck lately, it's probably an axe murderer standing outside with a knife. I hear James mutter something quietly but firmly, then he slams the door in the person's face. The lock clicks into place and he lingers there for a moment too long. My senses are back on high alert.

"Who was it?" I ask as he sits back down next to me, a little closer this time.

"Pizza delivery to the wrong apartment," he mutters, yawning. "It was probably nothing, I'm just a little on edge on your behalf."

My heart melts at his words. He cares about me, that's obvious enough. But does he care about me as a friend, or someone he wants to sleep with again? My head feels heavy and the question is more than I can think about.

"Could you stay tonight?" The words leave my mouth without my permission. My heart hammers in my chest and hours seem to stretch by while I'm waiting for him to answer.

"Of course I can," he answers with a nonchalant shrug, then puts his arm around me and pulls me against him. I close my eyes and relax into his embrace.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



“Haven’t seen you in a few days,” Buffy says with a smile as he pours me my usual: whiskey sour on the rocks.

“I’ve been busy,” I tell him, trying to convey in my expression that I’d prefer not to talk about it.

Not that I wouldn’t mind bragging about the gorgeous woman whose bed I’ve been sleeping in for past three nights. Strictly sleeping. Nothing else. Well, light cuddling, but that hardly counts for anything. She was so shaken up after receiving that voodoo doll. Then there was the shady-looking delivery guy insisting that he had a delivery for her apartment.

He was a greasy man, someone who looked like he ate all of the pizzas he delivered. There was a glint in his eye I didn’t like, and I was glad I was there, that I’d answered the door. Whatever is happening between Melissa and me, I’m not okay with her being harassed. It’s become a pattern in her life since we’ve met, and I know that no one is going to mess with her when I’m around.

It’s hard to believe that a few minutes before she got that voodoo doll, I was planning on ghosting her. Now I’m basically living with her. *No, Bones, don’t go there.* Because that would be too much like being in a relationship with her. I take a long sip of my whiskey sour and let the alcohol warm me. Melissa isn’t my problem and I’m not her bodyguard. But I’m allowed to be a concerned friend, and that’s all this is. I’m just a concerned friend.

“You’ve been getting busy?” Gator asks, overhearing our conversation. “Because I’ve heard—”

I stand up and get in his face, towering over him. “What is it you’ve heard?” I growl in his face.

“Don’t get your panties in a wad.” He chuckles, poking me in the chest. “We all knew you’d cave eventually.”

“I haven’t caved,” I protest, stepping away from him and sitting back down on the barstool. “Don’t be an idiot, Gator.”

“Are you sure?” asks Hemlock, smirking at me. “Because the way I see it, you’ve been spending an awful lot of time at the youth center lately. Seer’s been calling me nonstop to pick up extra shifts.”

“You’re welcome for the work,” I say, flipping him off. “There’s nothing weird about a little volunteering. You’d know that if you got your head out my ass.”

“I’m more curious about whose ass you have your head in,” he quips back, and it takes all of my willpower not to punch him in the face.

“Watch it,” Buffy tells him seriously. “Or I’m cutting you off.”

“That’s cool.” Hemlock laughs. “I’m sloshed anyway.”

“I’m cutting you off for the month,” Buffy says with a stern expression. “Leave Bones alone. He’s entitled to his secrets.”

“We’re well aware, mon frere.” Gator smirks. “Bones is the most secretive person I’ve ever met. I don’t know what the hell he does when he’s not here, and it keeps me up at night.”

“The thought of you marrying an alligator keeps me up at night,” I push. “Personally, I don’t want to be invited to that wedding.”

“Damn, if I’d known that, I could’ve saved on postage.” He smiles, taking in my ribs good-naturedly.

Normally, I can shrug them off just as easily. This is the nature of a brotherhood like ours. We mess with each other on a regular basis because that's what brothers do. There are pranks and jabs and a shit-ton of teasing. Ninety-nine percent of the time, I'm instigating it. When it comes to Melissa, though, I'm so damn sensitive. I can't put a finger on what it is, but I know I don't want to share her with anyone else. Not even in jest.

"What's your flower girl going to be?" Hemlock asks, picking up on the new thread of conversation. "A bullfrog?"

"No," Gator says in a very serious tone. "The bullfrog is going to be my ring bearer. This is a classy affair."

They break out into hoots of laughter, but I'm not in the mood to join them. I'm not in the mood for much, to be honest. Maybe it was a mistake coming home. Maybe I should have gone to some random bar where I could've been anonymous and not get asked questions about my sex life. My currently nonexistent sex life—not that they're ever going to know that.

Frankly, my mind is too preoccupied with thoughts of Melissa to care what topic the conversation shifts to next. While I could be thinking about how well her body fits against mine when we're sleeping, I'm more concerned with how safe she is right now. I came home because I know she's working, and the youth center is fairly safe. Besides the fact that she's now been harassed there twice.

Shit, what was I thinking? Even with all the security measures that were instituted after the vandalism last year, she's not safe. What if it is a parent harassing her? Despite what she said the other night, I'm not totally convinced that there isn't some deranged stalker parent. We watched a few episodes of a dance studio reality show, and it was truly eye-opening about what some parents can be like.

Then there's the fact that she's gorgeous. Any dad at the center, married or not, could easily become obsessed with her. They all have their own access codes, they can get in during business hours. I set my drink down and get up, ignoring Gator

and Hemlock as they continue to prattle on about some seriously stupid shit. Now they're talking about what they would be reincarnated as if they could come back as drugs. I need smarter friends.

I'm just about to leave when I see Seer walk through the front door. He looks at me in surprise, the same way Juliana looked at me when she saw me in Melissa's class. But he shouldn't be surprised to see me, I live here.

"Who are you again?" he asks sarcastically, motioning for me to follow him.

"Ha ha," I say dryly. "A man can't take a few days off."

"Of course a man can." He smirks. "But you haven't taken a vacation in ten years. I'm not used to you being gone."

"I'm sorry, Seer," I tell him honestly. "I don't mean to shirk my responsibilities here, there's just some things going on."

"Oh, I know," he says as we enter his office. When he turns to face me, his smile could light up Times Square. I want to sink into the carpet because I know he knows. He's looking way too pleased with himself.

"What do you know, Prez?" I ask, challenging him.

"I know that you've been making moony eyes at the dance teacher," he says, making a kissy face. If he weren't my boss, I'd deck him in the face.

"It's not like that," I say, despite the fact that he's not far off. "She's a friend and she's in trouble."

His expression changes and he sits down, motioning for me to do the same.

"What kind of trouble?" he asks curiously. "What do you need?"

Seer, at heart, is a huge pushover. Not that I'm taking advantage of him in any way, but I know he can't resist a good damsel in distress. He eats that shit up. We may technically be considered a criminal organization, but Seer sees himself as a fairytale prince. Since he has his princess, he's very focused

on keeping the peace throughout the land and showing how heroic he is.

As a humble prince, he doesn't ask for credit. Half the time, he doesn't want anyone to know what he did. He just wants to serve and make sure that deserving people have what they need to succeed in life and bad people see justice served. Knowing that, I'm not worried about him missing me if I need to spend more time with Melissa. He'll think I'm doing it for a noble cause and sign off immediately.

So, I tell him about how I met her. I recount the attack on the night I covered his class for him, and how I took care of her. I tell him about the voodoo doll and how scared she was. I even tell him about the pizza delivery guy, just in case that might be pertinent information. It could still be nothing, but I'm not taking the chance. I definitely do not tell him about the sex. Or the cuddling. It's not his business anyway.

"Who is this girl?" he asks seriously. "Why would someone have a vendetta against her?"

I shrug, because I truly don't have an answer for that.

"She says her dad is some business guy and has a lot of enemies," I say, though I'm not entirely convinced on that front.

"Is her dad still alive?" he asks, a paleness coming over his face.

"She didn't say, but she talks about him like he is." I fiddle with the zipper on my leather jacket, unsure about his line of questioning.

"Thank fucking Christ, I thought we were dealing with the daughter of Anderson Grey or some shit." He laughs with relief. "I don't think I have it in me to go another round with that prick, even if he is dead."

I laugh too, finding the idea ridiculous. That thought hadn't even crossed my mind, but now that it has, it does make me wonder. She's so vague about her life. Apart from telling me her dad's pissed people off, she doesn't talk about him singularly very much. It's always "my parents" this, and "my

mom” that. I have no insight into their relationship whatsoever.

No, the thought is too ridiculous. I’m sure she’s talked about him in the present tense. Great, now Seer’s got my thoughts going down a rabbit hole and questioning the girl that I ... have a vested interest in.

“In any case,” I tell him. “I feel like it’s my job to protect her. If something were to happen to her, I’d be responsible.”

“Because you care about her,” he states, as if this is the gospel truth.

“No!” I object. “I mean ... no. My interest is purely selfish. I was there the night she was attacked, and I was there when she received that doll. What if she starts to think I had something to do with it?”

“Aw, come on, mon ami,” he groans. “You wouldn’t be putting in all this effort if you weren’t attracted to her.”

“There are dozens of HR laws that state you can’t talk to me like that,” I tell him sarcastically.

“If you’re so worried about keeping things above board, I’ll be sure to report your wages to the IRS.” He smirks back.

“Point taken,” I mutter. “So, is this cool? Can you spare me for a few days while I try and figure out what’s going on with her?”

He shrugs and smiles. “What the hell, I think I can survive without you for a few more days. The Houston Kings are here for a while if we come up against any real threats. Voodoo doll or otherwise.”

“I’m going to shove a voodoo doll up your ass,” I mutter to his self-satisfied smirk as I get up to leave.

“Heard that,” he shouts at my retreating back. “And good luck pulling that off. My visions are better than ever lately, I’ll see it coming from a mile away. Probably the same time I get a vision of you marrying the dance teacher.”

“Goodbye, Seer,” I yell over my shoulder, giving him a one-finger salute.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Snake

When our cab pulls up to the house, a sense of nostalgia and warmth rush through my veins. It's been months since I've laid eyes on the house that was my home for fifteen years. Francesca and I have stayed in some of the most luxurious hotels in all of Europe, but none of them compare to this. I hope she'll see it that way. She still hasn't completely come around about living here.

She squeezes my hand as the car stops, a silent indication that our journey has come to an end. Now it's back to reality, or at least figuring out what reality will look like for us now. We've avoided the topic for so long, instead just content to live in the here and now. In London, we made out on the Eye and decided to pack up for Portugal. After spending a month on the Portuguese beaches, we decided to go back to France. The world was ours, we had no agenda and no need to set one.

As the months stretched out, though, I started to feel a tug to come home. I missed my brothers and my work. I even missed my little office at the front of the house. Chessy understood, and she agreed it was time to set down roots. Sitting in front of the house, ready to plant those roots, seems daunting somehow. The adventure is over, and it's just beginning. Funny how life is.

"So, this is home now," she breathes, getting out of the cab and heading toward the trunk. "It's nice to be back."

I meet her there and start pulling out our suitcases. They feel heavier than when we left, filled to the brim with gifts we've brought home for my brothers. If I know them at all,

they're going to roll their eyes and pretend they hate them, but they'll display them prominently in their rooms. That's just the way we show our love.

We walk up to the house hand in hand, and I feel a tightness in my chest. I can't believe how much I've missed being here. And now Francesca and I get to truly begin our lives together. Returning from Europe feels like stepping from one world into another, but there's little fanfare to mark our homecoming. As we enter the house, there's an eerie silence that falls over us. Where is everyone?

We make our way through the clubhouse, passing brothers who seem engrossed in their own affairs. A few offer nods of acknowledgment, but most don't spare us a second glance. It's as if we've been gone for a day, not for months. And considering how few of the men really know Francesca, I'm surprised by their amount of nonchalance toward her. I can't put my finger on it, but there's something really off about the whole club.

We make our way to my room, which has remained untouched since I left all those months ago. There's a stagnant air inside, another unwelcome reaction to my return. For a second, I wonder if we should have come back at all. Even the house doesn't seem like it cares that we've come home.

"It's always hard after being away so long," Francesca murmurs, noting my disappointment. It's not like I expected a parade when we returned home, but I at least thought my brothers would be happy to see me.

"It's fine," I assure her, though I don't feel fine. I feel like I should've stayed in Europe for another month.

We unpack in silence, moving things around to accommodate her belongings. For the first time, I consider that maybe we should start apartment hunting. This room isn't very large, at most half the size of our hotel rooms in Europe. We have the money to move out, and I want Francesca to feel like she can make her own mark on a place. This room is entirely too much of me, and there's no real room to expand.

“I’m really tired,” she says with an exaggerated yawn, flopping herself onto my bed. Our bed. “Do you mind if I nap for a while?”

“Not at all,” I tell her, kissing her on her forehead. “I’m going to check out my office.”

I leave her to rest, padding down the stairs to my sanctuary. Of everything in the house, it’s the place I missed the most. The computers are all off, the room completely silent. I sit down and turn them on, hearing them whir to life for what’s probably the first time since I left. Their hum is like a lullaby, serenading me back to my comfort zone. As much as I loved traveling the world with my wife, this is the place where I feel most like myself.

Immediately, I take the time to run new updates and get my babies up to speed. I can’t imagine how behind they are after not being on for months. They run at full speed, the software dusting off the cobwebs so to speak. I’m itching for something to do. This room, these computers, these are home for me. I get up and let them do their thing, seeing if I can’t catch Seer somewhere.

He’s not in the bar or in the room where we call church. He’s not in his office. I check the garage and see his bike is parked inside, right next to mine, which has been covered up since I left. I walk over to it and shake off the dust that’s collected on the vinyl. When I pull off the cover, I’m pleased with what I see. She’s in pristine condition, just the way I left her. I’m already itching to hop on and take her for a spin, but that will have to wait.

I turn to head back in the house, and inadvertently run into Seer, finally. His chilly blue eyes meet mine, and I finally see the welcome in them that I’ve been hoping for. He glides over to me and pulls me into a tight, one-armed embrace.

“Snake,” he says, pulling away. “Welcome back, we’ve missed you! How was the trip? How’s Francesca? Is she here?”

I laugh at his enthusiasm, gratitude filling my body. Any doubts I may have had about returning home vanish away as I

see that I'm needed and wanted here. The fact that he asks about Francesca is the icing on the cake. She's never had a place to call home, and I really want it to be here. I want her to see that there's comradery and family in these walls.

"The trip was amazing, Francesca is even better, she's upstairs sleeping," I say with a relieved laugh, answering all of his questions as we walk back into the house. "Catch me up. What's been happening while we were away?"

He sighs, running a hand through his hair. "A lot, mon frère . A lot."

He fills me in on everything that's been going on in since I left. The club has built upon the relationship with the Houston Kings, and Knix and Evanesce are in Houston acting as ambassadors for the New Orleans Kings. There are two Houston Kings staying here in exchange, and they're working to smuggle our supply out of the city because, apparently, Mayor Prudent has decided to crack down on crime.

"Not to put pressure on you right after you've returned, but I'm really glad you're back," Seer says with a relieved sigh. "Without you, we've been running blind. The police took down the Bayou Reapers a few weeks ago and we have no idea if they have anything on us."

"You will in an hour," I promise, ready to jump back into work. "I'll get into their database and flag any chatter about us. If it looks like they have anything significant, I'll make sure it magically goes missing."

"You're the best," he says with a smile. He looks like I've just given him a year of his life back, and I'm grateful for the feeling of usefulness. He's shown me that I have nothing to prove to belong here, but he's grateful for my help, nonetheless. "There's one other matter I could use your help with, but it requires the utmost of discretion."

We've walked back through the house and ended up in front of my office door. I can see the computers are already finished with their updates and ready for me to start my investigations. Perfect timing. And now my interest is completely piqued.

“Of course,” I tell Seer. “Anything you need, you know I’ll keep it to myself.”

We walk into my office and he sits down, closing the door. It’s a little crowded with both of us in the small space, and I can’t remember a time that he’s felt the need to shut the door when he’s given me a task. We don’t have many secrets in this organization. If we were in church, he’d just tell me in front of everyone. This must be huge.

“There’s a young lady who works at the youth center,” he says, with a mirth in his eye I can’t quite place. “She’s the dance teacher, and lately she’s been having some unfortunate run-ins with some dangerous people. There’s a vested interest in her safety and I’d like your help in finding out more about her and who might want to hurt her.”

“A vested interest,” I say slowly, processing his meaning. “Whose vested interest, exactly?”

“It’s strictly on a need-to-know basis,” he says, the glint in his eye getting brighter. “But, what the hell, I’m dying to tell you anyway. It’s Bones.”

“You’re joking,” I say, laughter bubbling up in my chest. “Bones, who said he’d rather be put in a body bag than walk down the aisle?”

“The very one.” Seer laughs, conspiratorially. “You know how he is, he said he’s worried about her for professional reasons, but I saw through that immediately. He’s someone else you’re not going to see around often now because he’s become her full-time bodyguard.”

My mind reels from this news. Of every disaster I thought we’d face, every government agency I thought I’d have to hack, I was sure the apocalypse would happen before Bones developed any real feelings for someone. I also know he’ll kill both of us just for having this conversation, so I steer us back to business.

“So, track down Bones’s girlfriend,” I say in a serious tone, as if this is the most natural thing in the world. “Got it.

What else do you need me to work on while I'm at it? I know you have a list."

He smiles sheepishly and nods, standing up and opening the door.

"I actually do have a list on my desk," he says. "But you just got back. It can wait a little while. You should get settled in."

"Give me the list," I deadpan. "You know I won't feel settled until I've checked everything off your list. This is my happy place," I say, gesturing to my setup. "I won't truly feel like I'm home unless I have a million things on my plate."

He chuckles at this. "Fair enough," he says, leaving and heading back toward his office.

While I wait, I immediately start searching for information on the dance teacher. I can't even really think of her as Bones's girlfriend, since the thought is still too ridiculous for me to grasp. I'm curious about her, though, and I want to know everything I can about the girl who's stolen the notorious bachelor's heart.

Seer returns a few minutes later, and he wasn't kidding. There are hundreds of tasks on his list for me. The main one, though, the one that's underlined several times, is to find out who's trying to hurt Melissa.

CHAPTER TWENTY



“Do you want cheese on your spaghetti?” Melissa calls from the kitchen.

The smell of garlic and tomato fills the apartment, causing my stomach to growl. It’s been a long time since I’ve had a home-cooked meal.

“Just keep putting it on until you can’t see the pasta anymore,” I joke. She comes back into the living room with two plates of pasta, one with a mountain of parmesan cheese on top.

It’s the third time this week she’s made me dinner and I’m starting to feel bad about it. If I could boil water without burning it, I would cook for her. I’m not staying here to be waited on hand and foot, I’m doing it to keep her safe. I’d be just as happy to order takeout and not drain her resources like this.

Besides, it all feels a little too domestic for my taste. Even though we haven’t had sex in weeks, spending this much time with Melissa feels too much like being her boyfriend. And I’m definitely not her boyfriend. No matter what Pocus and Seer are snickering about back at the clubhouse, I’m just doing a completely platonic friend a favor. I would do this for any of my friends. And if those friends happened to look really good in yoga pants and made me think about them naked, I wouldn’t let that interfere with my job protecting them. I’m a professional, after all.

“Are you okay?” Melissa asks with a laugh. “You look like you’re trying to work out complex calculus in your head.”

“Fine,” I say, turning to focus on her.

She’s nothing like the girls I meet in the clubs. Here, in the privacy of her home, she doesn’t have any makeup on. Her hair is thrown up in some messy knot on top of her head, and she wears a ratty sweatshirt that drowns her, concealing any hint of the gorgeous body I know is underneath.

And she’s kind. I never asked her to make dinner for me or to make a bed for me on the couch. I would’ve been just as fine without anything at all, but she put sheets on the couch and all these comfortable as hell pillows that don’t make any sense to me. I always thought pillows were just pillows, but these feel like falling asleep on a cloud.

Her blankets are also really fuzzy and warm. They’re a little too cutesy for my taste, covered in flowers and puppy dogs, but she has no shame in her tastes. Besides, I’m not going to refuse the offer of comfort. It’s not something I’m offered regularly, and it’s nice to feel taken care of, even if I’m the one here to take care of her.

When we aren’t at her apartment, I’m driving her into the center. So far, she hasn’t had much desire to go out after work. She’s there for long hours and says she just wants to come home and relax in peace. I don’t see how making dinner is very relaxing for anyone, but, again, I burn boiled water. Kitchens are one of the only places in the world that I actually do experience stress.

She seems to love it, though, and I’ve learned that there are two Melissas. There’s the badass dance teacher who’s compassionate but strict. She keeps her kids in line and makes them really focus on what they’re doing. She doesn’t suffer foolishness. At home, though, she’s quiet and introspective. Everything about her screams relaxed and unbothered. After dinner, we just sit in front of the TV watching old chick flicks and avoiding our problems from the day.

If it were anybody else, I’d be going stir-crazy by now. I would be desperate to finish this assignment and get back to

my free nights, trolling the clubs for my next conquest and drinking myself into oblivion. I don't miss it, though. When I'm around her, I feel completely content in whatever we're doing. I'm just not sure how normal it is to stay home every single night.

"Are you sure you don't want to go out?" I ask when the spaghetti's been devoured and I'm helping her wash the dishes. "I feel bad that you're stuck inside all the time. This isn't a bad fairytale, you aren't a prisoner or anything."

She throws her head back and laughs a happy, relaxed laugh. She doesn't look remotely bothered by my question, nor does she look like she's chomping at the bit to do anything else.

"I'm easy," she says with a shrug. I shoot her a questioning glance and she laughs again. "I mean, I'm uncomplicated, you perv."

She swats me with a dish towel and now I'm laughing, too.

"Work takes a lot out of me," she says as we both catch our breath. "I'm happy to come home and relax afterward, knowing I don't have any other responsibilities or people to entertain. I just get to be myself here and I don't owe anyone anything."

"It sounds like you had a fun time with Juliana the other night," I say nonchalantly. Truthfully, I'm fishing for information. I've noticed that there's been tension between the two women. At least, I think it's tension. It's so hard for me to understand the way women interact with each other. One second, they're best friends, the next they hate each other. And sometimes they say nice things to each other, but then those things make them cry. It's completely baffling. Men always say what they mean. There's no subtext or dual meaning.

In any case, Juliana and Melissa hardly spoke to each other when Juliana dropped Charlie off this week. The one time Hex came by, it was a totally different situation. Melissa seemed almost relieved that it was him and not Juliana. I tried to bring it up with Hex, but he didn't know any more than I did. It doesn't make any sense. Women.

“You’re hopeless, you know that?” Melissa says with a faint edge to her voice. “You’re not as slick as you think you are,”

“What do you mean?” I ask, genuinely surprised. We were just laughing. How is she mad at me now? This is exactly why I don’t get involved.

“You’ve brought up that night several times, and you keep acting like it’s just casual. Like you’re just asking me a simple question. It’s infuriating.”

She storms out of the kitchen and heads toward her bedroom. I immediately follow her, easily catching up with my large steps. She turns on me and shoves a finger against my chest.

“I’m entitled to keep things to myself,” she says. “We’re not in a relationship. You’ve made it very clear you aren’t attracted to me in any way, so regardless of what this is”—she gestures between the two of us—“you don’t get to know my business.”

“I’m just worried about you, Melissa,” I say as calmly as I can. “Let’s review the facts. The first night we met, someone was trying to kidnap you. The other day, someone sent you a voodoo doll. You can have your secrets all you want, but I’m trying to protect you. And I can’t do that if I don’t know what I’m protecting you from. Did something happen when you two went out?”

“A guy was stalking me, okay?” she shouts, her small voice filling the entire space. “It wasn’t a big deal. That happens at clubs sometimes, guys just get overbearing. I’m sure you’ve done it on occasion.”

“This is so not about me,” I say with an eyeroll. “I would never stalk anyone, and if a woman showed me she wasn’t interested, I’d back off. Regardless, you should have told me that. It could be related somehow.”

“Or it could just be a creepy guy in a club,” she answers with the same irritated tone, though her voice is lower now.

“And, by the way, I didn’t ask you to keep me under constant supervision. What, did someone hire you to protect me?”

That feels like a slap in the face. Then again, she has a point. What the hell am I doing here?

“Who would do that?” I ask, curious. “Would someone in your life pay me to protect you? Is that why you’re so upset?”

She turns on her heel and storms into her bedroom, slamming the door. There’s no closure on the conversation, and I have a feeling that’s the last I’ll see of her tonight. I sigh and plop down on the couch, putting on the news. Melissa hates watching the news, but I feel like I’m cut off from reality here. I need to know what’s going on while I’m here.

I fall asleep on my makeshift bed and wake up to the sound of Melissa banging around, angrily slamming cabinet doors as she prepares her morning coffee. One thing I do know about women is that when they’re mad, they let you know it in subversive ways. I’ve seen Abigail and Tori do similar things to Pocus and Seer, respectively. When they’re upset, they pointedly do things to show their displeasure. Melissa is definitely mad at me for last night. Meanwhile, I’m still not even sure what we were fighting about. It’s exhausting.

While she’s busy in the kitchen, I make use of the time to take a shower. This is the unspoken routine we’ve fallen into over the last few days, and I get the impression she could use the time away from me. When I emerge from the bathroom, freshly showered and dressed, she’s already gone. Shit. I grab my keys and head for the front door, where I see a sticky note at my eye level:

I don’t need a bodyguard. Lock yourself out.

Well, that’s definitive. She’s definitely angry with me. And as much as I would love to leave her alone and forget about the whole thing, there’s still a clear and present danger. I drive down to the center just to make sure she’s made it safely to work. Satisfied to see her car in the lot, I drive to the clubhouse. I haven’t been in days, but it’s time I go speak with Seer.

“It’s about time you showed up,” calls a voice as soon as I walk through the front door. I turn my head to the right and see Snake sitting in his office, furiously typing away as if he hasn’t been galivanting through Europe for the last several months.

“I could say the same to you,” I shoot back, in a bad mood after everything that’s happened in the last twelve hours.

“Bones.” Seer nods to me as he walks over from the kitchen. “I’m glad you’re here. Snake’s just been telling me something very interesting.”

“Good for him,” I grumble.

“It’s about Melissa,” Seer says gravely and my blood turns to ice. “Why don’t we sit down.”

Snake gets up and follows us into the room where we have church, a stack of files in his hand. Fuck, this can’t be good. Every possibility swims through my brain. She’s a member of the Russian mafia or she’s in witness protection. Maybe both. I don’t at all expect what Seer actually says.

“Melissa’s real name is Melissa Prudent,” he says, ripping the Band-Aid right off. “She’s Mayor Prudent’s only child.”

A peal of laughter rips through me before I can stop it.

“That can’t possibly be true,” I say. “Her last name is Anthony. I’ve seen her employment paperwork, she wouldn’t be able to use a fake name on legal documents.”

Snake hands me a thick file, but my hands are shaking too much to open it.

“Anthony is her mother’s maiden name,” Seer tells me. “It seems she had it legally changed when she was eighteen.”

“Fuck,” I say, unable to think of any other adequate words to describe exactly how angry and betrayed I feel.

I take the file with me and go back to Melissa’s place to look at it in silence. She’ll be pissed when she comes home to find me there, but I don’t really care how she feels about it now. She’s lied to me for weeks, and now things are far too complicated for me to just walk away. Her father must have

dozens of powerful enemies, and if I'm not there to protect her, someone's definitely going to hurt her. That shit wouldn't sit right on my conscience. But I'm done caring about her in any other sense. Whatever friendship we'd built is done. All trust I had in her is shattered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Melissa

James sits on the couch waiting for me when I wake up in the morning. It's been like this for days. I'll come out of my room and he's just sitting there, staring into space until I come out. He'll quickly go into my room without a word to me, take a shower, then be out quicker than I can make my coffee. After the disappearing act I pulled on him the other day, he's going for the world record for quickest shower.

He moves around me in the kitchen, grabbing a protein bar and shoving it in his pocket. Two days ago, he bought groceries and brought more of his things over. It's very clear that he has no intention of going away any time soon, and I'm absolutely not allowed out of his sight for as long as he can help it.

I feel like a dog in a cage. I have no freedom except for what he grants me, and even then I know he's always close by, watching my every move. He acts like I should be grateful, like he's doing me some great kindness by watching my every move. He doesn't realize that this is exactly the life I never wanted.

When I'd come home after our fight last week, I fully expected him to be gone. I was so ready to reclaim my space and forget he'd ever existed. But there he was, sitting on my couch with his feet propped up on my coffee table. He looked very comfortable sitting on my couch and drinking my beer. I was absolutely furious and threatened to call the cops.

“And when you call them, will you tell them it's Melissa Anthony?” he asked coldly. “Or will you tell them it's Melissa

Prudent, the beloved child of their mayor? Wait, wait, do you have a special, direct line to the chief of police?”

Shit. He was never supposed to find out about me. I realized in that moment I’d underestimated him. I thought he was just a pretty face with no real critical thinking skills. For weeks, he never asked me anything overly personal. We just were who we were and we left it at that. But the second he was confronted with the truth, he had a million questions for me.

“Why did you change your name? Does your father even know where you are? Do you still talk to him? Does he know that you have a prominent member of the Ruthless Kings sleeping on your couch?”

“I didn’t know I did,” I’d whispered in rage. “It looks like I’m not the only one keeping secrets.”

“Oh, you knew,” he’d spat at me. “You probably had your father’s secretary run a background check on me the moment we met. You’ve been playing me, Melissa. Do you have any idea how fucked up this is?”

“It’s not your business,” I’d shot back, my voice shaking with emotion. “Nothing about my life is your concern. You clearly hate my father and you want nothing to do with me. So get out of my apartment. I don’t want you here.”

“I don’t have a choice anymore,” he’d told me, his voice low and filled with anger. “If something happens to you, I’m going to be the first person your father investigates. People have seen us together, they probably know I’ve been staying with you. I’m not going down for that because he’s pissed off every gang member in New Orleans.”

His words chilled me to the bone. Dad was cracking down on crime, everyone knew. He’d just taken down the biggest gang in the whole state. But I was protected, I thought. It was the whole reason I’d changed my name and was never seen publicly with my dad. I didn’t think any of the gang members would be smart enough to associate the two of us. But James figured it out somehow, so I’d clearly underestimated their capabilities.

After that, he told me he no longer trusted me, and any friendship we'd developed was over. Now he's just the looming shadow everywhere I go. He's in my apartment, at my work, following me home between the two places. I'm not allowed to answer my door or go out for groceries. I'm always under his thumb, with only my bedroom as a private place to get away from him. I'm losing my mind.

Nearly an entire week has gone by since our fight, and he's barely even spoken to me. It's like he's a shadow or a ghost. This can't be any more enjoyable for him, so I don't understand why he can't just leave me be. He's made it very clear that he doesn't care about me, so what's it to him if I'm attacked again? My apartment is far too small for the two of us and all this underlying tension.

I feel like I'm going to lose my mind. Even at work he's there, hanging out in the parking lot or sitting in the gym. After his confession of being a Ruthless King, I see it now. Dr. Graves and Hex, all the men that Meredith associates with, they're all part of this. Which means they probably all know. How could I not see it before? Now there's a whole motorcycle gang apparently invested in keeping me safe. Keeping me trapped, more like it.

"Don't forget, Mom, Lily's mom is picking me up today," I hear Charlie tell Juliana as she's dropped off, breaking me out of my reverie.

"Charlie, my love," Juliana responds in a patient tone. "I know you're at that age where you know everything in the world, but I do, in fact, remember things. I'm the one who reminded you to bring your duffel bag."

"Whatever," Charlie mutters darkly, blowing off her mom and pushing past me to get to the dance room.

"You gotta love the pre-teen years," I say sarcastically, the first real words I've spoken to Juliana since our night out.

"Oh, my God," she breathes out in a huff. "If I had a remote control to fast forward through these years, I would do it in a heartbeat. I'm losing my freaking mind."

Guilt washes over me as I consider how cold I've been toward her. I didn't mean to shut her out, we'd actually had a lot of fun together. Until the creepy stalker, of course. It's time I set things right between us and give her a break. And maybe if I'm hanging out with Juliana, James will give me a bit of a break too.

"You know what helps with that?" I wiggle my eyebrows at her. "Tequila shots and a good beat."

"Really?" she asks, her face lighting up in excitement. "I didn't think you'd want to go out with me again. You were so freaked out by what happened."

"I just didn't want James to know," I confess. "He'd been so overprotective already. But it's all a moot point anyway. He knows everything about me now, as I'm sure you do too. So there's no reason we can't be friends."

She nods and smirks at me. "Those boys are like old ladies with the way they gossip. But I promise, I don't think of you any differently. You're completely entitled to your secrets, and if you want to pretend for a night that you're someone else, I'm totally down for that."

"You're amazing," I say, pulling her into a tight hug.

"Well, don't call me amazing just yet," she says, her features turning dark. "Unfortunately, knowing everything means I know that Bones isn't going to let you out of his sight tonight."

"Bones?" I ask, confused.

"James," she amends, then drops her voice. "Bones is his club name. I'm surprised he hasn't told you that yet. He hates being called James."

"We don't do much talking," I grumble, then realize how that sounds. "I mean, he's nothing but an overbearing bodyguard. When we're at my place, I'm in my room and he's in the living room and we don't say a word to each other."

"That sounds really lonely," she says sympathetically. "I think you need tonight as much as I do. I'll see if Bones and Hex will at least sit at a different table than us or something."

“Thank you,” I tell her earnestly, grateful to finally feel like there’s someone on my side. Someone who knows everything about this messed up situation and is willing to help me in a way that I want to be helped. “Do you want to just meet me here? James ... Bones isn’t going to let me leave by myself anyway. I’d rather drive with you than him.”

“Of course! Eight p.m., right?” she asks, pulling out her phone and setting a reminder.

“It’s a date!” I say.

A weight is lifted off my shoulders as I walk into class and wait for the other students to arrive. Not only is everything fixed between Juliana and me, but I’m hopeful that tonight is going to feel at least somewhat normal. It would be a thousand times better if James ... I mean, Bones wouldn’t come at all. That’s going to take time to get used to. But at least I can go out with a friend and dance away all the drama from the last few weeks.

As I’m walking my students through a complicated step, another plan hatches in my brain. Bones is probably going to be distracted by Hex, and if we go to a particularly crowded club, it will be impossible for him to keep his eye on me all night. I could simply get lost in the crowd and go home. I’d have at least some time to myself before he figured it out and came back. Even then, I could make him sleep in the hallway or something, so at least I could enjoy my apartment in peace.

When Juliana picks me up a few hours later, I feel a little guilty about what I have planned. She’s been nothing but nice to me, and I hate that I’m going to use her to get away from Bones for a little while. I especially hate that I can’t tell her, but I know she won’t be able to keep it from her husband and it’s like she said. He’ll definitely tell Bones, and then all my plotting will be for nothing. No, if I want to get any time to myself, she can’t know what I’m planning.

The club is packed tonight, but Juliana gives her name to the bouncer and we’re let in immediately without having to wait in the long line. This must be one of the perks of the motorcycle gang. If I didn’t resent Bones so much right now, I

might enjoy it a little more. When we get inside, I see that he and Hex are seated at a table, and when they spot us, Hex waves us over. Juliana shoots him a look, though, and he puts his hand down and shrugs.

He seems like a nice guy. I only know him in the context of Charlie, but I bet if I had more time to get to know him, I'd like him. I like Juliana a lot, and I can't imagine she'd put up with any man who isn't amazing. But there's the fact that he and Bones are close, and I don't think I'm ever going to forgive Bones when this is over. Being around him is way too hard.

I lead Juliana out to the dance floor and we both lose ourselves to the beat. A waitress comes around with shots and I grab two off the tray. It'll be easier to do this if Juliana is also a little tipsy. She leaves me alone for a few minutes to order more drinks and I see my opportunity. I text her that I'm heading to the bathroom so she doesn't get worried, and I scan the crowd for my bodyguard.

He's there with Hex, lost in conversation. He's not even looking at me. Perfect. I head toward the bathrooms, but I know there's a back way out of this club through the stockroom. I've had to use it before after a bad date. For a second, my stomach clenches and I think that there's no way it could be this easy, but I'm through the door in seconds and no one has tried to stop me. I breathe in the sweet smell of freedom and victory, and hail a cab.

I have probably half an hour until they figure out what's happened. The club is so busy, they're not going to be able to easily search in that crowd. A taxi stops and I get in, relaxing against the soft leather of the seat. I give the cabbie my address and close my eyes, appreciating this feeling of being alone. It's hard to believe that there was ever a time I didn't want to be alone. This feels amazing.

I'm almost disappointed when the cab stops, because I know I'm on borrowed time. I pay him for the ride and get out, staring up at my building. I should have gone to a hotel or something. At least I'd have more time to enjoy this feeling.

C'est la vie. I walk up the steps and pull out my keys to open the door, but I don't get the chance.

Someone grabs my arm, and I turn around to tell off Bones, but it's not him. It's a man I don't recognize.

"I hear you like to fight," he says, pulling out a cloth and jamming it against my face. Everything goes black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Everything about this place gives me a headache. The music is too loud, the lights are too bright, the people are all too close. It's hard to keep track of Melissa in this crowd. It occurs to me that I haven't seen her in several minutes. A knot forms in my stomach and I start to panic. Where the hell is she?

"Hex, shut up," I say to my friend who's blabbing on about something Charlie's done. "Do you see Melissa anywhere?"

Hex straightens and he starts scanning the crowd as well. I stand up and can see the top of Juliana's head. She's holding two drinks and looking just as confused as I feel. She spins around several times and pushes her way through people, and it's immediately clear to me that she's looking for Melissa too.

I put my hand in the air and wave it a few times to get her attention. She catches my eye and moves through the people back over to our table, setting the drinks down. They're fruity, frilly things that she clearly intended for herself and Melissa.

"Everything okay?" she asks cheerily, unaware of the storm that's brewing in my head.

"No, everything is not fucking okay," I growl, earning me an annoyed look from Juliana and a, "Not cool, dude," from Hex. "Where's Melissa?" I ask, a tight edge in my voice.

"I was just looking for her," Juliana says, oblivious. "If you hadn't called me over, I probably would have found her."

"Chill, man," Hex says, seeing my increasing frustration looming. "We'll go look for her, she's got to be around here

somewhere.”

Juliana nods and we each get up from the table, heading off in separate directions to look for her. I stand at least half a foot above most of the people here, and Melissa is nowhere to be found. It’s not the thumping bass or the flashing lights getting to my head. She isn’t here. I’m not sure how she did it, but she’s gone. *Shit, shit, shit!*

I go back to the table and wait for Juliana and Hex to get back. It’ll do no good for us to lose track of each other. When they finally get back to the table, I’m breaking out into a full-on panic. My palms sweat and my breath comes out in shallow spurts. The room starts to spin, and it’s only Hex’s hand on my shoulder that grounds me back to earth.

“She couldn’t have gone far, right?” Juliana asks, grabbing Hex’s hand and squeezing tightly. “Maybe she wanted to go to another club.”

“She wanted to get away from me,” I say, hanging my head in irritation. “I should have just given her space tonight.”

“Hey, you’re just trying to protect her,” Hex says calmly. “We’re going to find her, she’ll be fine.”

“And if she’s not?” I growl.

“Then it’s not your fault,” he says, ducking down and forcing me to look at him. “I know you have feelings for her, but she isn’t your responsibility.”

“I don’t—”

“Get over yourself, Bones,” Juliana butts in, fixing me with a steely gaze. “We’re all tired of the denial. Say whatever you want, but you’re so transparent. You like her and you care about her, so grow a pair of balls and admit your feelings so we can all stop walking on eggshells around you.”

Hex and I exchange a surprised look and I take a step away from Juliana, genuinely concerned that she might hit me. Her rage is rolling off her in waves, all of it directed toward me.

“Life is too short,” she says more evenly. “Trust me, I know. So let’s make a plan and look for her.”

I nod and we agree that we need to coordinate. There are a lot of clubs in this area, a lot of places she could have gotten to. Juliana tries calling her several times, but of course she doesn't pick up. She wants space from me, which means space from Juliana, too. She's not just going to willingly come back.

There's a small part of me that thinks maybe I should just give in to her request and leave her alone for the night. We both could use some time away from each other after this week. But there's a feeling in my gut telling me that she's in danger. She was attacked at work twice, and once while she was at a club. Someone is watching her, following her. We might be too late.

"I'll go to a few more clubs," Juliana offers. "We went to three the other night, I'll just retrace our steps, okay? Maybe she went to one of them."

"I'll come," Hex tells her, not so much offering as he is insisting. He doesn't want her going alone, an urge I completely understand.

"Call Meredith," I tell him as we walk out of the club and I head toward my bike. "I'm going back to her apartment to see if she's there."

We split up and I get on my bike, revving the engine and speeding away from the curb. I can't get to her place fast enough, traffic laws be damned. She's never wanted to get the police involved because of her father. I understand that now. She's been hiding things from him too. But maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing to get pulled over and tell the cops all about it. No such luck, though. I make it to her place in exactly seven minutes with no one to stop me.

Of course, there's the issue of keys. I'm usually with her, so I haven't had to get a key to the building. We aren't dating, so it's not like the conversation about making me a key ever came up. I press the buzzer for several apartments hoping that someone ordered food. It reminds me of the night the pizza delivery guy showed up at her apartment. He probably did the same thing to get in. Knowing what I do now, I was probably right to be short with him.

The thought only fills me with more dread. If that is the case, then these people know where she lives. It was just a coincidence that I was there that night. What would have happened if I hadn't been? What would have happened if I hadn't saved her that first night in the parking lot? Someone buzzes me in and I grab at the door, running toward the stairs so I can work off some of that nervous energy. She's fine. She has to be fine.

I knock on the door, but she doesn't answer. She's just inside and mad at me, that's all. She's not in danger. She's fine. I keep repeating this mantra to myself, but it's doing nothing to assure me. I bang on the door again but get no response again. A neighbor sticks his head out and gives me a dirty look, but I'm far too intimidating for him to start shit with me. He slowly closes his door and I hear the sound of several locks being turned.

Melissa could be dead right now, but I'm the criminal to her neighbors. Shit, if her face gets plastered on the news, that asshole next door will probably call and describe me to a T. This is all so screwed up. Where the hell is she?

I pull out my phone and open up our messages. I don't expect there to be any from her since she disappeared. She hasn't texted me in days. Why would she? I've been around her 24/7. This is all my fault, I just had to be the overbearing bodyguard. She hates me and now she's missing and it's all because I couldn't just leave well enough alone. So what if she is Mayor Prudent's daughter? What did that really change about her?

I quickly type out a text to her:

Please call me when you can. I'm sorry about everything.

Then I scroll up and see a message I'd forgotten about. It's like an oasis in the middle of a desert: *There's a key behind the fire extinguisher. You can let yourself in.*

She'd sent that two weeks ago, before our fight. I was coming over from the club and she wanted me to be able to get in. She'd been home, though, so I didn't need to use it. Now, I lift the fire extinguisher out of its holder and see a key taped to

the wall behind it. It's not the safest place to hide a key, but I'm not going to lecture her about it. When I find her safe inside her apartment, we'll have a calm conversation about everything and it will be okay.

Except she isn't in her apartment. It's not a large place, it's not like she has a million places to hide. My couch bed is still rumpled from this morning, there are two coffee mugs still in the sink. I look at the hook next to the door and her keys are absent. Her bed is made pristinely, the way it always is when she leaves the house. The bathroom door is slightly ajar with the light off.

Everything in the apartment feels stale, quiet. No one's been here. I can only hope that Hex and Juliana are having more luck than I am. I step out of the apartment and lock the door, pocketing the key instead of putting it back behind the extinguisher. I don't want anyone else having access to her. I think maybe I'll go join Hex and Juliana wherever they are and continue the search.

When I get outside in the open air, though, all the wind is knocked out of me. The panic fully settles in, bringing me to my knees. I sit on the stoop and try to focus on my breathing, to calm myself down. Just because she isn't here doesn't mean she isn't safe. We'll find her safe and sound and laugh about this together. She can buy the drinks after all the stress she put us through.

I shoot off a quick text to Hex to see if he has any updates. Please, let him have an update. Let him say that they found her safe and sound at another club and they're on their way back here.

Hex: *No luck yet. I called Meredith and she hasn't seen her, but she's calling Seer to put him on alert. Don't worry, mon frère, we're going to find her.*

I'm going to puke. He hasn't found her at a club. Meredith hasn't seen her. I don't know anyone else in her life I could call. We didn't get to that stage either. I doubt we ever will, and the thought causes another wave of nausea. She's fine. She has to be fine.

I lean forward, dropping my head between my knees. Somewhere I read that this helps control breathing when you're losing your shit, but I don't know what else I'm supposed to do. Being in this position doesn't make me feel any better. It makes me feel hopeless. It makes me feel weak.

I'm about to sit up when something in the grass catches my eye. I lean over to inspect it more carefully, and now I know I'm going to throw up. She came home. She was here. Because sitting in the grass is her keyring. I pick it up and inspect it closely. There's no doubt in my mind, it has her house key, her car key, her work fob, and a little tiny ballerina slipper on a keychain.

I immediately call Seer and tell him what I've found. I hop back on my bike and head toward the clubhouse. We're officially in recovery mode.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Melissa

My head feels fuzzy and there's a high-pitched ringing in my ears. When I try to open my eyes, there's nothing but blackness. For a second, I worry maybe I've gone blind, but when I breathe in, I feel a heavy fabric brush against my face. There's something covering my face, obscuring my vision. I try very hard not to panic, but that's difficult when I have no idea where I am.

This is really bad. Really freaking bad. Binge-watching TV on the couch for years has not prepared me for this. Every time someone has been kidnapped in a show or movie, they've either had the skills to get out, or there was someone coming after them. Or they died.

No, I can't think like that. I refuse to think like that. The fabric over my head feels heavy, which makes the hot air from my breath swirl around me. If I start to hyperventilate, I'll likely pass out in a minute. If there's one thing I do know how to do, it's how to control my breathing. I take slow, deep breaths and let them out evenly, calming my heartrate.

Even so, I can't stop the panicked thoughts that race through my mind. What the hell was I thinking? I truly underestimated how badly someone wants me. A shiver runs through my spine when I think about what my kidnapper could want from me, but I force myself to stay still and focus on my breathing.

I'm so mad at myself, and I'm a little mad that Bones was right. There was no winning in this situation, but this is definitely the worst-case scenario. He's going to be livid when

he finds out, but will he still care enough to come find me? Does he even have the resources? Beating up an asshole who tried to grab me in the parking lot is one thing, but I have no idea where I am. I can't count on him coming to rescue me.

I'm forced to think about the fight we had when he found out who I really was.

"If something happens to you, I'm going to be the first person your father investigates." His words echo through my brain. "People have seen us together, they probably know I've been staying with you. I'm not going down for that because he's pissed off every gang member in New Orleans."

"Oh, he's pissed off every gang member?" I'd asked, feeling furious about his revelation that he was part of the Ruthless Kings. "How do I know that you're really here to protect me then? For all I know, you've set this all up so you can look like some freaking hero."

"Fuck you, Melissa," he'd seethed. "I have never lied to you. I've never hidden who I was. I've asked you multiple times why someone is trying to hurt you, and you've never been able to give a reason. I can give you a million reasons why someone might hurt me. Where do you want to start?"

"You didn't tell me you were part of a gang, James. How is that any different from me not telling you who my father is?" I'd nearly screamed at him. "We are exactly the same, the difference is, you don't have any capacity to forgive."

"The difference," he'd started, his voice getting deathly low, "is that your father just took down one of the most dangerous gangs in the city. Were you aware?"

"Of course, I'm aware," I spat. "I'm not completely out of the loop, I heard about the takedown."

"And you really think they got every one of the Reapers?" he stated, a humorless mirth in his eye. "You go to bed at night feeling safe that Daddy got those monsters all off the street. Let me tell you something about gangs, sweetheart, they tend to scatter when there's trouble. I'd bet my left nut that there's

half a dozen guys out there just waiting for the first opportunity they can get to get their hands on you.”

“You give them a lot of credit,” I’d said, more bravely than I felt. “I changed my name nearly a decade ago, I’ve never been associated with my father’s campaign. Is it common for gangs to have those kinds of resources?”

“Our does,” he’d said with a shrug, a sick smirk on his face. “How do you think I found out the truth? Sure, it took our guy a couple days, but he figured it out. Don’t underestimate your enemies.”

“So you’re admitting you’re my enemy?” I’d sneered at him.

“No,” he answered with a sad smile. “I’m admitting that I know your enemies a lot better than you do. So I hope you’re used to me sleeping on your couch, because I’m not going anywhere until we know who’s trying to do this to you.”

God, I was so naïve. I really believed that I was untouchable. I love my father, but I never wanted to share his spotlight. It was something I was simply not interested in. He ran for a few small offices when I was young, and it became clearer and clearer to me that he had a bigger goal in mind.

I was in high school the first time I realized, without a doubt, that my father had ambitions to become mayor one day. We were learning about local government positions and the way small governments are set up compared to federal ones. I could clearly see his career trajectory set up in front of me, and I felt sick. I went home that day and told him that I would never speak to him again if he ran for mayor.

It was the worst fight we’d ever had. He was so hurt that I was stomping on his dreams. He said he wanted to do this to benefit our family, to build a legacy that we could enjoy for decades. I kept my word, ignoring him for days before my mom finally made us break the silence. She called in a therapist to make us work out our differences.

I realized then that it really wasn’t fair for me to make my dad choose between me and his political aspirations. Still, I

was almost eighteen, and just because I was okay with him pursuing his dreams didn't mean I wanted any part of them. With my parents' blessing, I went to the courthouse and went through the process of legally changing my name to my mother's maiden name.

It wasn't an easy decision to come to. As an only child, it really broke my dad's heart for a while. But that was my compromise. He could keep me in his life and run for mayor as long as I didn't have to take any part in it. I didn't want to be in the spotlight or to deal with the backlash of his decisions.

Fat lot of good it did, obviously. My captors, whether the Bayou Reapers or someone else, clearly figured out how to get to me. They didn't care that I'd changed my name. They probably wouldn't care if I had no relationship with my father. The way they see it, family is weakness. Family is leverage.

That brings me a little peace, oddly enough. That's what these people are after, most likely. If they kill me, they're probably political terrorists trying to make a statement. But if that were the case, they wouldn't have kidnapped me. They would have killed me in a very graphic, very public manner to show my dad that he isn't safe and no one he loves is safe. They need me for leverage.

If it is the Bayou Reapers, the answer is pretty simple, isn't it? They'll use me to negotiate the release of their fellow gang members. It will be a simple trade in their eyes, but I can't see my dad going for that. He loves me with his whole heart, but this was a career-defining move for him. That kind of crackdown could get him elected to state senate. He'll work with police or the FBI to bring me home, but it might be too late for that. If the Reapers are as dangerous as Bones indicated, they'll kill me before they let the negotiation break down.

If not, they'll probably torture me. Cut off my fingers one by one and ship them to my dad as proof that I'm still alive. Just to be sure, I flex my fingers and I can feel all ten still. I'd really like to keep it that way.

“Look who’s awake,” someone whispers, and they sound far away. Maybe across the room I’m in.

“It’s about time,” someone else grunts. “I was worried I’d put too much chloroform on that rag.”

He’s the man who grabbed me, clearly. I try hard to remember anything about him. I remember the first man who attacked me so clearly. He’s played prominently in my nightmares over the last few weeks. The man who followed me in the club is hazier, as I was slightly drunk. But I’m sure that this man isn’t him either. There wasn’t much time to look at him before he knocked me out, but I’m fairly certain that it’s a third man.

Maybe it’s better that I don’t know what he looks like. They always say if you know what they look like, you know too much. That’s a surefire way to end up leaving this place in a body bag.

“Morning, sunshine,” the first man calls to me a little louder. “Hope you’ve had a good night’s sleep.”

I don’t respond to him, instead focusing on my deep breathing.

“It’s rude to ignore us, sweetheart,” my kidnapper says. “We’re going to be stuck together for a while. The least you could do is be friendly.”

The two men laugh, but I just keep breathing slowly.

“Are you sure she’s awake?” my kidnapper asks the other man more quietly. “She looks like she’s still asleep to me.”

“I saw her hands move,” the other man responds, and I hear fabric scraping against cement. They’re getting up and walking over to me. I keep breathing in and out like it’s the most important thing in the world.

“She could have just been twitching in her sleep, dumbass,” my kidnapper says, much closer to me now.

“Even so, at least you know she’s not dead. He’d be pissed off if you killed her.”

“Shut up, idiot,” my kidnapper hisses. They sound like a real pair of geniuses. The first one has at least given away that there’s a leader in all of this. That gives me some hope that it isn’t the Reapers after all. I keep breathing,

One of them pokes my forearm hard. He can’t see me flinch at least, but I try not to react any other way. It’s better if they think I’m asleep. They’ll leave me alone, and maybe they’ll let more slip.

There’s an odd sensation as I feel something moving against my neck, and I realize, almost too late, that the men are removing my hood. I slam my eyes shut and continue my breathing, trying to position my head in a way that would look like I really am asleep.

“See?” my captor whispers. “She’s still out like a light.”

“Damn,” the first one says with disappointment. “I wanted to have some fun.”

“We’re not supposed to touch her,” my captor tells him, but there’s disappointment in his tone too. “She’s going to be a big payday for us, but if there’s a scratch on her, we’re not getting our money.”

“There are other ways to break her,” the first man responds, a sick hint in his voice. “Psychological scars are a lot harder to see.”

The men laugh as the bag goes back over my head. I open my eyes, but there’s still nothing to see. There’s not even a hint of light coming through. It’s impossible to tell where I am or even what time of day it is. I could have been here for hours, or mere minutes. I hear the two men walk toward another part of the room, then hear the sound of the door slamming shut. I listen hard for a moment, ensuring they’re both gone. Then and only then do I finally let the tears fall.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Seer

Bones has been calling me nonstop for the last fifteen minutes. He thinks something might have changed since we talked last, but I'm not a miracle worker. I can only imagine how panicked he must feel, but there's nothing I can do to make his wait any better. It's been twelve hours since Melissa was last seen, and Snake has been up all night searching for clues about her whereabouts. Whoever took her was smart enough not to be seen, that's for sure.

I'm just about to answer and tell him as much when there's a pounding on the front door. It's an angry, loud, violent sound. Whoever wants in sounds like they're going to break the door down if I don't open it soon. I quickly walk over and open it, shocked when I see the man standing on the other side.

He's disheveled and unshaven, his skin pale and his eyes red-rimmed. His tie is loose around his collar and his shirt is beyond wrinkled, but he still carries a certain air of authority. Mayor Prudent pushes past me into the house without being invited in and stomps around inside, looking frantically for something.

"Where is she?" he growls, turning on me and grabbing me by the collar.

I try to be a reasonable man under most circumstances, but having the mayor's hands so close to my throat is enough to send me over the edge. I push him back and put my hands up, warning him to back off. He's a few inches shorter than me,

and clearly not in the prime shape of his life, but there's something feral about him. He's dangerous.

"Don't test me," he warns, his voice low and dangerous. "I know you have my daughter. Where the hell is she?"

Understanding dawns on me, and I have to applaud the man. Since he's come into office, I've considered him to be little more than a figurehead. He always struck me as the kind of man who makes grand plans and lets someone else do the work. But as he stands in the hallway, sizing me up and ready for a fight, I see that he has a passion and fire that doesn't come through on TV.

He also needs to back the hell up before I punch him in the face. He may have the power to shut down our operation, but he's not going to barge into my home and start throwing accusations. I glance out the open door and don't see any of his men following behind. He's come here alone. Either very brave or very stupid.

"What exactly was your plan?" I ask him calmly and curiously. "This is a house full of armed bikers. What did you hope to accomplish?"

"Don't be a smartass with me," he shouts, pointing a finger in my face. "You took my daughter. It had to be you. I've been up all night trying to figure it out, and it finally clicked."

I notice there's a crumpled-up piece of paper in one of his fists, and I gesture for him to hand it to me. He slaps it in my hand, his face turning so red it's almost purple.

"Forget what you wrote?" he mocks. "You can have it, it's seared into my brain now."

We have your daughter. Drop out of the race or she's coming home in a body bag.

The words are spelled out in magazine cutouts, a clear sign that this is a ransom note. There's no money demanded, and no real promise of a safe return. It's absolutely nothing to go on, but I walk over to Snake's office and hand it over to him anyway, just in case he might be able to detect something from the wording or the magazines.

“Who’s that?” Mayor Prudent asks, craning his head to see into Snake’s office. “Are you the one who sent it? You sick fu—”

“Mayor Prudent,” I say in a calm but firm tone. My hands are up again, urging him to calm the fuck down. “My name is Seer. I’m the president of this organization, and I can assure you that no one here took your daughter. In fact, we’ve been up all night trying to find her. Can I get you a drink?”

He looks completely taken aback, like all the wind has been knocked out of him. None of this was what he expected to hear, but I can tell by his change of demeanor and the tears welling in his eyes that he believes me. At the very least, he really, really wants to.

“It’s 9 a.m.,” he says softly, his voice breaking.

“Do you care?” I ask with a shrug, motioning for him to follow me to the bar.

Buffy isn’t up yet, so I go behind the bar and pull out our finest bottle of scotch. After all, he’s the mayor of New Orleans. Only the best for him. I pour it in a glass with two ice cubes and hand it to him, not coming back over to join him. It’s probably best for both of us if we keep a physical barrier between us for the time being.

“I know about the youth center,” he says after a long sip of bourbon. “It’s a front for your group, right? You’re using it to launder money or something.”

“Not at all,” I say, surprised. I’ve tried hard to keep our name away from any association with the youth center. I didn’t want to sabotage Meredith or cause any trouble for those kids. “We have strong ties to the youth center, but it’s a legitimate venture started by the wife of one of our members. We personally donate a cut of our earnings to the center, not the other way around.”

He takes another swig of his drink as he considers this.

“She’s my baby,” he says, his voice breaking again. He clears his throat of the emotion. “I’m sorry for busting in here,

guns blazing, I just want answers. It gave me hope that maybe I could find her on my own.”

“You would have died,” I tell him seriously. “We aren’t the kind of people who do things like this, but the people who do wouldn’t have let you through the door. You do understand that this was a suicide mission, don’t you?”

“It would have been worth it if I brought her home,” he replies, his face flushing. With the alcohol in his system and a little perspective, it seems that the stupidity of his plan is finally dawning on him. “Shit, my wife would be so mad if she knew I was here.”

I laugh at this. How many times have I put Tori through similar stupidity? And if it were Nicky in trouble, I can’t say that I wouldn’t do the same. In front of me is not the leader of a major city. He’s just a broken, terrified father who wants his daughter back.

“Mayor Prudent, I’ll be honest with you,” I say, pouring another shot into his now empty glass. “I don’t like you. I find your policies to be overreaching and your results to be underwhelming. Goddamn, you have every gang in this city quaking after the takedown of the Bayou Reapers. We’re afraid to breathe the wrong way.”

He smiles just a bit at this.

“All that to say, I would never do something like this to you. Or anyone, for that matter. I don’t generally practice this kind of blackmail on anyone. Children are strictly off-limits.”

“I believe you,” he says into his glass, his voice hoarse.

“Thank you,” I tell him earnestly. “I should also tell you that one of my men has feelings for your daughter. In fact”—I look down at my phone to see Bones’s face on my screen, calling again—“he’s been calling me all night, asking for updates about our investigation. We haven’t been able to find anything yet, but I promise you we’re working as hard as we can to bring your daughter home.”

A sob rips through the man’s chest and I’m forced to take a step back, surprised by his overwhelming emotional response.

“You have no idea what that means to me,” he says through his rapidly falling tears. “I came here trying to fight you and you’re trying to save my baby. You’re a good man.”

Buffy walks into the bar, completely unaware of what’s happening, but when he sees the two of us, he slowly backs away. I can almost hear the sound of his footsteps running away. I wish I could run, too. It certainly wasn’t my intention to make the man cry, and now I don’t know what to do with him. Comforting people is really more Tori’s forte. Maybe I should call her.

“I have a son,” I tell him, trying to distract him somehow. “He’s just turned six and he’s the love of my life. My namesake and everything.”

“You named your child Seer?” he asks through sobs. “That’s such a stupid name.”

I can’t help but laugh. He’s slightly inebriated and definitely distressed, so I’ll let it slide.

“No! He has my real name,” I say with a chuckle, purposely not revealing that information to him. I don’t want to inadvertently give him more ammo to take me down someday. “And he’s my world. I’ve made a lot of stupid decisions in the last few years just to give him a chance at a happy life. If anything happened to him, I would set this city on fire just to get him back.”

He nods, though I immediately regret telling the mayor that I would set the city on fire. The last thing I need is to get deported.

“In any case,” I say quickly. “I’m not doing this because you’re the mayor, not even for my friend. I’m doing this because I’m a father, and I can’t imagine what it would be like to have someone take my son.”

“You’re a good man, Seer,” he says, gulping for air so he can calm down. “Are all the gang leaders as good as you are?”

“No,” I answer with unshakable certainty. “Like I said, if you’d gone to anyone else’s clubhouse in the state you were

in, it would have ended very badly for you. Lucky you came to us.”

He nods and finishes the last of his second drink.

“I just knew if I involved my security or the police, it wouldn’t end well for her. These kinds of people... they don’t like when you come prepared. I can’t risk Melissa being murdered because of my arrogance.”

“They won’t see us coming,” I promise him. “I know this side of things a lot better than you do. You were smart not to involve the police, but you’re going to need manpower. I’m willing to bet whoever took her isn’t a lone agent. There will be a fight, and you won’t win on your own.”

“I’m never going to be able to thank you enough, Seer,” he says so earnestly I feel uncomfortable again. “If ... when you bring my daughter back safely, I will guarantee you any official favor you want. I don’t have a lot of money, but I still have power in this city. Seriously, whatever you want will be yours.”

I nod curtly and take his glass back, putting it in the sink to be washed. He stands up on shaky legs and heads toward the door. I guide him back out into the hallway and point him toward the front door, keeping my eye on him as he goes. He’s not anything like I expected him to be in person. Compared to the other leaders I’ve met over the years, I would almost say that he’s a good man too. Hell, I might even change my mind and vote for him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



“We could always use an IT upgrade,” Snake suggests, which earns him an eyeroll from everyone in the room. “If you guys want me to keep functioning at my job, I need a full systems upgrade and an assistant. I can’t leave you again knowing that no one is going to help while I’m away.”

“So don’t leave again,” Hex shoots at him.

“Sure, and let me tell Juliana that your yearly trip to Brazil is cancelled this year,” Snake bites back, causing Pocus to snort. Snake’s apparently grown a pair of balls since getting married.

“I’ll find the money in our budget for your updates and your assistant,” Seer interjects, shooting both men an annoyed look. “I’m not asking the mayor for that.”

I sigh in frustration, tired of this subject. Seer’s called us together so we can strategize on how to get Melissa back, but so far, all anyone wants to talk about is Mayor Prudent’s visit and his promise of a favor. Screw that guy. If he weren’t the mayor, none of this would be happening. He should just step down so she can be returned safely.

“I still think we should have called church,” Pocus cuts in, eyeing Seer purposefully. “We need to let everyone know what’s happening.”

“And we will,” Seer tells him with authority. “But right now, Bones’s relationship to Melissa is on a need-to-know basis, and I’m not discussing the favor as a group. Can you

imagine what those idiots would throw out if we made this a group project? We get one favor, and it's going to be made among the five of us."

"The married clique," I grumble, crossing my arms. "Which, by the way, I am not going to join. This situation doesn't change anything."

"Right," Seer answers sarcastically. "But if this were truly the married clique, Graveyard and Knix would be here too. It's not my fault that the highest ranking members of this club just so happen to be married."

"Can we focus?" I ask, my patience officially gone. "Melissa's been gone for fifteen hours, and we know how precious time is in these situations. Snake, you really haven't found anything?"

He shakes his head gravely. "I'm sorry, Bones, I've combed through hours of video footage and I haven't seen her in any of it. I've run her face through a scanner and there's nothing."

"What about that kid from the center?" I ask, remembering when Snake went missing. "The one who tracked down Snake last year? Couldn't he help?"

"He moved to London," Seer says sadly. "I already spoke to Meredith, he's not able to help from that distance."

"There has to be something!" I yell, standing up because I physically can't contain my anxiety anymore. "She didn't just vanish into thin air. Someone took her, someone's been following her. Snake, there's nothing from the last two months that you could find?"

"I went through footage from the club the night that Melissa was stalked. She's not on the footage at all, which means I have no idea who was following her. Without a description, I can't just guess what he looked like."

"And the first night she was attacked?" I ask, feeling desperate. "The night at the center."

"There weren't cameras in that alleyway," Seer says somberly. "Believe me, I've already made a call to have some

installed. Unfortunately, that doesn't help us find her now."

"I can describe him," I tell Snake with certainty. "If I give you a detailed description, can you make a profile of his face?"

"It's worth a shot," he says with a shrug.

"Hex, can you ask Juliana if she remembers what the creep at the club looked like?"

"Of course," he says, standing up and pulling out his phone.

"Write it down," Seer calls to him as he leaves the room. "Your retellings aren't as good as you think they are."

"He really is shit at Pictionary," Pocus mutters.

I look between both of them and throw my hands up in annoyance. Of all the stupid things to be worried about right now.

Snake gets up and I follow him out to his office. We sit down together in the small space and I think back to that night. All I can think about is her cries for help and how terrified she looked. She wasn't looking terrified because she was attacked, though. She looked terrified when she saw me beating the guy up to a pulp.

I have to focus on his face. In my mind, I see it bloodied and bruised, but I saw it before I started punching. I tried to commit it to memory for this exact reason.

"His eyebrows were black and kind of bushy," I tell him. "Rounded at the top and about this far apart," I indicate with my fingers the distance between them. "He had a flat nose, it looked like it had been broken a few times."

He nods and types away, somehow turning my words into a digital image. The face is forming in front of me, and I focus on getting it exactly how I remember. Melissa's life may depend on me getting it right.

But then what? When we get her back, she'll probably still hate me. Even rescuing her won't change that for her. She felt suffocated by my presence, there's no recovering from that.

After all this effort, we're going to just go our separate ways and forget these last few months even happened.

"Bones," Snake barks, snapping his fingers in my face. "Where exactly were the breaks?"

I realize that I've zoned out, too focused on what-ifs. The only important thing is I get her back. It doesn't matter if she never talks to me again, as long as she's safe and no one tries to come after again. I'll kill the guy who did this to her if I have to. She shouldn't have to live constantly checking over her shoulder.

"He had a wide mouth, but thin lips," I tell him. "They were flat, they didn't have that curvy thing on top."

He nods and types.

"His eyes were narrow, but I couldn't see what color they were. It was too dark."

"Do you remember what shape they were?" he asks, not looking up at me as he continues to type away. The image of the man is starting to really come into focus, and it looks like a decent rendering. It calms me a bit, seeing that I'm not totally fucking this up. Just a few more details and he should have enough to do a facial recognition search.

I try my best to describe the shape of his eyes, making amendments as they come to life on the screen. Thankfully, Snake is able to make quick adjustments to the things that don't exactly look right to me. We're just about done perfecting his face when Hex comes in with Juliana's description.

"She made me record it so I wouldn't mess anything up," he says, sounding slightly defensive.

He hands his phone over to Snake, who hits a button and Juliana's voice fills the small room as if she's there with us. She didn't get a great look at the guy, but she's able to give Snake the broad strokes. She's definitely less precise than I am, but it's enough to come up with a rough sketch of the man. He looks familiar to me, though I can't place him. I've

probably seen him in a bar or in a club. Even as a blurry sketch, he's giving off major creep vibes.

"All right, gentlemen," Snake says with a satisfied smirk, stretching out his arms and cracking his knuckles. "Let's see if this is enough to give us what we need."

He pushes more buttons and uploads their faces into some kind of software. We watch in amazement as faces blur by, some looking more like the sketches than others. When the program finishes running, there are three matches to my description and seven to Juliana's. It's not a bad start at all.

"The one in the middle," I say, instantly recognizing my guy. "He's a little older now, but that's definitely him."

Snake nods and clicks on his information, printing out his rap sheet. Pages and pages spew out from the printer, and I know we're dealing with a professional criminal. His list of offenses is nearly as long as mine. Nothing about harassment or physical violence, though. He's mostly a B&E offender, with the occasional arson. Not a true arsonist by any means, but definitely a guy who doesn't know how to keep his shit clean.

Hex video chats Juliana to see which one of her results is the right guy. She waffles between two of them, and Snake prints them both out just to be safe. One guy is pretty clean, a car salesman in Jefferson. He has two petty thefts on his sheet from when he was younger, but he's been clean as a whistle for over a decade. The second guy, on the other hand...

With his face clearly displayed on the monitor, a cold dread settles in my stomach. He was dressed as a pizza delivery man, giving me flak about how he had a job to do and he needed to talk to the person who ordered the pizza. I knew Melissa hadn't ordered anything that night. She was too shaken up. When I told him to get lost, he took a major attitude with me, and I was ready to punch him in the face just for the hell of it.

I should've gone with my gut that night. He was the same creep who followed her around in the club. He may have sucked at his job both times, but it doesn't change the fact that

he took two chances to get at her. Who knows how many other times he's tried to get to her. He may even be the one who has her now.

"Give me an hour," Snake says, handing Hex his phone back and turning away from us to his virtual world. "If there's any connection between the two of them, I'll find it."

"Thank you," I tell him, getting up from my seat numbly and heading back to the meeting room where Pocus and Seer are both on their phones. Seer looks up at me to give me a thumbs up, but I don't feel an ounce of his cheerfulness.

"We don't know much yet," I tell him, feeling defeated. I'd hoped finding either one of those guys would help me feel more assured that we'll find her, but I somehow feel less confident now.

"It's hard, I know," Pocus says seriously, eyeing me with the look of a man who's nearly lost the love of his life on more than one occasion. Not that Melissa is the love of my life. "We haven't failed before. We'll find her."

"Whatever," I say with a shrug, putting my feet up on a chair and closing my eyes. I'm trying to show them that I'm nonchalant about this whole thing, that I don't care if we find her or not. After all, what is she really to me? Just a pretty girl I spent some time with.

"He's not fooling anyone," Pocus whispers dramatically to Seer, making sure he's loud enough to be heard. "Twenty bucks says he's married within the year."

"Pocus, have some compassion," Seer replies a little louder, and I'm about to thank him. But then he says, "They're going to need some time to heal from this. I'm putting fifty down for a year and a half."

"Forty on six months," Hex chimes in, coming back into the room

I genuinely hate them all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Buffy

I t's not often Seer pulls me off the bar. It's my job and I'm very good at it. I've been serving the men of this club their drinks for years, and it brings me great joy to do my job well. But, when the Prez calls, you don't say no. That's a motto I've lived by for years, and it's one I'll continue to follow until I'm too old and frail to keep up with this life. Hopefully that day never comes.

"You know I wouldn't ask if it weren't important," Seer whispers to me urgently as he hands me a phone and the keys to his spare bike. Mine probably doesn't work anymore, it's been so long since I rode it. "I'm worried about Bones. We're all worried about him. His stubbornness is going to be the death of him."

"You want me to babysit," I guess, looking over the phone that I barely know how to use. It's much too complicated for me.

"Not babysit, just ..." Seer looks off, struggling to find the right words for the situation. He seems to forget that I hear about everything that happens with the men. Sometimes they have conversations like I'm not even there, and I keep their business to myself. That's the sacred oath of a bartender. It's not my business to share.

"Bones respects you," he finally manages. "Everyone does, Buffy, and I think he'll be able to keep his emotions in check a little better if you're around. You know how he and Hex can be on their own. They tend to get carried away sometimes."

“Babysitting,” I confirm, and he nods with a sigh. “Got it, Prez. Whatever you need.”

“Don’t crash my bike,” he warns. “I’d let you use Snake’s, but I’m not sure it’s in any better shape than yours.”

Snake breezes into the room with a large file for Seer. “Here’s all the info you need about your guy. His address, all known associates, place of business, you get the gist.”

“Not many associates in here,” Seer says, looking through the file. “And you’re sure the two men have no connection at all?”

Snake shakes his head and shrugs. “I went back ten years, there’s nothing between them. Maybe they went to high school together or something, but there’s no indication that they’ve even met each other.”

Seer nods and turns his attention back to me.

“Just keep those two out of trouble,” he asks wearily, tossing me his keys. “Don’t try to get in between them if they start throwing punches, but call me right away.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, shooting Snake a look. He knows my shortcomings with technology better than most. As I walk past him, he slips something large and heavy into my pocket. When I’m away from Seer’s watchful gaze, I see it’s an old cell phone with actual buttons. Hallelujah.

I meet Bones and Hex outside of the house, and I immediately see what Seer means. Bones sits on his bike, anxious and ready to go. He’s kicking at the driveway, unable to sit still, like a petulant child. When he sees me, he doesn’t even acknowledge me, he just throws on his helmet and revs his engine. Hex, at least, looks my way and shrugs. We’re on the road in seconds, the wind whipping against us as I follow the two men. I’m not exactly sure where we’re going, but it’s nice to feel the concrete beneath me again.

I don’t do this enough, don’t leave the clubhouse enough. Truthfully, this was as much a gift to me as it was a request. I usually only hear about the action after it’s happened. I almost never get to take part in it.

We drive into the city, into a rundown part of town. Bones pulls up short at an apartment building that's definitely seen better days. It seems the residents may have seen better days too. There's an old man with no teeth sitting on the stoop shooting up. It's grim, to say the least.

Hex and Bones park their bikes and push past the old man, ignoring his pleas for money. Seeing him makes me think that maybe leaving the clubhouse isn't all it's cracked up to be. It's bleak out here. I follow them through a hallway and up a flight of stairs. The whole building smells of piss and alcohol. The light in the hallway keeps flickering out, casting the whole building in a dim, sickly glow.

"This is the one," Bones says when he reaches the third apartment.

Hex's hand reflexively moves to the hem of his pants where he's stashed his gun. He's ready for a fight, and I'm here to stop one. I wonder if Seer told him the real reason he asked me to come.

Bones pounds on the door and we wait awkwardly for any response. There's no sign of life inside, though a baby cries through the walls of another apartment. Christ, I can't even imagine bringing up a child in a dump like this. What kind of life is that child going to have?

"If he doesn't answer, I'm breaking down the door," Bones hisses through gritted teeth. "This asshole has five seconds."

He pounds on the door again and I can almost hear him counting in his head.

"See if it's open," I say, trying to keep the situation as calm as possible. Bones is in the frame of mind to destroy something, but it isn't always necessary.

Begrudgingly, he turns the knob to find that it is, in fact, unlocked. He turns to glare at me as he pushes the door open and steps across the threshold. Hex and I follow behind at a good distance.

The place is a mess, more or less exactly what I expected to find in a building like this. There's trash littering the floor

where there aren't dirty clothes. I'd hate to have to mop these floors. I thought alcohol was hard to clean up, but there are probably organisms living under these trash piles.

The apartment is small, just a narrow living room and a hallway leading to the bathroom. It looks like he sleeps on the couch, and there's not a kitchen so much as there's a hot plate and a minifridge. What there isn't, is any signs of human life. The place is empty, and it looks like it might have been recent.

"This is a dead end," Bones says, his voice hard and angry. "He's not here."

"I'll call Seer," Hex calls after him as Bones breezes out of the small room and takes the stairs two at a time, like he can't stand to be in the building for one more second. I don't blame him. It's not an uplifting place to be, especially when he's already in a frantic state.

I follow behind him with Hex trailing us, trying to get through to Seer. They connect and I hear fragments of the conversation and more disappointment in Hex's voice. So it's not good news.

One thing I've become an expert at over the years is reading people. It isn't just about looking at their body language, sometimes it's about listening to their tone of voice and detecting the slightest changes. Hex is trying to be supportive of Bones, to follow his lead and be his rock. But he's starting to see that this is a hopeless situation, and he doesn't want to be the one to deliver the bad news. I hang back with him and wait for him to finish his call. It may sound better coming from me.

"How are they doing on their end?" I ask, indicating toward his phone.

Seer and Pocus went to check out the apartment of another man. From what I understood of this mission, they were both leads in the disappearance of Bones's girl. Poor Bones is absolutely beside himself, doing anything he can to ease his own pain. The worst part is, he's so blind to why he's feeling the way he is. It's clear to me, and probably to everyone else who knows him.

Bones is in love with this girl. I noticed it weeks ago when he came to the bar. There was a heaviness about him, a worry that only comes to those whose loved ones are in trouble. I've seen it a million times over the years, but I never thought I'd see it on him.

Everything about Bones is closed off, even to an expert like me. He's a marble slab, hard, shiny, and impenetrable. Even with Hex, his closest friend in the group, he's always got a wall up, sky high. I don't know what's happened in his life and it isn't my place to ask. All I do know is that he doesn't let anyone into his fortress.

After he met this girl, though, there was a tiny crack. It would've been unnoticeable to anyone else, but I've been watching Bones for years. It was a split second, in the way he talked about her, in the way his eyes lit up before immediately glazing over to show no emotion. The worst part is, Bones doesn't even seem to realize that so many people are helping because they care about him and they're rooting for his happiness.

"It was the same for them," Hex says, staring at the phone still in his hand. "They got to the apartment and nobody was there. They said it looked like maybe he'd packed a bag or something. There were clothes scattered everywhere, and in his case, it didn't look like they permanently lived on the floor."

"That's interesting," I murmur. "Both men are gone, both doors left unlocked. It's like they were tipped off. Like they knew we were coming."

Hex nods heavily and the tension resting on him is evident. He stares out the dirty hallway window to where Bones sits outside. He's furious, pacing around and pulling at his hair. The sooner we get back down there, the better.

"Let me tell him," I offer to Hex. "He won't take the news well either way, but it may sound a little better coming from me."

Hex stares in surprise, but nods his agreement. "Do what you gotta do," he says. "Thank you."

We descend the stairs a little more slowly, both of us feeling the weight of the conversation that has to be had. Bones isn't going to be happy when he hears it. His anxiety is surely going to go up, and he's very likely going to express it in unhealthy ways. But there's nothing we can do to fix the situation right now. All we can do is pivot our plan and figure out the next step.

"This is fucking ridiculous," Bones says as he watches us approach. "This asshole is a coward. He'll be lucky if one of you gets to him before I do."

"You're right," I tell him. "But don't think we'll go easy on him either. He has to pay for what he did."

"Damn right!" Bones bellows, scaring the druggie on the stoop. "So, what did Seer say? Did they at least get the other guy?"

I sigh heavily and brace myself. Telling Bones this news won't be dissimilar to telling a child that Santa Claus doesn't exist. I'm stealing away the last shred of hope he has, unable to promise him that there might be hope on the other side. It has to be done.

"He wasn't there," I tell him calmly. "When Seer and Pocus arrived, it seemed that he'd just left, like maybe he was tipped off that they were on their way. I know it seems bad, but—"

"Bad?" He laughs humorlessly. "It doesn't seem bad, Buffy, it seems like a goddamn nightmare. She's missing and I..."

His voice cracks, and I see it again. There's that imperceptible shift. It breaks through his exterior for just a second before he clams back up and hides it away.

"I know it seems bad," I repeat. "But we're here for you, and we aren't going to rest until she's safe. You're not doing this alone."

He nods quickly and looks away, the emotion overwhelming him. I glance back to Hex, who's looking down at the ground, wanting to give Bones his privacy. I put my

hand on Bones's shoulder for just a split second to let him know that we're behind him all the way. I squeeze tight and release, knowing that's the closest thing to a hug he'll ever allow.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



The ceiling fan in my room squeaks when it's set too high. It's the most irritating sound in the world, but sometimes it's necessary to keep my room cool in the Louisiana heat. A little bit of irritation is worth the payoff in the end. Now, though, it gives me a migraine. I haven't slept in this room in nearly two weeks, barely even stepped in it long enough to grab essentials.

There's no point in going back to Melissa's now. I'd drive myself crazy sitting on the couch and hoping that, by some miracle, she'd just burst through the door and tell me the whole thing was a misunderstanding. I wouldn't even be angry, I'd be too relieved. I'd pull her into my arms and ...

And nothing. Because she hates me, and I wasn't overly fond of her the last time we saw each other. None of that matters now, of course. The only thing that matters is that we find her and bring her home safely. And if there's a single hair out of place, I'll kill whoever moved it. I'm not messing around, I've been itching to make someone pay for this.

The others are all downstairs, regrouping and re-strategizing. They still have hope that we're going to find her. They're fools, of course. All Mayor Prudent has to do is announce he's dropping out of the race. That's all he has to do. It's been ... I look at my phone and see that it's only been 18 hours. She hasn't even been gone a full day, but it's felt like weeks. I haven't slept in 36 hours, and I doubt there will be any in my future. I'm too wired, too twitchy.

I'm also out of patience for kind words and platitudes. I know my friends are just trying to help, but the more they say, "She'll be fine," the less it sounds true. It's become an unofficial mantra, something they're all saying just to placate me. Which is just stupid, because I'm not in a relationship with her. My interest in her safety begins and ends with ...

Fuck.

It's so goddamn obvious, isn't it? Everyone sees it except for me. They've all given me shit about it and I've chosen to ignore them, but it's so stupidly obvious and simple. Even I'm not dense enough to ignore what's happening here. I love her. I'm fucking in love with her. I don't know exactly when it happened, but somewhere between completely ignoring her existence and becoming her full-time bodyguard, I've crossed a line I never thought I'd cross.

Those assholes downstairs are never going to let me live it down. I won't tell them, even with my dying breath. They can speculate and make jokes at my expense all they want, but at the end of the day, this feeling is only reserved for her. Melissa. She's the only one I'll ever share it with, and I will have a chance to share it with her. There's no question I'm going to save her and then I'm going to tell her I love her.

Even if she rejects me, even if she sends me away and tells me she never wants to see me again, I'll know it and she'll know it. I close my eyes just for a second, my ears ringing with the realization. Even the damn fan stops bothering me for a second.

I turn the new information over in my head, assessing it from all sides. I've never loved anyone before, not even in a non-romantic way. I'd take a bullet for anyone of my brothers, but I'd never say that I love them. Half the time I can't stand them. It's a lot for me to take in and my brain is kicked into hyperdrive.

The next thing I know, my phone buzzes against me. I hold it up to my face and realize that two hours have gone by. I must have fallen asleep. Even more surprising, there's an email notification on my phone. I didn't even know I got

emails on this phone. It's certainly the first time I've gotten a notification.

Snake set us all up with email addresses a few years ago, saying that we had to legitimize ourselves as businessmen. He added the damn app to my phone and I never thought about it again until this moment. Curiosity gets the best of me, even though all I want to do is lie in the dark and shut out the world. There's an attachment in the email from a blocked address. In my head, I hear Snake giving a lecture about email safety, but I don't care. This could be important.

My stomach rolls when I see Melissa sitting there, tied to a chair. She's holding a newspaper with today's date, and she's clearly been crying. Her skin is pale and waxy, and her hair looks flatter than I remember. She looks awful, and it's all I can do not to scream out in anger.

"This is a message to the Ruthless Kings," she says with a shaky, hoarse voice. "I know that you're looking for me, but you have to stop. My captors only want one thing. My father resigns from office and they let me go. End of story. If you come for me, they will kill me."

She delivers the message with as much courage as she can, her voice not breaking on the words. But her shoulders are sagged and tears form in her eyes as she begs us not to come for her. What the hell am I supposed to do with that?

I quickly get out of bed and run to my door, nearly knocking Seer over when I try to leave. He's standing in the doorway, hand raised in an apparent knock. He's startled and there's a grim look on his face, but he doesn't move. He plants himself firmly in my way so that I can't get past him.

"It doesn't change anything," he says, and I know he's seen the video. "We're not going to stop looking for her. We're going to get her back."

"And what if you get her killed?" I shout, my voice carrying down the hall. I see Hemlock stick his head out of his room and shoot me a sympathetic look before going back inside and shutting the door. "How did this even happen?"

“We’re looking into it,” Seer says calmly, putting his hand against my chest to calm me. He should know that won’t work, but he’s not backing down. “Snake is downstairs right now analyzing the video and running system checks. There’s probably a leak somewhere and we’re going to deal with it.”

“Move, Seer,” I tell him, my voice low and dangerous. “Get the hell out of my way, I’m not going to be treated like a prisoner in my own damn house.”

Seer steps aside and gestures for me to exit. I brush past him and run through the house until I get to Snake’s office. He’s typing fast and furiously at his machines, cursing under his breath.

“What the fuck...” he mutters quietly, trailing off. “What the actual fu—”

“What is it?” I ask him, invading the small space of the office. “Tell me something helpful for once.”

He glances up at me briefly before turning back to his monitor and squinting. He types away at an unbelievable speed, code quickly appearing and disappearing on the screens.

“I’m handling it,” he tells me simply. “That’s the best I can offer you.”

“Do better,” I tell him seriously. “Get that tech freak of a wife down here and figure out how the hell these assholes knew we were coming for them.”

“It isn’t that easy,” he says, still not looking at me. “The video is encrypted to shit, and somewhere there’s a microscopic hole in the system that I can’t find. We fortified this system better than the Pentagon last year, so there’s no reason that anyone should have been able to get past the firewalls.”

“I’m hearing a lot of excuses,” I seethe. “I’m not hearing any solutions.”

“The solution...” he starts with clenched teeth, craning his neck to look at something on his second monitor. “The solution is that you get out of here and let me work. The

longer you distract me, the longer it takes for me to get to the bottom of the leak. I know you're worried about your girl, but I can't help her until I figure out who exactly hacked my system and how."

"Take a lap," Seer says from behind me, and I turn to glare at him. "We both know this isn't Snake's fault. He's only just gotten back, he couldn't have known."

I push past him again, the ever-present nervous energy coursing through my body until I'm unable to do anything but pace. Melissa is going to die if her father doesn't drop out of the race. Hell, she might still die if he does. I'm not going to trust the assholes who took her to keep their word. I'll tear the city apart to find her, but if I do, they'll put a bullet in her head. I'm trapped.

"He has to drop out of the race," I say desperately. "Seer, you have to make him drop out of the race, it's the only way we'll get her back!"

"I'm leaving now," he says. "I'm going to talk to him and we'll figure it out. We won't let her die, Bones, you have to believe that."

I nod and pinch the bridge of my nose, where I can feel pressure forming. Dammit, I'm not going to start crying in front of Seer. That's not something I do. The last time I remember crying, I was five years old. What the hell has this woman done to me?

"You tell him that if he doesn't call a press conference, I'm personally coming after him," I say with all the strength I can muster. "He can hire an entire army to protect him and I'll still get to him."

"Don't be stupid, Bones," he tells me with genuine concern. "Don't think for a second he doesn't care about his daughter as much as you do. He came here on a suicide mission today to get her back when he thought we had her. He's not going to let them kill her."

I nod and watch him go, sure that he's going to do what's best for everyone, and afraid none of it will matter. Seer is a

great leader, but he's also a diplomat to his core. He wants to keep the peace, and I want a war right now. The second I hear his bike pull away, I'm back in Snake's office, standing over him while he works.

"That won't make me go faster," he says sarcastically. "If you want to be useful, go get me Seer's laptop. The more machines I have working on this, the better."

I do as he requests and go to Seer's office to find his laptop. When I come back, I have to ask him something so I can keep my brain occupied with any other image than Melissa's lifeless body.

"How could they send that email to us?" I ask. "You said once that our email was on an encrypted server and only we had access."

Snake sighs heavily, fully over my shit, but I don't care. There's absolutely nothing I can do right now but be miserable, and damn if I'm not going to drag everyone down with me.

"That's true," he says patiently. "Good memory. Unfortunately, they've infiltrated the whole system. They've got access to everything, they've even implanted a malware that let them see what I was working on. That's probably how they tipped off those guys."

I nod, though it doesn't really make any sense to me.

"So they can see what you're doing now?" I ask, thinking this is all pointless if they can see our every move.

"No," he answers firmly, shaking his head. "I'm still looking for the leak, but I've set up a dummy dashboard. They'll see us replaying the video they sent, but nothing else. Until I can get the hole plugged, it's the best I can do."

"Thank you," I tell him. "I know it's your job or whatever, but I do really appreciate your help."

"Are you kidding?" he asks, finally turning to look at me. "Bones, you're in love. The bonafide bachelor has fallen, this is history in the making. There was no way I was going to miss this."

I punch him in the arm, but I can't help but smile. The jig is up, everyone knew about my feelings before I did. There's no point in hiding them now. All that matters is making sure I get her back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Seer

If Mayor Prudent looked disheveled this morning, he looks like a terminally ill patient now. His skin is a light shade of gray, though he's shaved since I last saw him, and he's put on a freshly pressed suit. This has to be one of the worst moments of his entire life.

"I'm glad you're here, Seer," he says, his tone slightly hysterical. "You must have seen the news."

I'm confused as I follow him inside his mansion. It's a new build, one the city purchased shortly before he came into office. The atmosphere is light and airy, completely contradictory to how the man looks.

"I haven't seen the news," I admit. "What's happened?"

He walks me into a large, open living room where a huge television has the news playing with the sound off. There's an image of Melissa on the screen, not dissimilar to the one I received earlier. She's holding the newspaper in her hand and there's fear in her eyes. The caption underneath reads, "Breaking News: Mayor Prudent's daughter kidnapped, Mayor blackmailed into resigning."

"They've been playing it on a loop for the last twenty minutes," he tells me, his voice barely above a whisper. "My baby is terrified, and she just wants to come home."

His voice breaks again, and I put a hand on his shoulder to show my silent support. I'm not sure what else to do, truthfully. I've come to tell him he should resign, to take away the hope that we can bring her back safely without any

physical harm coming to her. The screen changes and Davis Thompson is now standing outside of City Hall, talking to a group of reporters.

“Turn it up,” I tell him, curious to hear how this asshole can make this situation about him.

With a dissatisfied sigh, Mayor Prudent picks up the remote and unmutes the television.

“Obviously, my heart goes out to the Prudent family,” he says in an overdramatic, haughty tone. “This is a man who’s fought for the safety of this city, and some ruthless gangbangers have decided to test the limits of his new policies. To take someone’s child, that’s just reprehensible.”

He pauses while someone offscreen asks a question. He’s lapping it up, enjoying his time in the limelight. What’s better for the opposition than for the seated mayor to be blackmailed into quitting? If Mayor Prudent drops out of the election, Davis will be the favorite to win.

“No, I didn’t know Mayor Prudent had a daughter either,” he says in response to the reporter’s question. “They’ve kept her hidden for a reason during his term, and this exploitation just disgusts me. How low are people willing to stoop to blackmail those in power? It almost makes me think of resigning in protest.”

Mayor Prudent mutes the TV again and throws the remote against a far wall. Davis is still talking, still showing what a caring and supportive opponent he is. It’s truly amazing to me that he’s called a press conference to discuss a situation that has nothing to do with him. My instinct about him was right, he’s a bastard through and through.

“This is what I’m leaving the city to,” Mayor Prudent grunts. “He’s a smarmy little twerp with no real-life political experience. The people just like him because he’s young and attractive, but he’s going to run this city into the ground.”

I nod in agreement, but the truth hangs heavy between us. He’s going to resign. He’s going to let the bastards win.

“Have you already called the press?” I ask him, noticing how quiet the house is. It seems that, again, he’s all alone and dealing with this by himself.

“They’ll be here in half an hour,” he confirms. “I’ve already signed the document, I’m just waiting on my secretary to come notarize it. I’m not going to let them hurt my daughter.” He turns to me with a solemn look on his face. “And I suppose your presence means that you aren’t able to help me.”

I shake my head once, the guilt nearly swallowing me. Maybe if I had more time, I could make this right for him. Snake would plug the leak in our security and track down the hacker. We’d figure out where Melissa is. We’d have time to coordinate and plan a surprise attack so well-executed that they wouldn’t be able to hurt her because we’d be too fast.

But I have thirty minutes before he resigns, and that’s not enough time. Not when we’ve been working all day to find her, only to receive the video of her telling us to stop. I won’t let her be a casualty of my arrogance. I’m not going to put this girl in harm’s way just so I can prove to the mayor that we’re the best at what we do.

“Can I ask,” I venture, not wanting to rub salt into his wound. “Why didn’t you call the press conference the moment you got the ransom note? Why has it taken you twenty-four hours to reach this decision?”

His shoulders slump and he walks around to the other side of the couch, collapsing into the large cushions. He puts his head in his hands and starts to openly weep.

“I’m not a bad father,” he says through his tears. “I didn’t wait to prolong her torture.”

“I didn’t think you did,” I tell him. “Not for one second. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked. Forget I said anything.”

“No,” he says weakly. “It’s a fair question. At first, I thought maybe it was a joke. An awful, poorly executed joke. My wife is always complaining that she wants to retire and

spend more time with our daughter. She really thinks my career is the reason we don't see her enough.

"But once the shock wore off, I knew it was legitimate. Right down to the serial killer letters. I didn't tell my wife or my staff or anyone. I sent them all away. Until this story started running a few minutes ago, they probably didn't even know. Christ, Bridgette is probably beside herself right now."

"You did what you thought you had to do," I tell him.

"I thought I'd get you to hand her over and that would be that," he says with a sad smile. "That's obviously not how it turned out. Then, after I saw you, I thought, 'Maybe this fellow can really help me. Maybe there's hope.' I don't blame you, of course," he says with a nod. "It was too much to expect.

"But I suppose the real reason I waited was because I truly love this city. I want to do what's best for it. I'm sorry if that means I've caused you more stress than you needed, but I want to leave this city better than I found it. I was born and raised here, my heart beats to the jazz they play in the streets. I really thought I could still help people."

He pauses for a moment and looks down at his shaking hand. This situation has taken a physical toll on him. Even when she gets home safely, and we will bring her home safely, he's going to be dealing with the effects of this for years to come.

"Besides, I've come out hard on crime," he says weakly. "If I give up at the first sign of trouble, people will think I'm a hypocrite. They'll always remember me as the man who gave up, the man who let his personal life get in the way of his political promises."

He gets up from the couch and walks over to the distant side of the living room. For the first time, I notice an end table with expensive bottles carefully placed on top. It doesn't look like a bar cart, more like a museum display. Even from a distance, I can see that they're vintage, probably gifts he's acquired over the years. He picks up one of the bottles and stares at it longingly.

“An ambassador from France gave me this,” he says. “It’s a hundred and fifty thousand dollar bottle of cognac. It costs more than my first home.”

I whistle lowly, not sure exactly where he’s going with this. But I recognize a desperate man who needs space to process his feelings. He needs this.

“I always thought if my political career didn’t work out, I’d sell this bottle for cash. It’s my backup plan. Not that it’s as much money in this economy. A hundred and fifty K won’t buy me a double-wide trailer on the bayou.”

“Maybe a single wide,” I joke.

He opens the bottle slowly, regretfully, and takes a drink straight from it. He doesn’t even give it a moment to breathe. He swallows and his face screws up.

“Awful stuff,” he sputters, replacing the lid on the bottle and putting it back on the shelf. “Tastes like piss. Can you believe someone would waste so much money for shitty brandy?”

“You don’t have to do this,” I tell him sympathetically. “Give me a few more hours, I know we can find her.”

He shakes his head sadly. “We both know it’s over, Seer. You wouldn’t be here if it weren’t. They got to you too, didn’t they?”

“You’re a good man,” I tell him earnestly. “If you weren’t, they wouldn’t have to use Melissa to blackmail you. They—”

I stop short. Davis Thompson’s face still fills the screen, a determined look on his face. The caption reads: *Davis Thompson: “We can’t let the terrorists win.”* Well, if he isn’t the king of catchy phrases.

“Give me one hour,” I tell him, heading toward the door. “Cancel the press conference and shred your resignation. I’m going to bring her back.”

He follows me to the front door, looking confused and wary. Maybe it’s a longshot, but the feeling in my gut tells me that I’m right on the money with this.

“Please, Mayor Prudent,” I say with as much conviction as I can muster. “Screw your promise to me, screw our deal. I told you, I’m a father and I want to help you. I promise that I’ll have Melissa back to you before the night is over or you can shut down the Ruthless Kings and kick us all out of New Orleans.”

“That’s one hell of an offer,” he says, a hint of a smile on his face. “But I’m not holding my breath. You have an hour, then I’m starting the press conference.”

“It’s all I need,” I promise, pulling on my helmet and jumping on my bike. There’s a lot of ground to cover in an hour.

I race home and immediately call Pocus. I really, really don’t want to be wrong, but I do have to cover all my bases. I ask him to take Bones and check out the Bayou Reapers’ old hideout. Bones needs to get out of the house or he’s going to break something. Maybe even someone. And Pocus is the person I trust most in the world. He doesn’t ask questions, just agrees to come as soon as possible and get Bones.

I find Bones still in Snake’s office and tell him the new plan. He looks at me skeptically, but he’s never been one to question my authority. He sighs and slowly exits the room, heading straight for the front door.

Snake looks up at me with gratefulness. “What’s up, Prez?” he asks, his face lit up with curiosity. “Do you have a lead?”

“Better,” I tell him. “I’m almost ninety percent sure I know who took that girl. You’re going to get me to hundred percent.”

He nods and awaits my instructions, his fingers poised to start a new search.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Pocus

Seer was nearly manic when he asked me to grab Bones and turn over the Bayou Reapers' old hideout. He was either onto something or *on* something, but he wouldn't give me a hint either way. He just said it was important for us to look for clues about Melissa's whereabouts. So far, they're the only suspects, and apparently time is of the essence with this. Personally, I don't know what we can do with 20 minutes, but he said that was all he could give us.

I'm grateful Bones is with me, since he is one of the best shooters of the club. It's why I made him my sergeant at arms all those years ago. He's strong and he's a fighter. If we encounter any danger at all, he's going to put himself in the way of it. That's what he's best at. Tonight, though, there's a heaviness about him I haven't seen before.

I haven't seen him at all since I caught him smiling at the dance teacher a few weeks ago. It's incredible to see how this relationship has changed him. He's worried to the point of obsession. It's a feeling I know very well. Love is a blessing and a curse. It's the most wonderful feeling in the world until it makes us crazy. Suddenly, it's like we have no control over our thoughts or our actions. Everything we do is consumed by it.

He may deny it all he wants that he isn't in love with this girl, but he wouldn't be here if that were the truth. We're potentially walking into a viper's den. If there are any Bayou Reapers who haven't been arrested, they're going to be defensive and extremely dangerous. If there's no one there, he

might become defensive and extremely dangerous. Either way is a sure sign that his feelings for her run deeply.

We park our bikes a quarter mile away from their old hideout, not wanting to announce our arrival. If anyone is here, we want to see them before they see us. We approach the old house very carefully. The place is rundown, situated in the middle of an abandoned graveyard. They are called the Reapers for a reason.

We pick our way carefully through the headstones, ready to duck and cover if need be. Bones is all tension and heightened awareness. He looks like he's ready to pounce on someone at the first sign of trouble. For his sake, I do hope he gets the chance. There's nothing worse than that helpless feeling of loss.

So far, though, it's quiet on this front. We approach the house and there's no sign of life. I pull out my pocketknife to cut through the layers of police tape surrounding the front door. It falls easily to the ground, and I test the doorknob. It's locked, but it's an old door. I'm surprised they didn't have more security at their front door, though I suppose the Reapers' reputation is enough to keep people away.

In my time as Prez of the Ruthless Kings, I made sure to never get into tangles with the Reapers, or their leader, Samson. He was named for his incredible strength and his spotless record of taking down his enemies. It was better for everyone if we just stayed off their radar and never tangled. We had enough enemies as it was, but even our fiercest enemies were puppies compared to the Reapers.

My pocketknife is sufficient to jimmy the lock, and soon enough, Bones and I are stepping over the threshold into a clearly empty house. If anyone else were here, I'd be able to sense them. It feels exactly like the graveyard. It's dead inside. Maybe if Hex were here, he'd be able to speak with the ghosts who surely make this place their home.

"No one's here," I tell Bones. "Let's get this done fast. You take upstairs and I'll take down."

Bones nods, picking his way through the house to the squeaky staircase. I hear each step groaning under his weight. I can't believe anyone lived here, let alone operated a major gang from this house. It's a relic of a New Orleans of the past. I hold up my flashlight and carefully pick through all of the rooms on the downstairs. Apart from scattered furniture, it looks like everything else is gone. Either the police were extremely thorough in their raid, or someone's come back to clear the place out. There's nothing here, even in what clearly was the main office.

I hear Bones approaching, and turn my flashlight on him to see his downtrodden face. The anger and disappointment he's experiencing would be evident even if I couldn't feel it.

"There's nothing here, Pocus," he says with a pained voice. "This was just another dead end."

"Seer was probably counting on that," I tell him as we make our way out of the abandoned house. "He seemed really sure of himself when he called and asked me to check this out."

"So he purposely wasted our time?" Bones grumbles as we pick our way through the graveyard. "Why would he do that?"

"Because he knows where she is, and he just wanted to be sure."

Bones grunts his displeasure at this and remains silent as we quickly walk back to our bikes. He pulls away first, driving so fast I can hardly keep up with him. By the time we reach the clubhouse, he's off his bike and storming toward the front door as I park. His anger is so strong, I can feel it from the driveway.

I quickly follow after him, hoping to mitigate any fight that might break out. As soon as I get inside, I see that he's already taken out his anger on one of the hallway walls. There's a perfect fist-shaped hole and an annoyed Seer.

"You're going to feel like kissing me in a minute," he says to Bones, not concerning himself with the man's outrage.

“Come into the meeting room. You too, Pocus,” he calls so I know he saw me come in.

I clap Bones on the shoulder and push him toward the meeting room where Snake is, staring at a wall full of mugshots he’s hastily taped there.

“That’s all of them,” he says, turning toward Seer and looking surprised by our presence. “Good timing.”

“Gentlemen,” Seer says, motioning us to sit down. “While you were checking out the Reapers’ hideout, Snake was cross-referencing their membership records with the arrest reports. Everyone who was associated with the club is currently sitting in jail. He’s just confirmed it.”

Seer looks over to the wall and Snake nods once.

“And we had to drive all the way out there, why?” Bones grumbles. “Couldn’t you have figured that out without us leaving?”

The irritation falls off of him in waves.

“We could have,” Seer confirms calmly. “But you needed to do something with all that nervous energy and clear your head. And, hopefully, you’re more geared up now for a fight. Because I know where Melissa is, and we’re going to go get her.”

The irritation swiftly changes to surprise and Bones sits up straighter.

“I’ve called the mayor to give him the good news,” he goes on. “He’s given me another hour to safely retrieve her before he resigns. Discretion and careful planning will be essential to getting her back. Do you understand?”

Bones nods carefully and awaits further instruction from our leader. I can’t deny that I’m impressed with Seer. He knew exactly what Bones needed to calm down, and now he’s going to get the best out of him as we prepare for our fight. He’s come a long way since he first took over the leadership. There’s something more confident about him now, surer of his actions.

“I have to admit, I have a lot of respect for Mayor Prudent,” Seer says, surprising me. “He’s not a bad man. He’s honest and he cares about this city. The power doesn’t seem to have gone to his head. It would be a damn shame to have him retire and let the likes of Davis Thompson take over this city.”

“You really want to talk about politics right now?” Bones snaps, standing up and pacing the floor. Now that he knows that Melissa is within reach, he’s not able to keep still.

“No,” he says. “I’m telling you who has Melissa.”

Bones immediately stops pacing and looks at Seer with shock. It’s mirrored in my own expression as I assess Seer. There isn’t a hint of humor or jest in his face.

“You’re joking,” I say. “You must be. Why would he have Melissa?”

“Because he knows he isn’t going to win the election,” Seer explains, standing up slowly and handing me a piece of paper. “Don’t forget, he tried to bribe me to get me to dig up dirt on Prudent. He was willing to give us full immunity for it.”

I look down at the paper and see a satellite image of a small warehouse. I look back up at Seer, my eyebrow quirked in question.

“This is where he has her,” he tells me confidently. “It took some digging and looking past shell corporations, but he definitely owns this place.”

Bones comes over to hover above me and looks down at the image. Seer points to a small area on the image.

“We think they’re keeping Melissa here,” he explains. “There’s been a lot of increased activity on the satellite camera over the last 24 hours. Nothing that can conclusively show she’s there, but it’s too much of a coincidence. This has to be where he has her.”

“Let’s go, then,” Bones says, taking off for the door.

“We don’t know what we’re walking into,” Seer calls after him. “It’s impossible to tell how many men might be there

guarding her. We need to be smart about this so we can keep her safe.”

I get up and run over to the door, blocking Bones from exiting. Seer’s right, if we aren’t smart, they could kill her. They’ve warned us as much. We have to be as stealthy and efficient as we can.

“We’ll plan on the way, let’s go!” Bones growls desperately. “We can’t leave her in that place for one more second.”

I place my hands on his shoulder gently.

“You need to calm down, first,” I say, looking him straight in his eye. “Seer is right, we have to be smart about this, and we can’t let our emotions control us right now. He’s in charge, just wait for his order.”

Seer gives me a small, grateful smile, but Bones is trying hard to push past me.

“What if it were Abigail?” he asks, his voice pitiful. “Or Daisy? Or Benji?”

“If waiting an extra fifteen minutes means the difference between getting them back safely and getting them killed, I would wait every time,” I answer as calmly as I can.

“Besides,” Seer tells us. “I’ve got to wait for our backup to show up. They should be here any moment.”

As if on cue, there’s the sound of motorcycles pulling into the driveway. I let go of Bones and he takes off towards the front door, opening it wide. Outside, there’s half a dozen Houston Kings idling outside, waiting for us to join them.

“I called them this afternoon,” Seer explains from somewhere behind us. “If we’re going to have a fight, we’re sure as hell going to be ready for it.”

CHAPTER THIRTY



Melissa

I can barely keep my eyes open, but I'm too afraid to sleep. I haven't truly slept at all since I first woke up from the effects of the chloroform. My body and mind feel exhausted, and I have no sense of time at all. Sitting in the dark in silence has messed with my head more than I would ever have thought.

It could have been days since they came into the room, turning the lights on so maddeningly bright that I felt like I'd go blind. After having a bag over my head, it was an unwelcome surprise. They'd handed me a newspaper and forced me to record two videos. The first was for Bones. Any hopes I had that he might rescue me were quickly dashed. Then I had to record one for my dad. It felt like a punch in the stomach. I never wanted him to worry about me, and this is the most worrisome experience I could possibly think up.

I've tried to pass the time by thinking about the kids at the youth center. I pretend that I'm still at work, that I've passed the time teaching class. It's helped a little, kept me somewhat sane. But they haven't given me anything to eat or drink since I arrived. My brain can't seem to recall how long the human body can last without water, but I know it isn't long. Maybe they're just going to let me die of natural causes if my dad doesn't resign.

It kills me that that's what they want. After all the damage we did to our relationship, just so I could live a normal life and he could have a career in politics, this is still where it ends up. I'm the reason he's going to have to resign from a job he loves

and is so passionate about. Unless, of course, he just doesn't resign. I can't imagine he'd do that, but I'm losing my grip on reality. The longer I'm here, the more terrified I am that I'm never leaving.

I think back to the videos I recorded. They'd made me hold a newspaper to show the date. It was just a day after I'd gone out with Juliana. How could that be possible? How much time has gone by since then? My body is so stiff from being tied in this position, my stomach so empty. The room would probably be spinning if I could actually see the room, but that's obviously not going to happen.

My face is damp from the constant crying that's dehydrated me. There are no tears left to cry. I have nothing left. Not even hope. I close my eyes, thinking maybe it's time to just succumb to my exhaustion. It's not like being awake is doing me any good. Apart from the video, I've been completely neglected. No one will mess with me while I'm sleeping. They're trying to break me psychologically since they can't physically harm me.

I'm just finally drifting off when a loud sound jerks me awake. The tears fall from my eyes again, a sob forming in my chest. Did they know I was falling asleep? Are they literally trying to drive me to insanity? I hear another bang, and I immediately recognize the sound of gunshots. Lots of them.

I scream out in terror, the sound rattling my body. My throat burns from the effort, but my body is working on instinct. I can't think, can't feel, I can only fill my captivity with the sound of my fear. Either they're doing this on purpose to frighten me, or someone's come to rescue me. If that's the case, they'll kill me. If it's Bones, they'll kill him, if they haven't already.

As the gunfire continues to go off, I try to force myself to think about happier things. If these are my last moments, I'm not going to waste them begging for my life. That ship has already sailed. I just hope that when the moment comes, when they come to kill me, I remain brave. I close my eyes again and think of the happiest moments I can imagine.

I'm five again and my mom is walking me down the stairs to the living room. The presents under the Christmas tree are wrapped to perfection, the metallic paper shining under the lights. My heart leaps in excitement, knowing all of this is for me. When we step into the room, I see there's another pile of gifts, this one not wrapped. I immediately run to it, grabbing the first thing I can get my hands on.

It's a giant, fluffy teddy bear. I pull it into my arms, though it's almost as big as I am. I squeeze it tight, feeling like I've made a new friend. He becomes my Bear-Bear, and for the next fifteen years, I don't sleep for a single night without him. He becomes ratty and tattered, and eventually I put him away in a box and take him up to the attic. If I make it out of here, I'm going to find Bear-Bear at my parents' house and start sleeping with him again.

Then, I'm six, and my mom is handing me my first pair of ballet shoes. I'm a late starter, the only one in my class who doesn't know what she's doing. The other girls snicker when I don't immediately master a move, but I go home after class and obsessively practice everything I've learned. At first, it's a need to prove to the other girls that I'm just as good as they are, but soon, I'm in love with it. When I'm not in class, it's all I think about. I even beg my mom to buy Bear-Bear a pair of ballet shoes so we can practice together in my room.

My mom. She always smells like lavender and honey, and her hair is never out of place. She's the perfect politician's wife, but that's new. The mom I grew up with was a baker and a craft maker. She was always finding a way to keep herself busy, not content to just be the pretty wife of a government official. Before my dad ran for city council, she was always seen in a pair of jeans with dried paint or stray cake batter. She was messy and lovely and warm.

She's still all of those things, but now it's hidden under a thick layer of makeup and a gallon of hairspray. She wears designer clothes and high heels, and she wears actual aprons when she does anything messy. I try not to think about how she's going to react when she gets the news that I'm dead. This isn't the time for that. This is the time to only think about the

things that make life worth living. The things I'll miss the most.

The gunfire is getting closer. It sounds like it's just feet away, which could be true. They could be just outside of my little prison, ready to put me out of my misery for good. Whoever's here has gone through a lot of trouble for nothing.

I'm at the youth center for my first day and my kids file in for class. Some of them seem so excited, but others look as nervous as I feel. We're all a little apprehensive of each other, but soon we become like a family. Within the week, my students are running into class to hug me, enthusiastically showing me the moves they've been practicing.

I look up and a man catches my eye through the glass walls. He's tall and handsome, with a jaw that could cut glass. He's got a brooding look on his face, and I come to realize that's just the way he always looks. Even when he's happy, he's brooding. He goes from being a stranger to being the most important person in my life. He rescues me, and he keeps showing up for me, even when he finds out I've been lying to him.

How could I have been mad at him for trying to protect me? It's so stupid now, such a waste of precious time. He wasn't being overbearing, I was just angry with him. I was angry at myself. If I could do it over again, I'd never hide the truth from him. I'd tell him everything up front so we could just enjoy the budding relationship between us. I'd tell him that I like him a lot and I want to jump his bones every time he walks through the door. I'd stop being shy and coy and just say what's on my mind.

I don't have a lot of regrets in my life, but he's definitely the biggest. How stupid is it that it took me getting attacked for me to finally have the courage to ask him out? And now I'm going to die, without ever telling him that he's become one of the most important people in my life. My only prayer is that somehow, he'll know. He shouldn't have to carry around any guilt for not rescuing me in time. I know he tried his best.

My heart jumps as I hear a door banging open, and I know this is it. I take another deep, steadying breath, unwilling to show these assholes that they've gotten to me. They can kill me, but they won't get the satisfaction of knowing how thoroughly they've broken me.

The footsteps approach, only one pair this time. I can still hear the gunfire outside the door, so they must have decided this is a one-man job. Maybe only one man can be spared from the fight. He's right in front of me now, so close I can feel his body heat. The bag slowly starts to come off of my head, and I think I'm ready. As ready as anyone can ever be to die, I suppose.

"Open your eyes," he says, but I've always been stubborn. I won't do what he says. "Melissa, you have to open your eyes."

My eyes pop open, because I recognize that voice now. It can't be. He can't be here. I blink a few times, just to make sure, but the image doesn't change. It's Bones. In the too-bright light of the room, he's standing there in front of me, in the flesh. He isn't a mirage or a memory or a figment of my imagination. He's flesh and bone and he's come to rescue me. Even better, he's found me before my captors could get to me.

There's shouting outside, chaos happening on the other side of the door, but he's knelt in front of me, his attention focused on unlocking my handcuffs. There's a pair locking each wrist to the chair, but he's quick. He's clearly experienced in this. Even with his large fingers, he deftly manipulates a pin in the barrel of the lock and gets the first undone, then the second. He uses a pocket knife to cut the rope tying my feet to the chair, and I can't help but to throw myself against him.

His chest is strong and solid, his heartbeat audible from this distance. His arms move around my waist and he's pulling me up into his arms. He tries to stand me up, but my legs are asleep and I can't support my weight. He scoops me up like I'm a doll, like I'm Bear-Bear, and walks me out of my prison.

I press my face against his chest, the tears coming anew. He's moving quickly, getting us away from the noise and to safety, and all I can do is cry. I'm so useless in this situation. I've never been able to protect myself, but he's consistently been there to keep me safe. I literally owe him my life several times over.

"I'm sorry," is the only thing I can manage to say, over and over like a mantra. I whisper it into his chest in between the sobs that wrack my body. In a few moments, I realize that the gunfire sounds distant, and we're somewhere far away, somewhere safe.

"You have nothing to be sorry about," he whispers, gently putting me down. My legs are more awake now, but I still need his support to remain upright. I cling to him, and he clings to me, and I never want to let him go. "Do you think you can hold onto me if I put you on my bike?"

I nod mutely, and he hands me a helmet.

I'm seven and my dad is telling me a fairytale before bed. He tells me about a girl held prisoner in a tower, and how a prince on a white horse comes to set her free. I make him tell me that story several times a week for the next year, because I want to be a princess so badly. I imagine my prince and even pick out a name for the horse that he'll ride.

So, it's a motorcycle and not a horse. And I'm definitely no princess. Being locked away as a prisoner is much more terrifying than I could have imagined, and I'm probably going to need a lot of therapy to process this. Even so, I'm grateful Bones is the prince who came to my rescue.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Seer

The warehouse is quiet when we arrive. There's ten of us in total, Bones and I leading the charge, Hex and Pocus taking the rear, and our friends from Houston in the middle. Snake gave me a heat signature reader he obtained so we aren't totally blind going in. I'm able to see as we get close that most of the body heat is congregated in one part of the warehouse. They're all hunched together, like they're watching TV or something.

On the other side of the warehouse, completely alone and unguarded, is one single heat signature. It can't be that easy, can it? They can't be that stupid. Then again, from the information Snake was able to pull together, this isn't exactly a highly skilled team. They're low-level criminals, all contracted individually in the last month. They've probably viewed this as an easy payday. Little did they know they'd have to face us.

The best thing to do is to draw all their attention away from Melissa so that Bones can safely get her out. I can barely keep him contained as it is, he's about to go rogue and run the whole show. I pull our group up short so we can confer before we go in, literal guns blazing.

"Looks like we've caught a break, boys," I tell them as we huddle up in the woods near the warehouse. "From what I can tell, Melissa is alone. As long as we can keep these assholes distracted, you can grab her and take her home, Bones."

I look up at my friend, my brother, who looks truly hopeful for the first time all day. He nods and waits patiently for the rest of my instruction. A small miracle indeed.

“We’re going to start shooting on the west end of the building,” I say to the others. “Bones, don’t go in until you see the men come out. It looks like there are about a dozen of them, so try to keep count as best you can. A few might run over to grab Melissa, but you’ll be there first. Understand?”

He nods again, silent and buzzing with anticipation,

“We go on my signal,” I say, motioning for the others to follow me to the west end of the building as Bones splits off and goes to the east.

The Houston Kings pull out their pieces first, ready to shoot on my signal. Hex and Pocus move to the side door where we hope the men will start pouring out, ready to fight back. They’ll get the stragglers as they come out. As everyone gets in place, I give the order to fire.

The Houston Kings begin shooting on the side of the building, some bullets ricocheting off the metal, but most going in and making purchase in the wall. From outside, we can hear shouting, and within seconds, the door opens and two men come out.

I can see on my screen that most of them are still inside taking cover. The cowards. Unfortunately, just as I suspected, I see one heat signature running in the other direction, toward Bones. I creep my head around the corner to see that he hasn’t waited, instead going in on his own. Typical, but hopefully he’ll get there before the other man does.

The two who’ve run out of the warehouse start to fire at us, but Hex takes them both out before they get a chance. He shoots one man in the leg, causing him to immediately go down. The other, he simply knocks out with the butt of his gun. He’s not one to spill unnecessary blood if he can help it. He pulls out zip-ties and start binding the men while Pocus pats them down for weapons.

The Houston Kings fire again, and I see one heat signature creeping out of the warehouse through a back way. He probably intends to sneak up on us, but I run to the side of the building and shoot him myself, not giving him the chance. One of the Houston Kings, a man named Rebel, comes over to

take care of him so I can continue monitoring the device. He drags the man over to where we've already apprehended the other two.

"Rebel, you and Spider go to that side of the building in case anyone else tries the same move," I tell him, monitoring the device to see how Bones has fared.

Melissa is still alone, and I see two heat signatures not far away from her. If I know Bones at all, he's giving the man a run for his money. There's chaos amongst the other signatures, they're all moving around frantically on my screen. They must know they're surrounded with no other choice.

Both exits are now covered, so no matter which way the men come out, they'll be taken down by one of our men. Bones is who needs me now. I run past the main entrance, shouting to Pocus to cover me as I go, just in case. I'm halfway to the other side of the warehouse when I hear the sound of the main door opening and look behind to see a few of the men spilling out. Perfect.

I make it to the other door and wrench it open, where I see Bones struggling. He's hovering over a man on the ground, his hands pinning him down, but I can see his gun a few feet away from him. The man is scrappy and fast, actually managing to evade Bones's punches. I recognize him as one of the first assailants Snake pulled up.

"Ricky," I call, drawing the man's attention away from Bones. He looks over at me confused, and Bones manages to land a hard punch, causing him to groan in pain. He tries to wriggle away from Bones, but I'm closer now, my gun pointed directly at his head. "I wouldn't move if I were you," I tell him darkly. "Bones, go, I've got this."

Bones gets off the man and stands up, straightening his clothes. He walks over to his gun and picks it up, replacing it in his holster. He looks at me for assurance and I nod, motioning for him to go get his girl. He turns toward an unmarked door and pushes it open.

I turn my focus back to Ricky, whose hands are up in surrender. He looks terrified and defeated, but I don't trust him

not to try and run. I need to get him away from this area so Bones can safely get Melissa away.

“Get up,” I tell him. “Start walking.”

I keep my gun trained on him, marching him toward the door. He goes quietly, his head hung as he walks back out through the open door. Outside, all hell has broken loose as the rest of the men are trying to hold their ground and fight back. They’ve managed to create a barrier between themselves and my men, shooting back at them from inside the warehouse. I have to admit, they’re smarter than I gave them credit for.

I march Ricky to where Pocus and Hex are guarding the men they’ve apprehended, and zip-tie his hands behind his back. I pat him down just to be sure and find no weapons on him. I hear a sound from behind me and turn to see Bones is carrying Melissa out, getting her away from the fight. No need to hold back now. I tell Hex to keep Ricky conscious. I’ll need to talk to him when we’re finished.

I grab Pocus and pull him away from the gun fight, and back into the warehouse. We run to the other side where the men have locked themselves into what is apparently their breakroom. Pocus shoots around the doorknob, effectively breaking it. Together, we kick in the door.

Most of the men are focused on the main door outside, so our presence takes them by surprise. They try to shoot at us, but we have the advantage. We take out the two main shooters by the door first, so our men on the outside can get to the rest. It takes just two minutes to disarm and apprehend them all. Four of the Houston Kings are able to enter the room and we tie up the rest of them and get them all sat inside.

Some of them look young and green, like this may be the first time they’ve ever held a gun, let alone gotten shot at. Davis really went for the low-hanging fruit when he put together this team. From the intelligence we gathered, Ricky was the first one to be hired, which means he has the seniority. If anyone knows where Davis is, it’ll be him.

Pocus and I grab him and march him through the warehouse to the room where they’d kept Melissa. There’s

nothing more inside than a chair bolted to the ground, two pair of handcuffs that are unlocked on one side, and some rope on the ground. My blood boils at the thought of her in here, and I turn to Pocus to see the same look of fury on his face.

We push the man down into the chair and handcuff one of his zip-tied wrists to it. See how he likes being locked up. If things go the way I've planned, he should start getting used to the feeling. His face goes pale at the sight of us, especially as Pocus looks more fierce than I've seen him in a long time.

"Where's your boss?" he asks, his tone low and dangerous.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he cries out, his voice shaking with fear.

Pocus lands a punch on him and he screams in pain, his hands gripping the chair.

"Wrong answer," I tell him authoritatively. "See, we know all about you, Ricky. You're nothing but an unsuccessful thief with a rap sheet a mile long. Nothing's ever stuck to you, though, so you must feel pretty lucky. Is that why you placed that ad on the dark web?"

There's a beat of silence and he glares up at me through his swollen eye.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he repeats, this time with more conviction. Pocus, in turn, socks him in the stomach and he doubles over in pain. I crouch down so I can look at him at eye level.

"Don't flatter yourself, Ricky," I tell him calmly. "I don't care a thing about you. My associate could put a bullet in your head right now and I wouldn't lose any sleep over it. But I don't think you want that to happen, and I'd much rather see you in jail. What I'm saying, Ricky, is that your luck has run out. So now you get to decide how you'd like to see it end."

What light is left in his eyes go out as he begins to understand that he's beat. Either he's goes to jail on stalking and kidnapping charges, or he's leaving this room in a body bag. He's lost.

“Davis is probably at his apartment,” he says softly as he hangs his head in shame. “He knows you came here, so he’s there hiding. He doesn’t think you’ll try to come after him at home.”

“He’s a fucking idiot,” Pocus murmurs beside me.

We turn to go, knowing time is of the essence.

“You can’t just leave me here,” Ricky screams at our backs. “This isn’t humane.”

“Tell that to Melissa,” Pocus spits back, slamming the door behind him. We hear Ricky shouting at us all the way outside.

We ignore him, and Pocus heads for his bike as I stop to give Hex instructions. He and the Houston Kings are to stay here and wait with the scumbags until they hear the police arrive. The second they see lights or hear a siren they’ll clear out so the police don’t know about their involvement. I pull out my phone to call Mayor Prudent and update him about our progress so far. This next part will be tricky without his help.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Pocus

My heart thrums in my chest as I follow Seer to Davis's apartment. It's been a while since I've gotten to see so much action. Abigail might kill me when she finds out I was involved in a shootout, though. Probably best I don't mention it to her. And the night isn't over yet.

We speed to Davis's place, knowing time is of the essence. If he knew we were at the warehouse, he must know that someone is coming for him. There's no way he's arrogant enough to think he'll get away with this. Then again, he is an aspiring politician. He might think he's untouchable. I can't wait to see his face when he realizes he's caught.

It doesn't take long. We get to his building in no time and rush to his apartment. Seer uses his heat signature detector to ensure he's actually inside. Someone's there, at least, and they're alone.

I press myself against the wall next to the door while Seer knocks. The door opens and an overly confident voice says, "Nicholas! Have you reconsidered my offer?"

Seer shoots me an annoyed look, and I reveal myself, pushing Davis back into his ornate, modern apartment. His expression immediately changes to fear. His arms move up to cover his face while I land punches on him. I find purchase on every part of his body I can reach. He barely puts up a fight, and it actually makes it less fun.

"Get up, you piece of shit," Seer demands, putting his hand on my shoulder to stop me.

I stop hitting the coward, moving to a standing position so I look down on him as he continues to cover his face and curls his body into the fetal position.

“Please don’t kill me,” he whimpers, looking up at us carefully with tears streaming down his face. “I’ll give you whatever you want. I’m sorry I asked you to dig up dirt on Prudent.”

Seer throws his head back to laugh a dark, hollow sound. The sound chills me to the bone and I’m not even the intended recipient. I step back as he crouches down low, sticking his finger into Davis’s face.

“What was the plan, Davis?” he asks, his voice almost a growl. “You thought you’d kidnap the mayor’s daughter and somehow become the hero of the story? Are you really that stupid?”

“I wasn’t going to hurt her,” he cries. “I swear to God. I just wanted to scare Gerald into resigning. He wasn’t supposed to take so long.”

“He wasn’t supposed to be put in that position!” Seer screams into his face. “You. Do. Not. Harm. People’s. Children.”

“What’s it to you?” he sneers, regaining some of his arrogance. “You think that man would ever stick his neck out for you? You heard his plan to eradicate crime. He would put you in jail the second you stepped a foot out of line.”

Seer glares at Davis for a long moment while I wait with bated breath to see what his next move will be. Without warning, he pulls Davis up by his lapels and slams his back into the ground. There’s a sickening *thud* as Davis’s head collides with the tile. He’ll have a nasty bump in a few minutes, if not a concussion.

“Maybe so,” Seer responds to Davis’s taunt. “He could shut down my entire organization and put me in prison for life. But you know what? He’s not a lying piece of shit who extorts people by using their families against them. He’s a lot of things, but he’s not a crooked politician.”

Davis actually manages to laugh and starts to get up from the floor, pushing Seer away so he can struggle to his feet. He sways precariously, almost looking drunk, and glares at Seer. There's a sick glint in his eye, and the sneer is firmly placed on his lips.

"I never took you for a Prudent sycophant," he spits. "I gave you another option, Nicholas. I would have given you and your crew immunity for all crimes, past, present, and future. I would have worked closely with you to ensure our mutual happiness. You threw that away without a thought, and I couldn't figure out why. I wouldn't have imagined that you were such a huge fan of that pious dolt."

"Did you imagine that he'd blame me for the kidnapping?" Seer asks him. "Did you hope that the two of us would kill each other?"

"The thought certainly crossed my mind," he replies with a sick smile. "When I found out that Melissa Prudent worked for your little youth center, it was like hitting the lottery. I couldn't have prayed for better circumstances."

"How did you even get all that information?" I ask him as he stumbles over to the kitchen and grabs a bottle of vodka. "I heard you weren't a big fan of doing your own research."

He chuckles and twists open the bottle with some effort. He looks like he might pass out at any moment, but he lifts the bottle up to his lips and takes a big swig.

"Oh, I'm not," he says when he's finished, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "One of those guys I hired is a real computer wizard. Did you really think you were my only option? He hacked your system before I even approached you. I'd heard you were good at what you do, but I had no idea. Looking at your personal files was ... enlightening, to say the least. I know all your secrets. Pocus, is it? You sure do have an interesting past."

My blood runs cold at his words. Ten minutes ago, he was simply an annoyance. Now, he's a potentially serious threat to our organization and to me personally.

“And Nicholas,” he scoffs, turning to Seer. “Or ... Seeker? Psychic? No, no, I know. Seer, right?”

Seer stiffens as he assesses Davis, then he looks over to me apprehensively.

“Let me think,” Davis says condescendingly, placing his finger on his chin. “You have a pretty shitty relationship with your family back in England, right? It would be a shame if you got caught for a crime and got deported. Do you think your witch wife would follow you back, or would she stay here with your son, completely unprotected?”

Seer looks like he’s going to charge at Davis, but I move to stand in front of him as quickly as I can, blocking him from doing something he’ll regret.

“You don’t know anything about me,” Seer growls. “You have no idea what I’m capable of. If you did, you wouldn’t try to provoke me. You’d be too afraid.”

“Big threat coming from a man who’s stuck in his best friend’s shadow,” Davis taunts. “Pocus was your boss, right? Do you keep him around so you don’t fuck up the whole organization? Maybe Pocus is the one I should have had dinner with.”

Davis crosses to his couch and reclines back, putting his feet on the coffee table as if he doesn’t have two gang members in his living room. As if his very life isn’t in danger if he says the wrong thing.

“Don’t worry, Seer.” He smirks. “You’re not even remotely my biggest interest. But it’s like they say, keep your enemies close and all that. The day you walked away from my offer, I knew I needed to keep an eye on you. Consider it mutually assured destruction. You tell anyone what I did, and I’ll make sure that you and the Ruthless Kings go down with me. Like I said, I know everything.”

Seer’s face relaxes as he stares at Davis, and suddenly his whole body goes limp. I panic for a moment before I realize that he’s having a vision. I haven’t seen him have one in a long time. I didn’t even know he could still have them without

causing him tremendous pain. As we stand there in silence, I suddenly feel a wave of humor wash over me, almost bordering on hysteria. I realize that whatever Seer is seeing, it's immensely funny to him. When he comes back to himself, he nearly doubles over in laughter.

I look over at Davis, who stiffens at the abrupt change of atmosphere. Seer's change of demeanor seems to frighten him, and his body shows signs of tension. He white-knuckles the bottle so hard I think it might shatter. He puts his feet down and leans forward, watching Seer with confusion.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he barks. "Are you having a stroke? Stop that!"

"Davis." Seer laughs. "I swear on my shitty brother's life that I'm not going to speak a word to anyone about what you did. And rest assured, you're not going to have a chance to take me down."

This seems to appease Davis and he leans back in his seat. A small smile crosses his lips and he takes another swig of his vodka.

"Well, then." He sighs. "That's good to hear, Seer. It sounds like you finally have some sense. Melissa's kidnapping will stay our secret, and no one will ever be the wiser that I tried to extort her father."

"That's not exactly what I said," Seer remarks, a twinkle in his eye. "I just said that *I* wouldn't speak a word."

There's a pounding on the door and Davis sits up straight again, his face draining of color. When he doesn't immediately respond, the door is pushed open. Seer grabs me and pulls me aside as a dozen SWAT police push their way inside, guns trained on Davis. His hands immediately go up, his bottle of vodka crashing to the floor and shattering.

"Davis Thompson," one of the men grunts. "You're under arrest for the kidnapping of Melissa Prudent. You have the right to remain silent."

Two officers pull Davis up by his elbows and one cuffs him. As they read him his Miranda Rights, he looks at us with

a mixture of confusion and hatred.

“What the hell did you do?” he seethes, trying to fight his guards to lunge at us. They’re much stronger, though, and he isn’t able to shift more than a few inches away from them. “I’ll kill you for this.”

Seer steps closer to him, within inches of his face. He drops his voice so low I can barely hear him, and I strain to catch his words.

“You won’t do shit,” he whispers. “You think you know everything about us, but you’ve barely scratched the surface. It’s like you said, Davis, we’re the best at what we do.”

Seer steps back and nods to the officers who drag him toward the door. They only stop when Mayor Prudent steps inside the apartment and squares up against Davis. I watch as all the fight leaves him and he’s forced to literally face the consequences of his actions. He’ll probably go away forever if Mayor Prudent has anything to do with it. Just to add insult to injury, the man draws back and punches Davis squarely in his pompous face.

“Get him out of my sight,” the mayor growls and the men quickly drag him away, until only us three remain.

“What the fuck just happened?” I ask, feeling thoroughly confused and overwhelmed by the last five minutes. I’ve clearly missed a huge piece of information.

Mayor Prudent winks at Seer, who fiddles with one of the buttons on his jacket and pulls off a small, pin-sized camera.

“Another gift from Snake,” he tells me. “Mayor Prudent and the police saw everything. They heard his confession.”

“They also saw us shoot up a warehouse,” I whisper to him desperately, suddenly afraid of the consequences of our earlier actions. “And beat the shit out of a mayoral candidate.” Not only has my best friend colluded with the most powerful man in town, but he’s done it without telling me. And the man in question is very anti-crime.

“We saw no such thing,” Mayor Prudent says loudly, his voice filling up the now-empty apartment. “And if there’s any

recorded evidence, I'm sure it's going to go missing. So you have nothing to worry about, Pocus. Not where this is concerned."

"What about where other things are concerned?" I ask, thinking of everything else we could possibly go down for.

"Son," he says kindly. "You've rescued my daughter and found her kidnapper. You have no idea what that means to me. As far as I'm concerned, the Ruthless Kings are a charitable organization with ties to a very important youth center in the community. If you're involved in any other activities, that is simply not the concern of my office."

My stomach tightens as I pick up what he's putting down.

"Now, if you'll excuse me," he says politely. "I need to go check on my daughter."

He straightens his suit jacket and turns on his heel, walking out of the apartment and leaving me there shocked. I turn to Seer, my jaw figuratively on the floor. He's accomplished something I never could as Prez. He's garnered peace with the mayor. At least for the next four years.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Melissa

I'm cuddling Bear Bear, which is strange because I haven't seen him in nearly a decade. He's just as soft as I remember, and his worn out fur is a reminder of how much I've loved him over the years, how much comfort he's brought me. I squeeze him tightly to me and hear a grunt. I sit up and look at him, confused. He opens his mouth, his face transforming into a real bear. He morphs into a terrifying brown bear, poised to attack me. I cover my face, screaming as loud as I can in hopes that someone might hear me and rescue me. He's about to bite a chunk out of my face when my eyes pop open.

My heart pounds in my chest and I sit up in a bed I don't recognize, feeling like it's some kind of trick. I don't remember falling asleep. I certainly don't remember falling asleep here. Blearily, I look around and see that I'm hooked up to several machines, and there's an IV in my arm. I squint toward the other side of the room and see Bones awkwardly curled up in a reclining chair. It all comes back to me in a wave of dizzying memories and I think I may be sick.

The reality of it is much worse than my Bear Bear nightmare. I look at my wrists to see them bandaged up, and feel the rawness of my skin from where they were bound by handcuffs. My stomach growls angrily and I remember that I haven't eaten in a day and a half. The air around me starts to constrict and I feel like there's a bag over my head again. I try to control my breathing, to find my center, but it's no use. I'm on the verge of hyperventilating when I see Bones wake up.

He looks at me with bleary eyes, then straightens up when he sees the state I'm in. He gets out of his chair and carefully comes to sit next to me on the bed. My body immediately molds into him, relaxing just slightly as he pulls me into his arms and rubs my back.

"You're safe now," he whispers. "You're at the hospital and you're safe. No one is coming after you now. It's all over."

He continues to whisper these encouraging sentiments in my ear as I cry, the terror and panic all hitting me at once. I cling to him like I'm sinking in the ocean and he's a life raft. When my body has run out of tears, I just sob dryly into his chest, my entire body trembling against him.

"What happened?" I finally manage to ask. "Who did this to me?"

"It's not important," he murmurs into my hair. "You're upset, you don't need to worry about that now. Just know that he's gone and you're never going to have to worry about him again."

I pull away and look up at him, feeling defiant. My body is still shaking, but now there's rage coursing through my veins. Maybe he thinks it's better that I don't know, but I've just been through hell. It's my right to know who put me through it.

"Tell me," I demand, my voice firm.

He sighs heavily and gently tugs at me so I'll settle back against him. I relent, too tired to fight him, but also because I love the way his chest feels against me. He's a much better cuddler than Bear Bear, real or nightmare version.

"It was Davis Thompson," he finally whispers. His arms tense around me and I realize that this is just as hard for him to say as it is for me to hear. I pull away from him again to look up at his face. His eyes are filled with tears and so much pain. I reach my hand up to brush them away.

"He wanted to be mayor," he says. "He thought kidnapping you would be the best way to make your dad drop out of the race. Now he's sitting in a jail cell, hopefully getting beat up by a drunken cellmate."

I take a deep breath and exhale slowly, trying to process all of this. I always knew there was something I didn't like about Davis Thompson. It was more than just his attack ads about my father or his pandering to the press. Something about him always felt insincere and dangerous. I guess now I know why. I never would have believed he was capable of such an awful act, but it does all make a certain kind of sense.

“What about the Grimm Reapers?” I ask, feeling more exhausted than I ever have in my life. His chest vibrates against me with a chuckle.

“The Bayou Reapers,” he corrects me gently. “They're all in jail. We checked. None of them were involved. It was all Davis and some bad Craigslist ads.”

“Seriously,” I breathe, already feeling my eyes start to close as I rest against him. “And you figured it all out. You saved me.”

“I always will,” he whispers as I feel my body go weightless.

When I wake up again, the sun is bright in the window and Bones is back in his chair, though he's pulled it closer and he's slumped over my bed. His face is turned toward me, his hand limp around mine. I watch him, noticing how peaceful he looks in his sleep. There's something so innocent about him when he's like this, so vulnerable. In the short time I've known him, I've never seen him vulnerable.

His eyes flicker open and he smiles a shy, lazy smile. His hands move to his eyes, balling up in fists as he rubs away the sleep in them.

“Good morning.” He yawns. “Or afternoon. Possibly evening? I've lost all track of time.”

“Me too,” I murmur. “How long was I gone, anyway?”

He looks up at me and takes in a sharp inhale of breath.

“Oh, just about twenty-four hours,” he replies. “The worst twenty-four hours of my entire life.”

This surprises me. It had felt like so much longer, but I was under extreme duress. Some of that feeling probably sprung from the fact that I had no idea when or if I would get out of there. I'd imagined my life ending in captivity. I couldn't even hope that he would come for me. But he did.

"So," I say, stretching slowly and feeling the soreness and pain in my cramped muscles. "Tell me more about Davis Thompson's elaborate plan to become mayor by torturing me."

Bones squeezes my hand gently and shakes his head, a pained look plastered on his face.

"Please don't make light of it," he whispers with so much sincerity I think he may start to cry again. "I mean, I get it if it's part of your process or whatever. But I spent an entire day thinking I'd never see you alive again. There's no comparison, I know that, but I was in hell, too."

I smile sadly at him and he leans closer to me, kissing me sweetly on my lips. It's chaste, closed-mouthed, but I feel the promise in it. The promise that this is a hello and not a goodbye.

"I'm sorry," I say, as he pulls away and stares down at me with so much tenderness in his eyes. "I do want to hear everything, though, seriously. I just want to know how you found me. You said Davis is in jail. Is it in the press yet?"

He chuckles again and comes to sit on the edge of my bed, facing the room's window.

"I've barely left your side since I brought you here," he replies, his back to me as he looks down at his hands. "But, from what Seer has texted me since, the story broke early this morning. Public sympathy has completely turned toward your family. Your dad is basically guaranteed the next term."

I nod, even though I know he can't see it. It's so bizarre to think that I've won my dad another election, when all I wanted was to be left out of it. The whole experience is still so surreal, both right at the forefront of my mind and buried somewhere deep in my subconscious. I have so much still to process and unpack, but for now, I just want to feel like a normal girl

spending the morning with a guy she really likes. In the hospital, sure, but it's still a sweet moment.

Not that that's without its complications. After all, I was kidnapped because I'd purposely snuck away from Bones. All of our words over the last few days have been said in anger, when any words were exchanged at all. I know now that I'm in love with him, but he might hate me for what I put him through. I can't ask him to put all of it aside and forgive me. I'm also unwilling to let him go without a fight.

"Bones," I whisper, reaching my hand out to brush against his shoulder. "I just want to say, I really am sorry about the other night. I'm sorry about all of it. Being tied up with a bag over your head gives you just ... unlimited time to think. The whole experience was just proof that you were right to be so protective of me, and I'm sorry that I tried to push you away."

He turns just slightly to look at me, though he doesn't seem to want to allow himself to fully look at me. There's a wall between us and I'm not sure if I put it there or if he did.

"Do you hate me?" I whisper, unable to deal with the tension.

He shakes his head firmly and turns his body toward me, grabbing my face gently with one hand and forcing me to look up at him.

"Melissa, I could never hate you," he says gently but firmly. "You have no idea ... you don't understand how much I can't hate you."

He presses his forehead against mine and our breath syncs so that it seems like even our heartbeats are beating in the same rhythm. I'm about to close the gap between us again, to feel his lips against mine again and hopefully more of him soon after. But there's a sharp knock at my door and I pull away as if I've been shocked.

"Probably your dad," he breathes, and I relax again. Though, to be honest, the thought of seeing my father after all this doesn't seem that more appealing than being kidnapped again. "He told the staff I was your husband so I could stay. I

think he realized that there was no way in hell I was going to leave you, so he's been kind enough to help me stay,"

"He was probably too intimidated by you to try and argue." I giggle softly.

Bones kisses me on the forehead and pulls away, walking to the door and opening it to my father. He sighs and nods at Bones, clearly unsure how he feels about this situation. It's likely on his top ten list of nightmare scenarios where I'm concerned. Probably right up there with me getting kidnapped by his political adversary. Bones slips past him and closes the door, giving us some privacy.

"It's been a while, Missy," my dad says quietly, his voice breaking. "I was looking forward to seeing you at Thanksgiving, not getting into a partnership with a gang leader to rescue you."

"What?" I ask in shock, completely confused.

"Never mind." He shakes his head and blushes, crossing the room to me. I pat the bed for him to sit down. He gingerly sits by my side and pulls me into a long, gentle hug. I lean into it, realizing how much I've missed him. "You have no idea how worried I was," he breathes.

The tears spring to my eyes again as I think about him and all he must have been through, and I find comfort in his embrace. My whole life, he was the one who chased away the nightmares and kept me safe from monsters. Then a monster tried to hurt me because of him. I can't imagine how hard this has been for him.

"Please tell me that man didn't sleep in your bed," he finally says, breaking the sacred moment between us. Normally, this kind of comment would upset me, but it's all just so absurd. I can't help bust out laughing.

"I'll remind you 'that man' saved my life," I say, pinching his arm. "But we're just friends, I promise. Honestly, I'm not even sure we're that."

He fixes me with one of his special looks. The one that says, *I'm your father and I can tell when you're bullshitting*

me, but he doesn't press it. He just holds me tighter and tells me how much he loves me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



“I don’t see the problem exactly,” Hex mutters through a mouthful of Chinese food. “You’re friends again, right? You’re basically back to where you started, you just don’t spend every night sleeping on her couch.”

I pick up a fortune cookie and peg it at his head, satisfied when he rubs the spot in pain. He’s such an oblivious asshole sometimes.

“That is the problem,” I tell him. “I didn’t realize how much I loved being around her all the time. And now I barely see her. It’s like none of it happened. Like I didn’t lose my mind trying to save her.”

“You aren’t going to hold that over her head for the rest of your life, are you?” Juliana chimes in unhelpfully.

We sit at their kitchen table enjoying our takeout during a rare Charlie-free night. She’s, ironically, with the woman I haven’t been able to stop thinking about for weeks. The dance recital is coming up at the end of this month and Melissa is running extra rehearsals leading up to it to make sure everyone is ready. Meredith is going to bring Charlie home when she’s done.

I’d offered to pick Charlie up before I knew, and was immediately bombarded with questions about my status with Melissa. Not that there’s anything to share on that front. Two days after she came home, she returned to the center like nothing happened. I thought it was too soon, but I wasn’t

going to make her feel smothered again. I knew it wasn't my place to comment on her decisions.

It was like nothing had ever happened. She just jumped back into her work and a few days later, Seer had me go get a shipment of new guns from the docks. With Mayor Prudent off our case, it's back to business as usual. With the influx of cash we got from the Houston Kings, we got a huge delivery. In the last four weeks, business has been booming. Thanks to our new partnership with the Houston Kings, we've gotten a lot more nearby contacts that aren't in their jurisdiction.

It's been insane. I've had to cut back my mentor classes to once a month just to accommodate it all. Not that it matters much. I finished the recital set before the kidnapping and now I'm at a loss for what to do with the kids. I'm slightly grateful to take a step back from that commitment.

Besides, things between Melissa and me have been strange. Every time I'm around her, I feel like she wants to say something but she's stopping herself. I'm going out of my mind trying to decipher what it could be. Does she feel like her obligation to tolerate me is over now that the danger has passed? Does she miss me as much as I miss her? Does she secretly love me?

As much as I hope it's the latter, the other options are more likely. Things weren't exactly great between us before she was taken, and despite our moment together the next morning, some bridges just aren't meant to be crossed. Maybe I should just accept that she and I just aren't supposed to be anything more. Our entire relationship was built on her being in life-threatening situations.

So, instead, I've thrown myself into work. To make up for the time I stepped back to keep an eye on Melissa, I've put myself at Seer's mercy. Whatever he needs, I'm there to do, no questions asked. To be fair, it isn't much different than how it was before Melissa, but now I feel like I'm missing something in my life. There's an emptiness in my chest that didn't exist before. Or maybe I just didn't notice it.

If Seer's noticed a change, he's been kind enough not to say anything about it. He's taken my offer to work harder as a challenge to keep me as busy as possible. If I'm not running guns to different cities, I'm going on patrols with Hex or helping Buffy with problems at the house. I've been there to stop fights from happening at bars, and even had to go pick up Hemlock from the police station when he got into a shouting match with a woman at a club. Thankfully, Seer's new deal with the mayor seems to cover everyone's ass.

I've also gotten closer to Blue from the Houston Kings. Now that things have settled down for us in New Orleans, he's planning to go back home and Knix and Evanescence are planning to come back home. Life is truly returning back to normal, but normal life feels hollow. I don't want it. I want Melissa.

"Personally, I think you should just tell Melissa how you feel," Juliana says now, taking a large slurp of her egg drop soup. "Women respond to honest and vulnerability. Tell her how you feel and work it out from there."

"Nah, that's a bitch move," Hex says, earning him a smack from his wife. "I'm just saying, you can't give her the upper hand. If she knows how you feel, she has leverage to get whatever she wants, even if she doesn't share your feelings. How is that fair?"

"How did you ever land me?" Juliana shakes her head, staring at him in amazed disappointment. "Bones, listen to me. I know Melissa has feelings for you. She's asked about you on more than one occasion. She misses you as much as you miss her."

"That doesn't mean she has feelings for him," Hex argues. "Maybe she's just horny."

A chopstick flies at his head, this time thrown by Juliana. I shake my head and pick up my container, suddenly not hungry anymore. It's been like this for weeks. I can't think about her without feeling sick to my stomach. I'm losing sleep wondering if I should have handled everything differently. Basically, I'm losing my freaking mind.

I throw my food away and grab my keys, unable to entertain this conversation any longer. This is my first night off in weeks and being here feels like a waste. Of course, it's not like I'm going to go back out to clubs like I used to. They hold no interest for me now. I haven't even looked at another woman since Melissa and I first hooked up. I didn't want to taint the memory, but now I like the idea that she was the last woman to touch me. Damn, I'm whipped.

When I get back to the house, I shuffle to my room, not interested in much else. Drinking will just make me sad, and spending time with anyone else is just a reminder of who I'm not spending time with. I collapse onto my bed and bury my face into my pillow, growling my frustration into it. A knock at my door a few minutes later has me worried that the pillow didn't do its job.

"Can I come in?" Seer calls from the other side of the door.

"I guess," I call back, not really in the mood for definitive answers.

He opens the door, staring in for a moment and watching me. I turn to look at him and see a worried look cross his face. I roll my eyes and cover my face with the pillow again.

"I was trying to sleep," I lie. "What do you want?"

"I've just spoken to Beast in Houston," he replies, his voice casual but slightly off somehow. "He's down a couple men. Some virus going around. He was wondering if I could spare a few of you for a few days."

"And you want me to go?" I ask, feeling completely disinterested in this suggestion.

"Actually, I was wondering if you'd like to go for longer," he says cautiously, and I sit up to look at him. His posture is tense and his expression is worried. He thinks I'm spiraling. He wants to get me out of town to cheer me up or some shit.

"How much longer?" I ask.

He shrugs, but I know he and Beast talk constantly. They've hatched a plan together and I'm not involved for some dumb reason. Maybe Seer thinks he's doing me a favor.

“Well, they’re still working to get their weapons business off the ground, and I was thinking maybe you could go help them. It could be fun.”

“How long, Seer?” I demand.

“Six months, maybe longer,” he says carefully.

“And Knix can’t do this, why?”

This is all a ploy to cheer me up, I know it. He thinks if he gives me more work, it will somehow make me forget that I’ve fallen in love with someone who may never love me back. Screw love and screw him. I’m a grown man and I don’t need my boss pulling strings in my personal life.

“Nesce wants to come home.” He shrugs. “You know how women can be. Shit.” He winces. “No, that’s not what I meant.”

“I’ll think about it,” I tell him, wanting to be done with this conversation so I can wallow in my misery. “Give me some time to decide, okay?”

“Of course. Take all the time you need. They can wait a while. I’ll still send a few guys tomorrow to help them in the meantime, so don’t rush.”

He awkwardly turns and leaves, not closing my door all the way. I realize that Tori’s in the hallway with him, waiting to see how this strange conversation has gone.

“Well?” she whispers, though I can still hear her.

“He says he’ll think about it, but I’m not hopeful,” Seer tells her. “I’m worried, Tori, he’s not himself lately.”

The two continue discussing how to fix my life as they walk down the hallway, out of earshot. It’s ridiculous that all my friends think it’s their job to make this situation better. They’ve been giving me crap about finding love for years, and now that I’ve found it and lost it, they don’t know how to handle me. That’s just typical, isn’t it?

I grab my phone and check the time. If I leave now, I can get to the center right as practice ends. I get up and grab my

jacket. There's only one person I want to talk to and I'm tired of pretending I don't.

When I reach the parking lot, I see parents leaving with their kids. Meredith and Charlie walk out together, chatting. Meredith stops short when she sees me, but gives me a small smile as she looks over her shoulder. Close behind is Melissa, a relaxed look on her face. You'd never know what she went through just a few weeks ago. When she sees me, she slows down, changing her course to meet me at my bike.

"It's been a while," she says when she reaches me. "I thought you'd fallen off the face of the planet or something."

"I've been busy," I tell her casually. "Really busy. In fact, Seer's just asked me if I want to go to Houston for a few months to help with operations there."

She looks down at her shoes and frowns. "Oh," she breathes simply. "That's a big deal, huh? He must have a lot of faith in you."

"He's tired of me moping around," I admit, wondering if I'm imagining the electricity between us. Maybe it's just my desperate attempt to invent something that doesn't exist. Or maybe ...

"If you want to do it, you should take him up on it," she says, staring deeply into my eyes. "But if there's a reason you don't want to go, then maybe you should seriously pursue that reason. Maybe you could take that reason out to coffee, or maybe out dancing?"

She's smiling now, her eyes wide and hopeful. For the first time, I consider that the unspoken thing between us may actually be love. Maybe she really does feel the same way about me that I feel about her. Maybe my idiot friends are right and giving up your life for a woman isn't giving up at all. It's something new and special, something worth sacrificing for.

"I'll take that under serious advisement," I breathe, taking her face in my hands and bending down to kiss her. She reaches up on her tiptoes to meet me, and for the first time in my life, I'm certain that I'm done with being a bachelor.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

One Month Later



Melissa

Kids run around backstage at the community theater we've rented out for the day, and I think I'm going to scream. This whole recital has proven to be so much more stressful than I ever could have imagined. Parents brought their kids late even though this last practice is the most important, the theater staff messed up every song during the first dress rehearsal, and the preschoolers keep having meltdowns. I'm going to need a stiff drink when this is all over.

Even so, I'm so proud of everything the kids have accomplished. Less than a year ago, most of them had never taken a dance class in their lives. Now, they're all in their costumes, ready to show their parents and friends what they've accomplished through their hard work and dedication. As their teacher, I'm an emotional wreck, amazed at how far they've come.

I call for one last run of the show from the top, earning groans from all of the kids. I know it's hard work for them, and I appreciate how patient they've all been today. Frankly, the fact that all the kids aren't having meltdowns is a miracle. I'm certainly on the brink of one. I stand in the wings of the stage as the preschoolers come out in their flower costumes.

The good thing about starting with the preschoolers is that they're so cute, no one will care if they mess up. One little girl goes out on stage and stares blankly into the empty auditorium, not moving an inch during her song. Well, that's

okay. She has the personality to carry it off. Everyone will be so enchanted, they probably won't care.

Daisy's class is next, and I suddenly feel very relaxed and confident. Thank goodness for Daisy, seriously. I don't know what I would do without her here. She's been so excited and happy all day and it's helped with the general atmosphere of the group. Everyone is happy when she's around.

Unfortunately, she takes that feeling with her when she leaves the stage, and I'm left with my ball of nerves. I nearly jump out of my skin when someone taps me on my shoulder. I turn around and see Bones standing there, a large bouquet of flowers held out to me. I could cry. Scratch that, I am already crying. It's the sweetness of the gesture mixed with the stress already brewing within me. My cheeks flame in embarrassment. I've cried in front of Bones enough for a lifetime.

He looks around quickly and, satisfied with our seclusion, bends down to give me a sweet kiss. If only there were time for us to sneak into an empty dressing room and make out. That would certainly help take the edge off. There will be time later, though. I just have to get through this next few hours.

"The set looks really amazing," I gush, so proud of what he and the boys put together. He ducks his head in humility, but I can tell he's pleased with himself. "You should never have shown me your building skills. Now I'm going to use you all the time."

"Use me all you want." He bends down to whisper lowly into my ear. "Use me right now if you'd like."

I giggle and swat him away, taking the flowers and holding them against my chest. They're daffodils, my favorite. Underneath that tough exterior, Bones continues to surprise me with how thoughtful he is.

"Tonight will be amazing," he tells me earnestly, his eyes shining with pride. "You're amazing. And I'm here for whatever you need."

He leans down for another quick kiss and leaves me be while I watch the rest of the dances. When the last group exits the stage, I go back to the dressing rooms where the parents and volunteers are helping to wrangle the kids.

“Okay, everyone,” I call out, and all eyes turn to me. “We’re just half an hour away from showtime. Doors will open in ten minutes, so if you need to go to the bathroom, now is the time!”

I look at Abigail with some significance, as she’s the parent who’s volunteered to help with the toddlers. Even though her son isn’t gifted and doesn’t come to the center, she signed up for that age because she didn’t want to make Daisy too nervous. It’s for everyone’s benefit, as a nervous Daisy would wreak havoc on all of us.

I plaster on a smile and walk through the maze of the backstage until I reach the doors leading to the lobby. Meredith is there, waiting for me. She stands with several important-looking people I don’t recognize, and I realize they must be donors. They have that quiet humility of people who spend more money on a single outfit than most people spend on a car. It’s a trait I’ve learned to spot from my father’s many years in the public eye.

“Here’s the woman of the hour,” Meredith says sweetly when she sees me. She pulls me into a quick hug and introduces me around the group. I shake a lot of hands, but don’t recall the names. There’s already too much going on in my head, I can’t possibly try to retain it all. “Melissa’s classes, in particular, have helped many of our kids with their confidence and temperament. We’ve found them to be a really valuable asset to our roster.”

I beam at her words. My job sounds really important when she puts it that way. Of course, they also add pressure to my already insurmountable stress. Here is a group of people that I have to impress in order to help the center. It’s the last thing I need right now.

“And here’s James Marrow.” Meredith smiles to a space behind me. I turn to see Bones approaching us and he winks at

me. I instantly feel more grounded. “He built the sets with several of our boys, and used it as an opportunity to teach them life skills. They’re certainly a power couple, aren’t they?”

Meredith winks at us and Bones grabs my hand, squeezing gently. She leaves us alone as she walks the donors through the lobby to meet the other teachers who’ve come out. Everyone is here, as it’s the biggest event the center has put on. The kids’ artwork is on display in the lobby on auction to help raise more funds. Half the proceeds from the concession stand are going to the center. It’s a big night for Meredith, too.

I watch her and can’t help but be impressed by how calm and collected she is. Compared to me, she’s the picture of grace and tranquility. All I have to do is make sure the kids make it through the recital. She’s the one who has to make sure the donors are happy with what they see tonight.

“She’s amazing,” I whisper to Bones.

“I certainly think so,” says a man I vaguely recognize as he approaches us. “I’m not sure if we’ve met before, I’m Dr. Graves.”

The man holds his hand out and I take it, realizing he’s her husband, Graveyard.

“You don’t have to be so formal, man.” Bones laughs at him. “She’s with me. She knows all about us.”

“Unlike you, I know how to behave in social situations,” Graveyard responds with a sarcastic smirk. “But it is nice to finally meet the woman who performed a miracle with our Bones, here.”

I blush again and beam up at my man. We’re joined by Pocus and Hex, who’ve come to watch their daughters. Both of their wives are backstage, so they look a little out of place among the other parents. Now that I’m more familiar with the Ruthless Kings, I do find it funny to watch them all outside of their element. They draw a lot of attention to themselves, but they never seem to care. Tonight, they aren’t members of a

motorcycle gang, they're just fathers who've come to support their children.

The lights of the lobby dim and that's my cue. The doors all open and the guests start to file into the auditorium. I hold on to Bones hand and we hang back as his friends go inside to find seats.

"Will you stay backstage with me?" I ask him, suddenly feeling panicked. "In case there are any set emergencies or something."

He smiles a knowing smile at me and lets go of my hand, moving his to my waist.

"I'm not leaving your side for a second," he says, pulling me closer to his body.

We head backstage and stand in the wings for the duration of the show. Despite my fears, it goes off without a hitch. Even when numbers aren't perfect, the kids are clearly having so much fun, and the applause is always uproarious. I can't believe how many people came out tonight. It's encouraging to see that the kids are all surrounded by people who care about them so much. When I peek out into the crowd, I'm shocked to see that my own parents are there. They must have slipped in after I came backstage. My heart skips a beat when I see them, and I think I might cry again.

Instead, I focus on the show, feeling a little dizzy at how quickly it passes by. Too soon, the kids are doing their final bows and Meredith is on stage, calling me up to thank me for all my hard work. Charlie comes up to hand me another bouquet of flowers and the crowd screams loud for me. I look down to see my parents beaming, cheering louder than anyone else.

Confetti is shot off from canons and the curtain is brought down. Just like that, the night is over, and all the stress I've been carrying for weeks finally starts to dissolve. Bones comes over to kiss me sweetly, but we're interrupted by the awkward cough of my father.

“Dad.” I laugh, feeling lightheaded. “Mom, I can’t believe you guys came!”

“Of course we did!” my mom gushes, looking at Bones with unabashed interest. It’s the first time they’ve met, and she’s not shy with her approval of him. She gives him a big hug, clearly surprising him. Dad, on the other hand, is much more reserved.

“James,” he says shortly, holding out his hand for a firm shake.

“Mayor Prudent,” Bones addresses him in the same clipped tone. They shake hands for just a moment too long and my mom has to break the tension.

“Well, darling, we’re sure you have plans tonight.” She looks at Bones with a sparkle in her eye. “We just wanted to tell you how proud we are of you. Right, Gerald?”

She nudges my dad, who finally stops eyeing Bones with mild horror and turns to me. He reaches into his lapel and produces a card, handing it to me and pulling me into a tight hug.

“We’re so proud, Missy,” he whispers in my ear. “We’ll see you at dinner on Sunday?”

I nod and hug them both again, still unable to believe that they came. They’ve always supported me, of course, but they weren’t super thrilled that I took this job. Since the kidnapping, though, we’ve gotten closer than ever. My dad has even invited Bones to this Sunday’s dinner. He’s totally freaking out about it.

I look around and realize Bones and I are alone for the first time tonight. I lean up to kiss him deeply, relaxing into his body in a way I haven’t been able to all night. He puts his arms around my waist and brings me closer to him. I can feel his heart pounding in his chest.

“Did I tell you they gave me my own dressing room?” I ask, grinning wickedly.

“So what the hell are we doing out here?” he breathes, grabbing my hand and pulling me to the backstage area. I

guide him to the dressing room and shut the door, locking it behind me.

We've taken things slow for the last month, but I'm done going slow. I wrap my arms around his neck and pull his head to me, slipping my tongue into his mouth as he pushes me against the door. He bends down, his hands moving to the edge of my skirt to lift it up. I gasp at his touch as he brushes against my sensitive skin.

He presses himself against me and I feel his hardness through his jeans. He needs this as much as I do, maybe even more. I reach down to slip off my underwear, awkwardly stepping out of them, my legs brushing against his. His hands go to his belt as he quickly unbuckles it and then releases himself.

He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a little silver packet. I take it from him and rip it with my teeth, quickly slipping the rubber over his throbbing cock. He groans quietly into my ear, moving his hands down to my ass and squeezing it. I position him at my entrance, and he gently pushes inside of me, taking his time.

I feel every glorious inch of him, my body stretching to accommodate his girth. I capture his lips with mine, nibbling on his bottom lip as he pulls me up by my ass, causing the most delicious sensations in my core. I feel every inch of him inside of me and it makes me breathless.

"Fuck me against this door," I moan, tired of taking it slow. "We have to be quiet, but I need you, baby."

He groans at my words, thrusting his hips wildly against mine. I hold back my squeals, unsure who might still be around. Instead, I show him how good it feels by digging my fingers into his back, pushing myself against him as forcefully as I can. My head tilts back as I try my hardest not to scream out.

We're both panting and sweating as we race to the finish line. I kiss him hard again as a wave of pressure builds in my stomach. I'm so close, just on the brink of unfettered bliss. He gently slips his tongue into my mouth, and I feel dizzy by the

thought that I'm completely filled by him. I'm consumed with him. He starts to tremble, and I know he's coming undone. His fingers move to my center, bringing me over the edge with him.

I'm wrecked by my pleasure, my whole body reacting to his touch. I feel it in my core, in my toes, in the arch of my back. We could do this a million times and I'll never get tired of the feeling of him inside of me.

"We should probably go," I murmur against his lips. "I don't want to get locked in here tonight."

"I do." He chuckles, pulling out of me carefully and adjusting his pants.

"Come home with me," I suggest, straightening my clothes. "I could do that all night."

"Be careful what you ask," he growls into my ear, pressing me back against the door. "You'll have a hard time getting rid of me."

"Good," I whisper, pressing into him for another longing kiss.

EPILOGUE

Three Months Later



The collar of my shirt digs into my neck, and I pull at it for the thousandth time tonight. I will never get used to wearing a suit, but I'll wear one every day if it means I don't have to wear a tuxedo. Unfortunately for me, that's exactly what I've been forced into tonight for the festivities. Pocus and Seer had to help me with all the pieces, and the final result made me look like a butler from a monster movie. The things I do for Melissa.

She, on the other hand, is absolutely stunning in her tight black dress. It hugs all of her curves and shows off a modest amount of cleavage that I can't stop staring at. I keep having to force myself to look away, knowing that her dad is somewhere in the room glaring at me. She wears a pair of tall heels because her dress is slightly too long for her, and I love having her closer to my height. It's intoxicating to be around her.

Mayor Prudent was inaugurated this morning for his second term. We sat behind him on the podium as he gave an inspiring speech, promising to bring New Orleans together in his last four years. He really is a decent guy, even if he does hate me. He's been surprisingly tolerable of me, though I imagine that has everything to do with Melissa. There's nothing he won't do for her.

In the end, Mayor Prudent won in a landslide victory. His closest opponent didn't even come close and the kidnapping really did win him a lot of support and favor from the public. He was apparently struggling with the young parent demographic before the kidnapping, but once they saw how

much he was willing to sacrifice for Melissa, they overwhelmingly voted for him. He gave a rousing press conference after Davis was caught to condemn the man's actions and to reaffirm his stance against crime in the city. Apart from one organization, of course.

Since she was dragged into the public eye after the kidnapping, Melissa decided to roll with it and support her father publicly. We've attended every parade, every debate, every fundraiser in the last four months. Every time, she told me I didn't have to come with her, but there was no way I was going to leave her on her own. Even with her dad's security team, I worry about her when she's out of my sight. With Davis in jail, no one's tried to harm her, but I'm always ready to pounce on any man who looks at her the wrong way.

Tonight, no one can keep their eyes off of her, and I can't even be mad about it. She's radiant under the lights of the ballroom, and a natural charmer to everyone she meets. I can't believe she shied away from this life before. It's like it was meant for her. I, on the other hand, feel awkward and out of place. She doesn't leave me alone, though. She introduces me around and never lets go of my hand. When we're seated at tables with high-ranking officials, she keeps her hand on my knee, squeezing gently when she wants me to know she loves me, that she needs me here.

When I officially met her parents at dinner a few months ago, she wasn't shy about touching me in front of her parents. I knew in some way that it was an act of defiance for her. Mayor Prudent isn't my biggest fan, after all. Despite rescuing her, he doesn't think I'm good enough for her. I can't be too mad, of course, I know I'm not any parent's dream. Six months prior, that hadn't concerned me.

That night, I'd been so nervous I could barely eat. Her mom kept asking me if I was okay, if she could make me something else, if I didn't like what she'd made. Compared to the mayor, she was incredibly kind and welcoming. We're around her the most at all these events since Gerald is usually giving a speech. She's been unwavering in her support of us since the beginning, making me feel like a son. That was a

benefit I'd never expected, and it definitely counterbalances Gerald's quiet disapproval.

Now, they're twirling around the dance floor to some old song as they celebrate his victory. Melissa definitely got her grace from her mother. The mayor is like a drunken elephant, but no one cares. His dance skills are not paramount to his ability to lead the city. They're staring at each other with so much love, and I realize how much I want to be like them when I'm older.

Before Pocus met Abigail, I'd never seen a healthy relationship, and they were too annoying for me to ever consider wanting it. When all my friends started dropping like flies to love, it felt like a curse. All I could see was how much their relationships were affecting me, and the influx of estrogen in our group was alarming. But as I watch the Prudents, I finally understand what my friends have been yammering on about. There's something nice about knowing you'll have someone support you in your old age. Someone to dance with you when you look like a complete ass.

The music changes and Melissa grabs my hand, pulling me toward the dance floor. I didn't want to look like an ass quite this early, but there's nothing I'd refuse her. Especially not this. It's her night as much as it is his, and she's a knockout. Any man would be lucky to breathe the same air as her, and she chose me. It's more than I've ever imagined.

When we're out on the floor, she looks up at me with confidence, her body positioned the way we've been practicing for weeks. She was thoughtful enough to mention that people would expect us to dance at the inauguration. I'd nearly had a panic attack, but she brought me to the dance studio several times a week and showed me how to lead. The lessons have clearly paid off, as my body moves in muscle memory while my mind is too preoccupied to remember anything.

"You're doing great," she whispers encouragingly, her hand firmly pressed into mine.

When the dance is over, we take a bow and hug her parents. Well, she hugs her parents and I give her mom a hug. Gerald and I are strictly on a firm handshake basis. Melissa tells her parents we have to leave, which is news to me. I'd planned to stay for the whole thing, even if the thought made me miserable. I'd even booked a suite at the hotel so we wouldn't have to drive home late.

Melissa turns to wink at me, grabbing my hand and gently tugging me toward the ballroom doors. Outside, the lobby is quiet, as if there isn't a huge party going on inside. It looks like Security has probably shut down this part of the hotel so that no one can disturb the party. The long hallway leading to the elevator is eerily quiet.

"You've been amazing." She turns to me, wrapping her arms around my neck and leaning in for a kiss. "You deserve a reward for all you've endured today."

I quirk my eyebrow at her as she presses the call button for the elevator. I really like the sound of that. The moment we're in the elevator, her lips are on mine, and I have to appreciate the way her tall shoes give me easier access to her mouth. My hands slide down her waist to her ass, and I tug her body against mine. I want to pull her closer and wrap her legs around me, but her dress is too tight for that. I'll have to be patient enough to get her to the room.

When the elevator doors open on our floor, it's all I can do not to throw her over my shoulder and run her to the room. I exhibit saintly levels of restraint as I walk her to the door, reaching into the fancy lapel pocket inside my jacket to get the key. I hate everything else about this outfit, but the move makes me feel like a movie star. Melissa looks duly impressed.

"My lady," I motion inside once I've opened the door. She slides past me, rubbing her body against mine seductively as she enters. She grabs me by my lapels and pulls me in behind her.

"I don't want to be a lady tonight," she purrs, backing to the large king-sized bed in the middle of the suite. Her pupils are dilated, her breathing ragged. She kisses me again

hungrily, pushing off my tuxedo jacket. “Damn,” she complains when she sees the cummerbund underneath. “You have on way too many clothes.”

I laugh as I pull off my tie and help her take off the many layers of the suit. Unfastening the shirt collar feels like heaven, and I slip out of my shirt, feeling the warmth of her hands on my chest. It took an hour to get the damn thing on, but less than a minute to strip down to my T-shirt and boxers. I feel like myself for the first time all night.

“Now you’re the one wearing too many clothes,” I murmur, turning her around so I can unzip her dress. I take my time with it, teasing her as I slowly slide the zipper down her back.

My lips find the spot behind her ear that drives her wild, and I slip my fingers under the straps of the dress to push it down. It falls gracefully to the floor and she carefully steps out of it, revealing the sexy lingerie she’s hiding underneath. She turns around and pushes me away, sitting down to fiddle with the straps on her shoes.

“Leave them on,” I growl. “You’re sexy as hell in those things.”

She smirks at me and does as I say, leaving the shoes on and crawling back onto the bed, her underwear-clad body on display for my eyes only. I’m already hard for her, which she quickly notices, biting her lip as she stares at my crotch. Fuck, I want to spend the rest of my life with this girl. I want to come home every night and bury myself in her warmth.

I climb on top of her, pressing myself against the sexy curves of her body. She gasps in anticipation, eagerly curling her fingers through my hair when my lips come in contact with hers. Her body writhes underneath mine, and my hand slips between us, hovering over her more sensitive spot. Her underwear is soaked to the touch and I groan out in anticipation. She moans into my mouth as I put pressure on her clit.

“Touch me,” she pleads, her voice rough and desperate.

In response, I slide the fabric aside, slipping my fingers into her wet folds. Her hips rise to meet me in response, her body set on fire by the small contact. Her breath grows more ragged as I explore her, touching and teasing, but not giving her the satisfaction of what she really wants. I've waited all day to be with her like this, to feel her and touch her and taste her. There's no rush, no agenda tonight. I want to bring her to the brink of pleasure and make it last as long as possible.

"More," she whines. "Please, Bones."

"Just trust me," I whisper, releasing her lips and kissing down the side of her face, to her neck, to the swell of her breasts. Her fingers don't leave my hair, the pressure of her fingernails digging into my scalp driving me wild. I briefly remove my hand from her wet pussy so I can quickly unclasp her bra and get it out of my way.

She whines again, the sound turning into a moan when I pull one of her nipples into my mouth. My hand moves back to her wetness as I continue to tease her there as my tongue creates intricate patterns on her hardened nub. Her body is so wound up, so desperate for release. She tries to say something, to plead or beg, but she's unable to form a coherent word. Instead, her body speaks for her, her free hand clutching the comforter as her body thrashes underneath me.

My mouth leaves her nipple and I kiss down her torso slowly, leaving a hot, wet trail as I go. I need to taste every inch of her, to swallow her as I bring her to her first release. My tongue brushes against her clit as I plunge two fingers deep inside of her. Her entire body arches off the bed, her scream of pleasure so loud I'm sure they can hear us downstairs.

My cock throbs at the sound, and damnit if I don't nearly come right then. I desperately need to be inside of her, but not until she's been thoroughly ravaged. My tongue darts around her clit while my fingers try to find purchase on every inch of her sensitive skin. Her hips rock against me as she loses herself to the sensation. Her orgasm crashes over her as she cries out in wild abandon. Her whole body trembles as it

overtakes her, curses falling from her lips as she continues gripping me tightly.

I consume her, the electricity of her pleasure flowing through me. I crawl back up her body to capture her mouth in mine, to let her taste herself on my tongue. She's breathless, her body like jelly. Her eyelids flutter shut as she moans softly into my mouth, a sharp contrast to the deafening screams she'd just let out. I carefully slip off her panties, discarding them on the floor. I pull her legs around my waist, feeling her shoes digging into my lower back. I grind against her, my boxers still concealing my erect cock.

"Please," she whispers, her back arching, pushing her body closer to mine. "I need you."

I let her go just long enough to push my boxers down, then position myself at her entrance. It's still wet from her orgasm and her new excitement. I bury myself inside easily as she hisses with her desire. She's already close again, her walls tightening against me as I thrust in and out of her slowly. Her legs are so tight around me, not giving me much room to move. She isn't letting me go anywhere.

Her second orgasm rips through her quickly, pulling me down with her. I collapse on top of her as my release overtakes me. So much for making it last. But there will be time for that. We have the hotel suite for the entire night. We'll have each other for years if I have any say in it. I fully intend to be with her for a long, long time, making her come undone forever, if she'll have me.

EPILOGUE

Months Later



Melissa

“Have a good night,” Meredith calls as I’m packing up my things. I chase after her, not wanting to walk out to my car alone. The date has me spooked.

“Meredith wait up,” I call and she stops, smiling back at me as I run toward her.

It’s been exactly a year since that very first attack. I guess, in a way, it’s also the anniversary of when I met Bones for the first time. It’s strange to think about how much has changed since that night. Before then, Bones was James, a man I saw a few times at the center and couldn’t stop thinking about. Now I know him for who he really is and I love him more than I could have ever imagined.

He’s likely at home already. Our home. We moved into the new apartment just a month ago. We’re still unpacking on the weekends, still figuring out how to share a space. It’s completely new for both of us, but I think we’ve risen to the challenge. He’s beyond accommodating to me, never letting me feel overwhelmed or bombarded. He makes sure I always have plenty of space when I need it, though I don’t want much space from him these days.

“How’s everything at your new place?” Meredith asks as we walk out of the building. “You guys settling in okay?”

“We love it,” I tell her honestly. “Bones is actually learning how to cook, so the kitchen is sometimes a disaster, but other than that, it’s been kind of perfect.”

She smiles at me with a knowing look in her eye. “These boys, eh?” She laughs. “How did any of them survive before we came along?”

“I’m guessing they survived on a lot of takeout and ramen.” I smirk.

“And hospital food in Graveyard’s case,” she says, wrinkling her nose. We reach my car and she gives me a quick hug. “We’re all really glad you’re in his life, Melissa,” she tells me. “You’ve been really good for him.”

My heart swells at the sentiment. As I’ve gotten to know the Ruthless Kings and their wives better, I’ve realized that it’s a very tight-knit community. These men have spent years together as brothers, and they would die for each other. There’s an unspoken bond there, a love that none of them would ever admit to out loud. They care about each other so deeply in their own strange way.

We women have had to navigate this sacred bond and find our own places. It was a lot to understand at first, but now I feel like I’m truly part of the community. It’s also something of a joke to all of them that Bones, of all people, has found love. Before he met me, he was apparently a very notorious bachelor. I’d gotten that sense before the night we officially met, but I hadn’t realized how deep his commitment to being alone ran. The other men have told me real horror stories about his single life.

The wives, on the other hand, have helped me understand that as hard as these men can be to love sometimes, it’s worth the effort. Not that there’s any going back for me. My life has improved so much since we’ve been together. Despite our rocky beginnings, these have been the best ten months of my entire life. I’m happy to be with Bones in whatever capacity he’ll allow me to be in. Even if that means I may never be his wife.

Juliana was the one who first broached the topic of marriage with me. As the wife of Bones’s closest friend, and certainly my closest friend in the group, she wanted to make sure I knew what I was getting myself into. After we’d

announced to them that we were moving in together, she'd pulled me aside to have that talk with me.

"You know how much we all love you, Melissa," she'd said. "You've become like the sister I never had and I'm so happy Bones has found you. I'm just worried that he's going to screw it up."

I'd laughed, not because I didn't think he was capable, but because it was so nice to have a friend who knew us both well enough to say something. Juliana and Hex knew they wanted to get married almost immediately, and they adopted Charlie early in their marriage. Bones was notorious for changing the subject whenever the discussion about our future was even broached.

"I've come to the realization that I just have to enjoy the present with Bones," I'd told her honestly. "I love him so much and I know he loves me too, and that's enough for right now. Maybe it will even be enough forever. I refuse to pressure him and risk losing him."

"He's not going anywhere," she told me confidently. "He might have a commitment phobia, but I don't think he'll ever purposely let you go. Just know that we're rooting for you, and if you ever need a girls' night, I'm here, okay?"

It was nice to know that people cared so much about us, and I spent a long time thinking about what she said. But since we've been living together, I feel like we're on firmer ground, and I meant what I told her. If we stay together forever, without rings or weddings or babies, that's okay with me. I feel fulfilled enough in my life and in our relationship. I don't need more.

He's been exactly what I've needed without having to try, but I do see him every day go out of his way to make me feel loved. It's in the way he makes my coffee before his every morning, or how he always makes sure I'm satisfied in the bedroom before him. He helps me sometimes at the center and brings me lunch when I have to work on the weekends. He knows my dream is to one day open my own dance studio and he's always texting me about properties he rides by. There's a

side to Bones I don't think even the Ruthless Kings get to see. It's a side that's just for me.

When I get home finally, all the lights are off and there are candles lit all over the apartment. My immediate thought is that the power must have gone out and I just wasn't paying attention. But as I shut the door and put my things down, I see the rose petals on the floor and the champagne chilling in a bucket on the kitchen island. What on earth?

Bones shouts out in pain in the bedroom and I tiptoe in to see him lighting even more candles. He shakes his hand and sucks on his finger as if he's burned it. He looks up to see me standing in the doorway watching him and freaks out.

"I didn't think you'd be home this early," he says in a panicked voice. "Shit, I'm not ready yet!"

He rushes over to me, pushing me out of the room and toward the front door. I can't help but giggle, unused to him being so flustered and nervous he's always so confident and self-assured. It's completely adorable. He opens the front door and pushes me out.

"I just need five minutes," he tells me, putting his hands up to tell me to wait. "Give me five minutes and everything will be perfect."

He goes back into the apartment and slams the door, and I'm in absolute hysterics. He immediately comes back out and kisses me quickly, telling me how pretty I look. Then he goes back inside, slamming the door again. I can't begin to let myself hope that he's about to propose, but all the signs are leading to it. He's never done anything like this before, and I've definitely never seen him so frazzled.

I wait patiently as I hear him tearing through apartment, cussing a few times as I hear sounds of banging and grunting. Finally, he opens the door again, dressed in a fresh shirt and smiling nervously. There's something so vulnerable about him, it's almost childlike. He grabs my hand and walks me inside, the room bathed in candlelight. My heart pounds in my chest as I wait to hear what he's going to say next.

“Do you remember what today is?” he finally asks quietly. “A year ago today, we met.”

Tears spring to my eyes at his words. I didn't think he'd remember it the way I did. Any other man would have forgotten, I'm sure of it. I had a boyfriend who forgot my birthday. Twice.

“And I realized something a while back, I want to spend all my years with you,” he says meekly. “But I hate today. I hate that today is the anniversary of when some asshole tried to attack you. I never want that to be the reason we remember today.”

I'm fully crying now, sobs wracking my body. There he goes being ridiculously thoughtful again. How on earth did I end up with such a wonderful man?

“There's a caveat, though,” he says slowly, taking a breath. “I've never really wanted to get married. Until a few years ago, I'd never seen a marriage work, and I knew a long time ago that it wasn't what I wanted for my life. It wasn't a thought that came into my head until you.”

Well, that's not exactly what I expected him to say. I say nothing, knowing that he's likely planned this speech and I need to hear the whole thing before I start jumping to conclusions.

“I don't want you to think that my dislike of marriage has anything to do with you. Not for a second. If you want to get married, if that's really important to you, then I'll do it in a heartbeat. I'll go to the courthouse right now and sign a paper. I'll even take your name if that's what you want.”

I laugh, unable to control my emotions at all right now. I've not doubted his love for me for one second in this relationship. He's always been so respectful of my needs and my wishes. I could never force him into something he doesn't want.

“Even so,” he continues. “I know that I never want to be with anyone else. I want to be yours for the rest of my life. It's not even a question for me. You're the only woman I'll ever

want. So..." He takes a deep breath and kneels down on one knee.

The last few minutes have been an emotional rollercoaster to say the least. The tears still flow freely, but I can't stop the smile that spreads on my face or the gasp that comes from my mouth. I sob and laugh and have no control of any of my emotions. My head is spinning.

He reaches into the pocket of his leather jacket and pulls out a small, black velvet box. When he opens it, I start crying even harder. It's my grandma's engagement ring. Any ring would have been perfect, but this is beyond anything I could have hoped. He would have had to ask my dad for this ring, which means my dad must have given his blessing for this.

I pull him up to a standing position, unable to say anything at all. I kiss him as hard as I can, my tears wetting his face. He holds me tightly, his arms squeezing my waist. I'm crying so hard now I can barely stand, but he's keeping me upright, supporting me. He has as long as I've known him, and now I know that he always will.

He picks me up and carries me to our couch, one that we picked out together. He gently lays me down on it, supporting his weight on his knee as he kisses me deeply. I'm going to spend the rest of my life with this man. He's my forever. I knew that before tonight, but now I know he feels the same way. He wants me to be his forever, too.

"I don't want to marry you," I whisper against his lips with a coy smile. He immediately freezes and sits on the couch, putting distance between us. I grab his jacket and pull him back into my space, kissing him firmly on the lips. "I don't want to marry you if you don't want to get married. But I will stay with you forever, if that's what you want. I don't ever want to be with anyone else either."

He relaxes against my touch and leans in to my kiss, his tongue capturing mine. We kiss long and slowly, then hard and desperate. Clothes are removed and thrown in a heap next to the couch. He's on top of me and inside of me and all around me. He's part of me and I'm part of him, and we'll never

belong to anyone else for as long as we live. He makes love to me on the couch, slowly and carefully like he's worried this moment might collapse if he moves too quickly.

My body is so attuned to him now, it doesn't take much for me to fall over the edge. It's the first of many times he'll unravel me tonight. After the first time, he pulls me on top of him and reaches down for the velvet box. Without a word, he slips the ring onto my finger and brings my hand to my lips. I run my hand through his hair, loving how the diamond sparkles in the light.

"People will think you're crazy," he says later, his hands rubbing lazy patterns on my back. My breathing is slow, my body so exhausted from the sheer amount of emotion it's been through tonight. "They'll think you've settled."

"Then they don't really know me," I reply, kissing his chest. "Because if they did, they'd know that you're the best thing that's ever happened to me. I don't have to be your wife to know that I'm never going to love anyone else like I love you. Besides, I don't need a piece of paper to know you are mine."

He laughs, the sound so beautiful I can actually see it as I drift off to sleep. It's bright and colorful and full of hope and love. It's a sound I'll never grow tired of. Even when we're old and grumpy, his laugh will be my favorite sound in the world. He'll always be my home.

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