



SNAKE

K.L. SAVAGE

SNAKE

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

K.L. SAVAGE

Copyright © 2023 by K.L. SAVAGE

All rights reserved. Except as permitted by U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without prior permission of the author. The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book via the Internet or via other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, establishments, or organizations, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously to give a sense of authenticity. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. SNAKE is intended for 18+ older, and for mature audiences only.

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)
[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)
[Chapter 30](#)
[Chapter 31](#)
[Chapter 32](#)
[Chapter 33](#)
[Chapter 34](#)
[Chapter 35](#)
[Epilogue](#)

Epilogue

Also by K.L. SAVAGE

SNAKE

She was the woman I loved, and I betrayed her.

I have secrets and enemies even my brothers the Ruthless Kings don't know about. When my systems go down and I can't fix the problem I wonder. When she knocks on my door I have to ask, has my past finally come to collect?

One moment, she was the only friend I had in this world. The next, we were completely and irrevocably shattered to pieces. And it was all my fault.

She taught me everything I know. Now she's here. Is she here to help me or ruin me?

The threats are still coming. The club is in danger and I don't know how to stop it. I thought we'd be running the world together one day and now I just hope we can make it one more day.

Can I fix what I broke between us? Or will one final secret be the end of us?

PROLOGUE



Snake

The familiar hum of my computers soothes me. They always have. I'm surrounded by the soft glow of monitors and the rhythmic whirring of processors. It's my sanctuary. The place where I feel most at home. Between me and these computers, I can accomplish anything. There's no stone we can't unturn. I love the feeling of usefulness they evoke. I'm not strong like Bones or Hex. I don't have the leadership of Pocus or Seer. In this room, though, I am king. No one can take it away.

Lately, my mind keeps drifting back to the girl who taught me everything. Long before the brotherhood, when I was a scared little kid with no family and no real love in life, there was Francesca. She spent hours teaching me her extensive knowledge of computers. We'd sneak into the computer lab at the group home every night for a private lesson.

She was magnificent to watch. When we were ten, she could handle a computer like no one I'd ever met. She was constantly fixing outages and crises in the home. I found out later she caused some of those problems so she wouldn't get kicked out. Once she vouched for my skills, we were indispensable. Sure, we'd never get adopted, but at least we wouldn't get split up. We wouldn't end up in worse situations than we were already in.

Francesca was more than my closest friend. She was my partner, my confidante. We were a dynamic duo, eventually running computer scams and raking in the cash. We were the masters of deception, using our skills to outsmart the unsuspecting. Together, we were unstoppable. Because of her, I was strong.

Then everything went wrong. After nearly a decade of friendship and running our schemes together... Well, it's not worth thinking about that now.

After fifteen years, I can think of her without bitter regret. Things went to shit so quickly for us. I thought we'd be running the world together one day. In one fell swoop, we were strangers.

I remember the thrill of our schemes, the rush of adrenaline as we made our plans and chose our targets. We were a force to be reckoned with. We were a pair of hustlers who reveled in the chaos we created. Francesca's brilliance and beauty only added to our mystique. People underestimated us. They never suspected the quiet tech guy and the stunning woman by his side pulled the strings.

We were living on the edge, dancing with danger. Our scams brought us wealth and power, but they also brought enemies. We were always one step ahead, but in the end the price we paid was our friendship. Our bond fractured under the weight of our ambitions and the darkness of our choices.

Now, as I sit here in the solitude of my office, I wonder what might have been. What if things had turned out differently? If she hadn't suggested we try to take down the most dangerous man in the country.

Well, that's ancient history now. It doesn't do to dwell on the past. He's safely locked away in jail where he can't get to us. She's safe on some remote corner of the planet, probably conning men out of money. She always had a knack for the long game. If I'm a king in this room, she was a goddess out there. Her skills and wit were unmatched by anyone I've ever met.

Francesca's face appears in my mind, her sleek straight hair and intimidatingly beautiful features. I remember the way her eyes sparkled with mischief as we hatched our plans. She was a genius. She was a technological savant with an almost supernatural ability to communicate with the devices I manipulated. Of course, now I wonder if those powers actually were supernatural. I know so much more now than I did then. She probably did have a gift.

I wish I'd asked her more questions. I wish I'd been a better friend to her. Of all the shitty things I've done in my life, betraying her was the worst. So, I bury myself further in my work. I try not to think about her at all. It's the same process I've followed for the last fifteen years and it's served me well.

Time has a way of erasing memories, dulling the pain of past betrayals. The wounds we inflicted upon each other have faded. What remains is a bittersweet nostalgia for the thrill of our illicit endeavors. I try to push those thoughts aside, to focus on the present and the duty I owe to the Ruthless Kings.

Still, as her face once again floats behind my eyes, I'm reminded of how much I'd started to want her. How much I'd longed to be with her. It was only after we parted that I realized the awful truth. I was completely in love with her, but I never had the chance to tell her. She probably thought I hated her after what I did. She probably still hates me.

I wouldn't have done it for any other reason than love. She needed to be protected. I had to be the one to keep her safe. If I'd had a chance to explain, maybe she would have understood. But that was never on the table.

I have to grapple with the fact that I probably never will know love. I screwed it up so royally, maybe I don't deserve it. That's my burden to bear. But I hope that somehow, some way, Francesca's found true happiness. That's all I ever wanted for her.

CHAPTER ONE

Seer

Bones brings in the mail and carelessly tosses it on the desk. Classic, careless Bones. A maid he is not, and he loves to remind me of it. None of the men have been happy since I assigned household duties, but they don't have to live with my wife. One day, they'll probably all understand what it's like to have a woman relentlessly nag at you until you have no choice but to surrender.

"I didn't marry you so I could spend all day, every day cleaning up after our son and your pack of ingrates," Tory had told me during a particularly nasty fight. "When you took over as Prez, I thought that meant that I would be your first lady. That I would help you keep things running. I did not sign up to be the help!"

"Nobody thinks of you as the help," I'd argued. It was apparently the exact wrong thing to say. Tory had listed off an entire diatribe of domestic duties she'd had to take care of over.

"Of all my friends, I'm clearly the stupid one," she hissed, and I knew better than to respond. "Abigail, Juliana, Evanesce, Meredith, they all live somewhere else! They were smart enough to get away from this house and make a place of their own."

"We have the apartment," I pointed out, which led to a pot being thrown at my head.

Suffice it to say, the very next day I called church and announced the new chores everyone in the house had to take part in. Pocus had a field day with that one. Once Tory talked to Abigail about it and Abigail got on his ass, he didn't think it was so funny anymore.

So now I'm sorting through the mail Bones has so ungraciously dropped

in front of me. I sift through an endless pile of junk and garbage. Honestly, I don't know why people send mail anymore. It all gets thrown out away. Even the postcards Hex and Juliana send from Brazil eventually end up in the trash. It's nothing personal. I don't like clutter.

The unmarked envelope with the threatening note inside is hardly any different. It's the run-of-the-mill threat I get every few months. No return address shows on the front. No name to the words that should intimidate me. I wouldn't be doing my job well if I didn't get threatened at least once a week.

The end is coming for you, Prez, is all it says in cut-out magazine letters.

Either this person is a serial killer or has entirely too much time on their hands. And what a vague, unoriginal message. The end of what? My life? My reign as the Prez? Honestly, I'd be more worried if I couldn't literally see the future. Little by little, Tory's been helping me regain my second sight. I haven't seen anything horrible coming at me. The future seems calm, maybe even promising. Of course, that worries. Nothing is calm around here.

I crumple up the note and throw it away with the junk mail. It will sit at the bottom of a dumpster where it belongs. I don't have time to be focused on veiled, anonymous threats when I have an entire organization to run. Honestly, doesn't anyone ever think of that? Maybe I should add *reading the mail* to Bone's assignment. I'm sure he'll love that.

On to more important business, like finishing my son's kindergarten application and checking in on the Cuatros Locos gang. I laugh at the stark contrast between the two tasks. I'm sure no other parent from Nicky's kindergarten class is running a secret investigation into a gang. They probably have normal jobs like accounting or marketing. I'm sure when they finish work for the day, they're not falling asleep thinking about what the next possible threat could be to their family.

The last few months have been too quiet for my liking. Apart from the occasional threatening letter like the one I discarded, no one's tried to threaten us. No one's created any obstacles for us whatsoever. A more naïve man would be grateful. I feel in my bones that this is the calm before the storm. Something is lurking around the corner. Something waits to ensure our destruction. There always is.

Top of my list is Diego Velez, the new leader of the Cuatro Locos. He's relatively young for a gang leader, rising up through the ranks at thirty years old. Unlike his predecessor there's not much can be found about him. He's

like a ghost who appeared on the scene one day. Given my experiences, I would be less shocked to find out that he is a ghost. Instead, he seems to be a flesh and blood man, a threat looming in the distance.

After the violent gang attacks several years ago, before I took over as Prez, the gangs in this city formed a mutual respect for one another. We had to have each other's backs when no one else would. Of course, I lost respect for many gangs when they recruited children as their drug mules. Those kids were being funneled into the gangs by a seriously deranged and supernaturally gifted cop. Still, I cut ties with many organizations at that point.

Our bonds have mended now that the kids have been safely released from gang life, but Diego Velez hates my guts more than any other gang leader in the city. Well, to be fair, he hates the entire MC, and I happen to be its current leader. He would hate Pocus if he were still in charge. But he sees me as the reason his gang is dwindling down to nothing. After all, I was the one who invited the police to help end the child trafficking.

If Diego hates me for that, I welcome it. I would rather be known as the man who rescues kids, not the one who exploits them. Still, I'd feel a lot less unsettled if there was something I could learn about Diego, some piece of information I could use against him if the situation demanded.

I walk into Snake's office, his "Inner Sanctum" as he likes to call it. His back is to me. He types fast and furious across three different monitors. This is how I usually find Snake, completely blocked off from the rest of the world. If he could, he'd probably marry a computer. He doesn't seem to have much use for people in general, only the bright screens of his monitors. Everyone has their thing, I guess.

"What's up, Prez?" he asks, not turning to look at me.

This is one of his eerie skills. Then again, I'm one of the only people who ever comes in here. It was probably a good guess.

"Just checking in on your progress with Velez," I tell him plainly.

Of all my men, Snake needs the least amount of hand-holding. He's a man of few words who prefers that others communicate the same way. The less talking, the better. He's a self-starter, an independent worker. He finds his comfort in this small room. His companionship is with these machines. He speaks a language I can never hope to understand.

"Still nothing, boss," he says, his fingers moving furiously. "But don't worry, I'll find something. Nobody's this clean."

I nod and turn away before he asks an uncharacteristic question.

“You okay, boss?” he asks. “You seem more stressed than usual.”

I turn back around to find that he’s still not looking at me. His fingers haven’t stopped moving. His screens scroll with information. How he could notice any change in my demeanor is a mystery to me. But I am more stressed than usual. The calm stresses me. Give me a threat, give me a problem, give me something to occupy my brain and my hands.

The silence is unbearable. These last few months have been nothing but peace and quiet. I can’t stand it. I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. The anticipation and anxiety are eating me up. What terrible monster will crop up and steal this peace? What threat will the MC face that I can’t handle? Pocus stepped down a few years ago because he was willing to risk his life to protect the club, even at the risk of his family. I keep wondering when that moment will arise for me.

With a forced smile, I deflect his question, pushing him away to shield him from the storm brewing within me.

“I appreciate your concern, Snake,” I reply, my voice strained. “But it’s not your job to notice. This burden is mine to bear.”

Silence settles between us, an unspoken understanding hanging in the air. I retreat to my office, my sanctuary. I can ponder my concerns on my own there, without Snake’s unsettling observational skills. Seriously, how can a man who basically lives in the virtual world be so attuned to my feelings?

Snake has always been a bit of a mystery. When he joined the MC fifteen years ago, we were all young and impressionable. We didn’t ask questions. We just did as we were told for the sake of brotherhood and the good of the Ruthless Kings. I was a young twenty-something who’d run away from my family and was too concerned with my visions of the future to give a low-level member like Snake any thought.

Now, I’m the leader. He’s one of my most indispensable men. Sure, brute force is important, but without Snake, our entire foundation would crumble. His ability to hack into any database and find information on any threat has helped us tremendously throughout the years. For years, it never occurred to me to ask him where he came from, what demons he was trying to outrun.

Now it’s much too late to ask. If Snake wanted that information known, he would have offered it freely. He’s done nothing to make me doubt his loyalty to this club. At the end of the day, that’s what matters most. Still, his uncanny gift of perception can be unsettling at times.

I force my mind to focus on other things, like this ridiculous application for my son's school. There's a line for parent occupation and income. I'll obviously have to fudge some information there. My poor son can't be known as the son of an infamous gang leader and a known witch. I want him to have a more normal childhood experience than the rest of us have. That makes my mind wander back to Snake, but I shake the thoughts out of my head.

All I need to know about Snake is that he's my brother. There's nothing he wouldn't do for the club. The rest is his business. His past is his burden to bear. So maybe he'll continue to be a mystery like Diego Velez. But I can't worry about that. He'll eventually find me everything I need to know about Diego. Snake's story will remain his to tell if and when he's ready.

CHAPTER TWO



Snake

I'm engrossed in my work. Lines of code and digital pathways surround me. I run down them, trailing further down the rabbit hole, though I keep hitting dead ends. I shouldn't be surprised that Diego Velez is so difficult to uncover. Like any good gang member, he's kept a low profile throughout his adult life.

His complete lack of a record shocks me. He has no arrests to show, no foster history, or anything. Even Pocus had that much available in the public records before I cleaned up his profile. Perhaps the Cuatros Locos have their own hacker, someone who's erased all trace of Diego from the digital sphere. That would come as a surprise. Their gang has dwindled down to almost nothing. I can't imagine they have many men in the field, let alone a digital hacker.

The lack of information frustrates me. It's not usually this hard to gather intel on someone. What usually takes me a matter of minutes has spanned over the course of days. It makes me question my skills and value. If I can't provide Seer with the information he needs, what good am I to the club? This has been my home for nearly half my life, and I can't do my one duty to protect it.

I'm shaken from my internal argument when I receive an email from an unfamiliar address. It simply says, *See you soon, Sammy*. I don't recognize the email, but only one person in the world ever called me that name. Francesca.

How strange that she would be reaching out for the first time in fifteen years when I was just thinking about her. She did always seem to have a sixth sense in a way. But I have no idea where she is now. I tried to keep track of

her those first few years although it felt like being stabbed in the heart. Knowing what I did to her was awful. Wherever she was at the time, I knew she was out there hating me.

Now, though, I have no idea what might be going through her head. Reaching out was a good sign, right? She messaged my private email that isn't listed anywhere. Only the members of the MC have access to it because they know it's the fastest way to reach me if they aren't at the clubhouse. She must have worked her magic to find the address, the way she always did.

Francesca's skills with a computer were unbelievable and unmatched. If Seer saw her in action, he'd probably put me out on the street in favor of her. She'd have information on Diego in ten seconds flat, I'd guarantee it. Truthfully, I wouldn't be surprised if she attempted to return to my life to put me out of a job. I'd deserve it. I left her without a dime all those years ago. Even if it was for her own protection, I never had a chance to explain. She'd be well within her right to do the same to me.

Curiosity eats me up from the inside out. What could she possibly want now, after all these years? If she wants revenge, she can brainstorm more creative ways to get it than emailing me. I think back to the scams we used to run on unsuspecting targets. She could strip me of my entire identity with the push of a few buttons.

Without thinking about it, I increase my personal security system, just in case. The very last thing I need right now is a digital attack. If Seer is in any way as annoyed by my lack of information as I am, the last thing he needs is another reason to doubt my competence. I built our entire database from scratch. Before I joined the MC, all its records were handwritten in shoeboxes.

If Francesca were to hack me, she'd get access to everything we'd ever done. She could bring the whole organization down. I wouldn't even blame her for it. After everything that happened with us, I turned to the Ruthless Kings for protection. She probably hates the club as much as she hates me. If I have to guess, she hates me a lot. I deserve it.

One moment, she was the only friend I had in this world. The next, we were completely and irrevocably shattered to pieces. And it was all my fault. I got too cocky with my abilities. I thought I was untouchable. She was always the true mastermind, the real technological genius between the two of us. I was only an apprentice, but I was a fast learner.

In some ways, working for the MC has been my penance. I've locked

myself in this small room, away from the rest of the world, to help a cause I believe in. For fifteen years, I've served the MC without question. I've contributed every ounce of talent I have. My entire world revolves around these walls, and I like to keep it that way.

I know what happens outside of this place and I want no part in it anymore. I know what we were both capable of, and it broke us. We were once innocent children who only knew that we needed to survive in this world, and then we got greedy. We wanted too much from a world that didn't want to give us anything at all.

I close my eyes and remember what a scrawny, scared kid I was. My parents were gone, and I was being driven to a group home by a social worker who smelled like stale cigarettes and cat piss. She talked too much and too fast, telling me how much I would love this home and how lucky I was to live there. She probably wanted to make herself feel better for dropping off a child in a home that would barely keep him fed and definitely wouldn't keep him safe.

I wasn't lucky. I was unwanted. I was a traumatized ten-year-old boy who'd been called into the principal's office at school to be told both of my parents had died in a car crash. I had no other family, so the state sent me to the only group home that had room.

When I arrived, I saw half a dozen other kids who were as scrawny and as traumatized as I was. To deal with the own hell they were forced into, their favorite game was hazing the new kid. Everything inside of me screamed to get back into the social worker's car and lock the doors. It wouldn't have done any good, though. She wasn't a better alternative to the Menges family.

I remember the false, almost sinister smiles Dan and Judy Menges wore when my social worker dropped me off. I was another paycheck from the state, not an actual child with actual needs. But there was Francesca, with her bold brown eyes and sharp wit. She was the same age as me and clearly the favorite. Unlike the other kids in the home, she warmed to me immediately.

When the older boys would bully me, she could fix them with one look and they'd stop. She had this untouchable energy. She was fierce, too tough to be messed with. It only took a few days in the home to realize no one ever messed with her. While the other kids were busy trying to make each other's lives a living hell, nobody bothered her.

She was pretty, even then. She had pale-blond hair, though back then, it was always dirty and tangled. Judy didn't do much to keep us kids bathed

besides make us share a bar of soap and a single, dirty bathroom. Francesca's eyes were a deep shade of brown that reminded me of my mom's homemade brownies.

I missed my parents so much in those first months. I locked myself in closets so I could cry without getting beat up by the older kids. Francesca would find me and grab my hand, pulling me into the home's computer room.

It was the only room in the house that was nice. It had three computers, one for Dan, one for Judy, and one for us kids to share. Ours, of course, was a much older PC that barely worked, but it was a state requirement that they had a computer so we could do our homework. Otherwise, we never would have had one to ourselves.

I had two teenage foster brothers, Benji and Derrick. They were fifteen and sixteen respectively and hated my guts. It was Benji's fourth group home and Derrick's seventh. Neither of their parents were dead. They were just too strung out on meth or alcohol to raise their children. The boys would sneak onto Dan's computer to look at dirty pictures. They were sure I was the one who ratted them out. When they got in trouble with Dan, I got beat up pretty bad.

It was after that incident that Francesca gave me my first computer lesson. At ten, she already knew how to code and how to perform some pretty advanced recovery techniques. She installed software on our shared computer that mimicked a virus so Dan eventually had to get us a newer, nicer one. I watched in amazement as she would design worlds out of nothing. She was like a real-life wizard.

She taught me how to code first because she said it was the easiest thing she could explain. I asked her where she learned so much about computers. She shrugged and said it was something she was always good at. I took that as law and never asked her more questions. She was my guru, my teacher, my everything.

Benji got kicked out of the house a few months later for using drugs on school property. Derrick ran away. Two more kids immediately took their places, so I wasn't the new kid anymore. As the months went by, it seemed like Francesca and I were the only two who didn't get rehomed. We made a pact with each other that we'd never leave without the other.

We kept our heads down, going to school together and sneaking into the school computer lab during lunch and after school so we could continue our lessons. In a few months, Francesca taught me how to build my own website.

It was a simple, ugly thing, but it was mine. In a house like ours, it was a rarity to have anything belong to you. She gave me that gift. It was something no one could steal or beat out of me.

Francesca was given the chance to skip two grades, but she stayed with me, honoring our pact. School would have been hell without her, but I never thanked her for that sacrifice. She was truly a prodigy. She could have gone on to start high school and college at a young age, but she didn't care about any of that. She only cared about our friendship.

I was too young at nineteen to appreciate the sacrifices she made throughout our lives. Time is the great equalizer. As the years have passed, I've become more keenly aware of exactly what Francesca gave up to keep me safe when no one else in the world cared about me. I wish she knew I was only trying to do the exact same thing.

CHAPTER THREE

Francesca



I sit alone in a dimly lit apartment in Barcelona. My heart pounds in my chest. The weight of the past bears down on me. I feel the cold tendrils of fear creeping up my spine. For years, I've been hiding off the grid, running from my past, and seeking solace in the anonymity of a new life. Now, the past has caught up with me. It threatens to unravel everything.

In recent weeks, anonymous letters have arrived at my doorstep, filled with hateful words and insidious threats. The sender remains nameless, but I know who's behind these tormenting messages. I didn't think he'd be capable of harboring such a deep grudge, festering with resentment for the last decade and a half. Truthfully, I thought he'd be in jail for the rest of his life. But he's out and he's found me, piercing the veil of secrecy I thought would protect me.

My hands tremble as I read the latest letter. Its words are etched into my mind, echoing with malice. It's a twisted game he's playing, taunting me and reminding me that my past can never truly be outrun. I've fought so hard, sacrificed so much to build this new life. I haven't touched a computer in five years, denying my identity to stay off his radar.

If he's found me, I know Sammy is next. Despite everything, he at least deserves to know the threat is coming for him. It would serve him right to be found, to have to pay for his sins. The vengeful side of me says he deserves what's coming for him. But I can't deny the other side. A part of me still cares about him for some sick, twisted reason.

After the way he left me, I shouldn't care what happens to him. I should let the chips fall where they may. I need to focus on my own safety. But I can't forget that small, sad boy who walked into my group home at just ten

years old. From the moment I saw him, I knew that it was my responsibility to take care of him. Twenty-four years later, that instinct hasn't faded. I curse it. I shouldn't have to feel the weight of this burden now. Not after what he did.

I can't deny that I'm afraid. As much as I want to protect Sammy, I hold a small glimmer of hope that maybe he'll protect me too. After all, he ran away to that "band of brothers" to cover his ass. He has the power of numbers whereas I'm vulnerable and exposed all on my own. He owes me security at the very least.

I gather my belongings from my small apartment and prepare to step out into the unknown. A mix of apprehension and defiance washes over me. No matter what happens, I won't go down without a fight. Whether Sammy agrees to help me or not, I won't be the next victim of Ronan Burke. He may blame me for everything that happened to him, but he won't break me.

The city streets are bustling with life as I walk among the crowds. My senses are heightened, alert to any signs of danger. Tourists stop and pose for pictures, then immediately post them online for all the world to see. It disgusts me how little they consider their own security. Anyone in the world could find them based on the things they post. Everyone in the world is obsessed with sharing their every move. I've spent the last fifteen years existing in the shadows, purposely ensuring no part of my life exists online.

I move with purpose, my steps guided by an unwavering determination. When I arrive at the bus station, I pay for my ticket in cash and hand the clerk a fake ID. He can't tell the difference and I know it. My guy is very good. I thank him in my perfect Castilian Spanish, something I've prided myself on perfecting. Locals ask what part of the country I grew up in, convinced I'm native and not an American who happens to be good at blending in.

I'll miss Spain, but it's not safe for me here anymore. I wish I could stay forever, swallowed up by the anonymity that Barcelona provides. Though, I suppose it wasn't anonymous enough. Ronan found me somehow, after all. Despite everything I've done to watch my back and ensure my safety, he found a way. And he'll find Sammy, too.

I have to imagine that his vindictive nature has only grown. He's probably spent the last fifteen years in jail plotting our demise. He wants it to be slow and agonizing. He'll make us suffer for what we did to him. If I know Ronan at all, and I'd like to think I do, he'll make it hurt. I can't give him the satisfaction.

I could try to lost in the world again, but how long would it be before he found me again. I can't spend the rest of my life running, watching my back. He doesn't get that satisfaction after everything else he's done to ruin my life.

Sammy's a sitting duck, though. Which is why I don't run to some far-off corner of Europe to hide until Ronan inevitably finds me again. This train goes straight to the airport. I'll board a plane to the one place in the world I hate more than I hate Ronan. New Orleans.

I've already told Sammy I'm coming, risking exposing myself to Ronan. I encrypted the free email service and bounced the signal off of a thousand different servers. Even if Ronan intercepted the message, he'd have no way to know it was from me. Unless, of course, he somehow knew that I was the only person in the world who used the name "Sammy."

It was the only way I could let him know it was me. Obviously, signing my name was out of the question. I very much doubt he lets anyone else call him Sammy now, especially at thirty-four years old. He's probably Sam or Samuel, or some stupid gang name that makes no sense. He'll definitely know it's me.

I refuse to acknowledge the possibility that Ronan's already gotten to him. He saw me as the brains of the operation, I'm his true target. He can't think that hurting Sammy could possibly punish me. Not after he was the one to destroy our friendship in the first place. It was the best revenge he could have taken, apart from killing me. He took away the only person I truly loved in the whole world.

Thoughts of Sammy flood my mind, memories of stolen glances and shared laughter. We were two puzzle pieces that never quite fit together, mostly because he could never look up from a computer long enough to acknowledge I existed. I suppose that was my fault too. After all, I was the one who taught him everything he knows. It was to bring us closer together, not tear us apart.

Even now, after all these years, thinking about him feels like a punch to the gut. So many times, I was sure he'd come back, apologize for what he'd done. Those first few weeks felt like a nightmare I couldn't wake up from. I was broken and vulnerable with no one to turn to for comfort. I kept telling myself it was all a big mistake, that he would come back and make things right.

Then the weeks wore on to months and a year had gone by. Then five. Then ten. I'm not sure at exactly what point I gave up waiting. One day, I

decided my only course of action was to stop thinking about him. To pretend he never existed and the whole thing was a blip. That's not an easy feat for a relationship that spanned nine years, especially when it's the most formative nine years of your life. But I had no other choice. The grief would have drowned me.

The train stops abruptly. I realize we've reached our final destination. I'm once again lost in thought in the world of Sammy. Damn him for making me so weak. I slowly get up from my seat and walk through the train doors in a haze. I move through the terminal until I find the airline I'm looking for. The line isn't long. Once I'm at the counter, I tell the attendant the story I've been working on in my head.

Paying for a plane ticket in cash is unheard of these days, but it's my only option. Fake IDs are fine, but credit cards will leave a trail. Cash is easier, especially laundered cash. The attendant rolls his eyes, unimpressed by my story and deeply apathetic. Still, he takes the cash and prints out my ticket, annoyed he has to count out the bills. Poor thing, having to spend an extra two minutes doing his job.

The saving grace is he assumes, like most Spaniards have, that I'm native. If he knew I was American, he'd probably refuse to help me at worst, or call me names at best. Regardless, I now have my ticket in hand and a few hours to kill before I leave.

The lure of technology is everywhere I turn. Every person in this airport is on their phone, hardly looking up to notice anyone else is near them. Children watch tablets. People pay for food with their watches. Hardly anything in this place can do without technology. Many of the stores have gone cashless. The world is a very boring place without the use of technology.

It's a slippery slope, though. For five years, I've chosen to stay off the grid and off technology completely. It's been the easiest way to maintain my safety and anonymity. Ronan isn't my only enemy. Not that it matters, Sammy took all the money with him. That's always baffled me the most. He never seemed to care how much money we raked in, but he took all of it when he left.

For a long time, I questioned if everything I knew about him was a lie, but we'd grown up together. There's no way he'd been fooling me for nine years. We were only ten when we met. He wasn't some criminal mastermind psychopath. He barely knew how to use the internet when I started teaching

him.

No, I still don't understand it. I probably never will. He may try to explain once we're face to face, but I won't give him the chance. He doesn't deserve it. It doesn't matter why he did it anymore. It only matters that he did and never apologized. He never tried to reach out, never tried to check up on me. He left me alone to fend for myself. Nothing he can say or do will ever change that fact.

CHAPTER FOUR

Seer

I stand frozen. My eyes are locked on the devastating scene unfolding before me. Flames leap and dance with an insatiable hunger. They consume everything in their path. The clubhouse, the heart and soul of the Ruthless Kings, stands engulfed in an inferno of destruction. The crackling of wood and the roar of the fire fill the air, drowning out all other sounds.

My heart clenches in my chest, aching with a profound sense of loss. This isn't just our physical home. It's the place where we've built our legacy, forged our bonds of brotherhood. In this home, I learned what it meant to be a man and to put someone else's needs above my own. It's the place where I fell in love, where I raised my son.

But now, as I watch it crumble in the merciless grip of the fire, I am filled with profound helplessness. The flames devour our sanctuary. They reduce it to ash and smoke. The familiar sights and sounds that once brought me comfort and strength are now swallowed by the ever-growing blaze.

I clench my fists. My mind races with a mix of fury and despair. Every fiber of my being screams for action, for a way to save what remains of our home. But the fire rages on. Its intensity is too fierce to challenge. The flames lick at the sky, mocking my futile attempts to control the uncontrollable.

Memories flood my mind. A montage of moments that have shaped me. I remember the first time I walked through the doors as a broken and scared young man. When Pocus named me his vice president. When Tory showed up out of nowhere to take care of me. When we brought Nicky home from the hospital.

At this moment, I stand here with tears welling in my eyes. I am forced to confront a painful truth—I cannot turn back time. I can't change the course of

this devastating event. All I can do is bear witness to the destruction, to the loss that threatens to consume me.

Guilt gnaws at my conscience. I question my decisions and actions. Could I have done something to prevent this tragedy? Did I fail my brothers? Did I overlook a warning sign? These questions haunt me. Their weight presses upon my shoulders.

I watch the flames lick higher and higher as my beloved home is shrouded in smoke. I can't stop it. I'm helpless and paralyzed as I'm forced to think about everything I've built. Everything that's now gone. Glass explodes and shatters into pieces as the windows give out. The structure begins to collapse.

I cover my face. Though a shard of glass pierces through my skin. Hot blood trickles down my arm. I hear screams of fear and horror. I can't concentrate on any of it. There's only the roar of fire in my ears, consuming every sense. The only thing louder is the thought clanging through my mind.

Your fault, your fault, your fault.

The house falls. It crumbles to the ground as if it were a stack of toothpicks. This legacy that was built before me, that I've worked to carry on, is in ashes. It's reduced to nothing. Still, the fire rages on. The heat whips at my face. The smoke stings my eyes. Something breaks inside of me. I fall to the ground, screaming out in pain.

All around me are the dead bodies of my friends. Pocus is lifeless, his searing, lifeless eyes boring into mine. There's a message there, disappointment almost. It's like, even in death, he's telling me that I could have done better. I should've done more to stop this from happening. To my right is Bones, gasping for air as his body succumbs to his injuries.

I call out for Tory. My voice is hoarse, but she's nowhere to be found. Where is my wife? My son? Panic and fear grip my heart because I know somehow they were inside the structure as it went up in flames. They're probably crushed under the collapsed house. I have nothing left. No one.

I jolt awake, drenched in cold sweat. My heart pounds against my chest with terror. The remnants of a vivid nightmare cling to my consciousness. They refuse to release their grip. The vision is etched so clearly in my mind. It's a scene of devastation and despair, leaving no room for misinterpretation.

Tremors course through my body. My mind reels with the aftermath of the vision. Hands grip me. An angelic voice whispers soothingly as I feel gentle fingers run through my hair. I'm so wound up I can't relax into her,

my body stiff and defensive. Adrenaline runs through me, but my body is frozen in panic.

“It’s okay, mon coer,” Tory whispers sweetly. “It was just a dream. You don’t have to be afraid.”

I shake my head profusely. Tears already form in my eyes. It wasn’t just a dream. It was the clearest vision of the future I’ve had in several years.

“Everyone’s going to die,” I whisper. My voice is hoarse from the unshed tears and rising panic. “You and Nicky, you’re going to die.”

My voice breaks and I collapse into her arms. She holds me tight and rubs my back, singing softly. It takes me nearly half an hour to compose myself. All the while she stays holding me as if it’s her only job in life.

“The future isn’t set in stone,” she tells me firmly when I’m calm enough to hear her. “You may have seen our death, but that means there’s time for us to stop it. You and I both know there’s no way in hell you’ll let anything happen to us.”

She meets my gaze and forces me to stare at her. Her eyes are steely and determined. I know she’s right. I just can’t unsee those images and can’t stop the panic that’s gripping my heart. But it hasn’t happened yet. It won’t happen. I’ve stopped the future before. I can do it again.

“I love you so much,” I whisper, pulling her face to mine and pressing my lips firmly against hers.

Her hands instinctively intertwine around my neck, the way they have for years. Her hands run patterns against my scalp. Our sweet, quiet moment is replaced with a frantic, frenzied mess of hands and lips and tongues. We’re desperate for each other, as if we’ve never had the chance to touch and are experiencing the sensation for the first time.

There aren’t many places on her body I haven’t explored, few traces of skin that haven’t been kissed. I move against her, letting her feel how much my body needs her touch. It takes mere seconds to discard our clothes. Soon, I’m sliding inside of her. She gasps in pleasure, her hands grasping desperately at our sheets.

I touch her the way I know she likes. I gently stroke my fingers between her legs as her breathing rapidly increases. If she doesn’t know how much I need her, how much I depend on her, then my fingers have to tell her. Have to show her. I want her to feel as good as she makes me feel. I want her to know that she’s the reason I wake up every morning and keep fighting. Sure, I have my responsibilities. I have the guys, and we have Nicky. But Tory is

my sun. I rise and fall by her side.

She's close to coming undone. I can tell by the way she tightens around me. I kiss the soft swell of her breasts as her breath hitches, loving the feeling of her smooth skin against my lips. She's been complaining a lot about her body lately. She says her breasts are sagging and her skin is wrinkling, but I don't notice. To me, she's the same perfect woman I met all those years ago. Her body was made specifically for mine. I'll always worship at its altar.

My name slips from her lips as she falls apart, though she's mastered the art of making her bliss as quiet as possible. Ever since Nicky was born, we've learned to enjoy a silent bliss so as not to draw his attention. We've had a few too many close calls with him interrupting us thinking something was wrong.

But I wouldn't change a thing. Our son is a reflection of our love for each other. He is the direct result of this ecstasy we can only find in each other's arms. Before I met Tory, I didn't know what real love was supposed to be. The idea of being without her fills me with a consuming panic, eating at me from the inside out.

I thrust deeper inside of her, coming undone on my own. I bury my face in her neck as I let my rapture wash over me. Then I roll onto my side and pull her with me, unwilling to break our connection. I'm still keyed up from that vision. I still feel the fresh horror of losing the most precious people in my life. I have to stay connected to her as long as possible to remind myself that we're okay. She's here, surrounding me, alive and well.

She holds my face to her neck and runs her fingers through my hair as I begin sobbing again. I can't stop the tears from flowing from my eyes. I'm too tired and traumatized from the vision to compose myself. She whispers sweet nothings into my ear until my body relaxes. The crying quiets. She slips away so she can clean up, but I remain in bed, focusing on the air moving slowly in and out of my lungs.

I've never had a vision like that in my whole life. I felt the heat of the fire against my skin. I smelled the smoke. It wasn't like I was seeing a picture of things to come. It was like I was actually there, plucked out of this present moment and into that one, too stunned to move or help or do anything.

I couldn't gauge the date. Everyone mostly looked the same, besides being coated in soot and dead or dying. A cold chill passes through my body. I feel the sudden urge to throw up. I still see Pocus's lifeless eyes reprimanding me. I should call him, tell him about the vision, and get his advice. He'll have some insight.

Then again, telling him about the vision might add undue stress to his plate. He'll literally kill himself in the pursuit of stopping it. If anyone can self-fulfill a prophecy, it's Pocus. Perhaps it's best to keep it to myself for a while and try to unravel it by myself or with Tory. She won't judge me or stress herself coming up with a solution. She'll wait patiently for me to arrive at a conclusion myself before she gently corrects me and gives good advice.

One thing I know for certain, though. No matter what happens, I need to get her and Nicky away from the clubhouse for a while. Even if everything else in the vision comes true, I won't let my family be put in harm's way. The sharp ache of losing them stings in my chest. I slowly get up, pull my boxers on, and walk quietly out of the room. I slip across the hall and toward Nicky's door very quietly.

I don't want to wake him, but I'll never get back to sleep myself until I can lay my eyes on him and ensure that, right now, he's perfectly healthy. His chest moves rhythmically up and down. A small smile plays on his lips. At least someone is having good dreams tonight.

I lean down and kiss his forehead, pausing when he stirs. I'm afraid I'll wake him up and throw off his sleep schedule. That would be a fate almost worse than death. Tory would murder me. Thankfully, he turns to his side. His breathing returns to a slow, peaceful rhythm. For tonight, he's perfectly safe and happy. I'll do everything in my power to ensure that remains his reality.

CHAPTER FIVE

Graveyard

Meredith enters our apartment with a heaviness in her step. Her eyes are clouded with distress. I sense the stress engulfing her, the weight of an unseen burden pressing upon her shoulders. She doesn't say a word, just slams doors and pouts her way through the apartment without acknowledging me. It would be cute if I wasn't so worried about her.

I get up from the couch and carefully approach her, afraid I might end up in the crosshairs of whatever war she's waging. I gently place my hand under her chin and lift her face so she'll look at me. A storm cloud brews behind her eyes. I'm afraid of adding to it. Still, I want her to know that whatever's going on, I'm here to help relieve her burden.

"What's wrong, baby?" I bend down to place a sweet kiss on the side of her mouth. "You look upset."

She takes a deep breath and leans into me. I feel the complete weight of her burden and carry it as if it's my own. I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her to me, letting her rest against me. Her arms twist around my neck. We stay there for a moment as she breathes me in.

"It's probably nothing," she says, taking a step away from me and reaching into her bag. She produces a piece of paper and hands it to me. "But we received this today at the center."

I unfold the paper and try to take it in. It's written like a ransom note in a bad cop movie. Letters are cut out from various magazines to spell out a warning.

"Count your days. Your freaks can't stay hidden forever."

I re-read the words several times as the anger starts to slowly rise. Heat spreads over my face and pounds in my ears. I cast it aside and pull her back

into my arms, holding her tighter against me. She cries, her body shaking with sobs. I guide us to the couch and pull her into my lap, rubbing her back as she releases the stress that's probably been building since the second she read that note.

"It probably is nothing," I tell her as reassuringly as I can. "A stupid prank by teenagers or something."

"A teenager wouldn't know about their gifts," she says slowly, pulling away from me and looking into my face with sad eyes. "What if it's Damien? What if he's got someone on the outside planning an attack on us?"

"It's not Damien," I reassure her more seriously.

We've had a close watch on Damien ever since he went to prison. He was put in solitary confinement for his own safety. As a cop, he was a target for the rest of the prisoners. However, as a child trafficker, he wasn't given any sort of special treatment. I'd feel sorry for the guy if he weren't such a total piece of shit. Still, I doubt Damien's had any chance to make friends in his current situation. I tell Meredith as much.

"It's been very triggering," she admits, resting her head on my chest and playing with my hand. "I spent so much time on the run, always watching my back. And it feels like the second I find safety and security, someone's come and taken it away."

My heart aches for her, for the unwavering dedication she has shown in creating a safe place for those kids to thrive and find a community. It is a noble cause, one that she's dedicated most of her time and energy to. Before the center opened, I hardly saw her at all. She keeps regular hours now, but it's never far from her mind. Even when we're together, she's thinking about some issue or another.

I admire her work ethic and dedication. She's roped in several of the Ruthless Kings into helping at the center. Never did I think I'd see the day when Snake would willingly leave the house and spend several hours doing something for the children. He set up the computer lab for her and built in a bunch of cybersecurity that I'll never understand. He's gone down a few times and taught coding classes. Only Meredith could get him to agree to that.

Her passion for those kids is infectious. No one's helped her out of loyalty to me. It's all her, and a little bit Charlie. From the moment they entered our community, they won over my brothers. She won't take something like this lightly. No amount of convincing will make her believe it

was a dumb prank.

And I understand. If I'd spent years running from a psychopath and hiding gifted children from him, I'd also be on edge. But if it's not Damien, who could be sending such a threatening message? Who would want to attack her and break down everything she's worked so hard to achieve?

I hold her close, enveloping her in a comforting embrace. I offer the solace of my presence. Words feel inadequate in the face of her pain, so I let the warmth of my touch speak volumes. We sit there for a long time, comforting each other. I want to be her safe place, just as she's mine. I want her to know I would do anything to keep the monsters at bay.

As I hold her, a chilling realization comes over me. I'd completely forgotten about the letter that was left in my work inbox. It didn't have the same serial-killer vibe, it was a hastily scrawled note on a torn piece of paper. I'd thought nothing of it at the time. I threw it away and went about my shift.

Now, though, I see the words floating in front of my eyes.

Dr. Graves is the perfect name for you. We'll be digging yours soon.

It came days ago, but now I see it in my mind as if I'm holding it in my hands. Meredith doesn't notice any change in my demeanor. She kisses me softly and breaks out of our embrace, moving to the kitchen to start dinner. She'll let out her frustration on chopping vegetables and tenderizing meat. Meanwhile, my heart pounds so loud I can hear it in my ears. I can't tell her about my letter without causing her further panic. She doesn't need to bear the weight of any more fear. Certainly not on my behalf.

I watch her as she cooks, her back to me. She's put on music and is moving around the small kitchen, singing slightly off-key. I love being home in time for dinner to witness these small moment of freedom she indulges in. It's one of the few times throughout the day that she truly lets her guard down. I'm torn between watching her and going into our bedroom to call Seer. Duty eventually wins, though. If something is going on, he needs to know about it.

With a heavy sigh, I get off the couch and walk into our bedroom, closing the door behind me. Hopefully Meredith will think I've slipped away to take a shower or sneak in a quick nap before she finishes dinner. I don't want to raise her stress level anymore. She doesn't need to worry about this.

Most likely, someone is trying to attack me. They know going after her is the best way to do that. I'll see if Seer can spare a couple of the guys to keep an eye on the community center for a few days. I'm sure he'll be happy to

grant that request. Like I said, Meredith has had a huge effect on the club.

“It’s not a great time, Graveyard,” Seer answers after a few rings. It seems we aren’t the only ones having a bad day.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him genuinely. “I wouldn’t be calling if it weren’t an emergency.”

I hear him sigh heavily. I can’t help but wonder what’s got him so hard up. Unlike Pocus, Seer can usually be counted on to be fairly even-tempered and open. It’s a rarity to experience this stressed out version of him.

“You might as well tell me,” he answers in a resigned tone.

“Meredith received a threatening letter today at the community center. It was pretty bad, Seer. She’s really shaken up. Can you spare a couple of guys to patrol the place when it’s open?”

“Of course, I can,” he says, compassion now coloring his tone. “Anything for those kids. What did the letter say?”

I can’t comprehend the edge to his tone. I tell him the gist and hear another heavy sigh.

“I think it’s my fault somehow,” I admit. “I think someone’s pissed at me, and they’re taking it out on her.”

“What makes you say so?” he asks curiously.

“Because I got a note too. A few days ago. I thought nothing of it, but now that she’s gotten one too, I think someone has to be messing with me. She was worried the note came from Damien, but Snake continuously updates me on his movements. It could be an old enemy or—”

“It’s not just you,” Seer cuts me off in a hollow tone. “I got one the other day too. Were your notes written in psychotic magazine letters?”

“Hers was,” I confirm. “Mine was scrawled out hastily, but I didn’t know the handwriting. Even if I did, I’ve thrown it away.”

“Me too,” he sighs again.

“What’s going on, Seer?” A sense of panic rises in my chest. “If this isn’t Damien and it’s not someone after me, who’s doing this?”

“It’s not like there’s a short list of people who hate us,” he mumbles sarcastically. “Off the top of my head, I could name about a hundred people who would want to intimidate us.”

“But how many know where to find me at work? Or Meredith? That’s got to shorten the list a bit, yeah?” I ask hopefully.

“I’ll talk it over with Snake,” he says wearily. “He’s done a good job keeping our personal information hidden. Maybe he can find out who’s

gotten hold of it.”

“Yeah, you do that.” I feel more frustrated than when I came into the room. This is clearly a much bigger threat than I’d imagined. At least I don’t feel guilt that someone’s threatening Meredith to get to me anymore. But I can’t say I’m at ease now.

“I’ll send a couple of guys to the center tomorrow,” Seer reiterates. “It’ll be fine. Just keep your eyes open.”

He hangs up without a proper goodbye. I get more insight into the full scope of his stress. Seer basically had proper etiquette beaten into him as a child. He’s not the type to hang up without some formality. A chill runs down my spine as I realize whoever is threatening us has a much grander agenda than I first suspected.

I walk back out into the living room to find Meredith serving up dinner on two plates. I walk to her and wrap my arms around her waist from behind. Then I press my face against her neck and breathe in her sweet scent. I place a kiss there and feel her shudder against my chest.

“What brought that on?” she asks, turning to me and placing a chaste kiss on my lips.

She returns her attention to the task at hand. I let go of her and follow her to the table as she sets down our plates.

“I just really love you,” I tell her. “And I promise you, I won’t ever let anything bad happen to you again.”

She smiles at me from her seat and grabs my hand. “I love you too,” she says softly. “Now stop being such a sap and eat your dinner before it gets cold.”

I laugh and do as she says. A pissed-off Meredith is scarier than whatever threat is staring us down.

CHAPTER SIX

Pocus

A palpable tension lingers in the room. I look at the faces of my brothers, noticing their expressions range from annoyed to terrified. I have no idea what's going on, nor why Seer called an emergency church meeting, but I'm here. I wait with bated breath. My anxiety starts to grow. What the hell is going on around here?

"Thank you all for coming on such short notice," Seer says gravely. "This isn't a meeting I want to have, but it's come to my attention that we're under a coordinated attack."

This is news to me. I sit up straighter, trained on Seer's every word.

"Who here has received a threatening letter in the last week?" Seer asks.

Every hand in the room shoots up apart from mine.

Now I'm downright offended. Some men pull out letters from their back pocket, while others whisper about what their letters said. I look at Seer with a confused expression to find a similar look on his face as he assesses me.

"We need to be on our guard," Seer goes on, bringing everyone's attention back to the front of the room. "It's not just us, Meredith received a letter as well, right, Graveyard?"

I look at Graveyard in the corner, and he nods.

"Someone threatened the kids," he confirms, which causes another round of whispers.

Everyone here loves those kids. They've all volunteered at the community center without being asked. Hearing the center has been threatened is more infuriating to them than getting letters themselves.

"They knew my real name," says Jenks, one of the newer members. "I've never told Seer my real name," he says as his face grows paler.

“There are no data leaks,” Snake chimes in. “I’ve scoured the system a hundred times. Nobody has gotten into our files. There’s no reason someone should have access to any of this information.”

“No one should have been able to connect Meredith with us,” Graveyard chimes in. Sheer fury drips from his tone. “I’ll kill whoever’s doing this.”

“Simmer down, Graveyard,” Seer tells him with an authoritative tone. “We’ll find who’s doing this, and we’ll make them pay. Until then, I need you all to report to me if you have any unusual encounters. If someone looks at you the wrong way, give me every detail.”

“I can think of better ways to deal with that,” Bones murmurs.

I can’t help but chuckle. His reaction always involves giving someone a black eye.

Seer dismisses church, but I don’t move until the room is cleared out. He looks wearier these days, more stressed than usual. It’s a look I recognize well. It’s probably how I look most of the time. Since my son’s birth, I haven’t gotten more than four hours of sleep on any given night.

“You look like hell, mon ami,” I tell him honestly as he comes to collapse in the chair next to me.

“I feel like I’m in it,” he says with exhaustion in his voice. “It’s been a shitty week.”

“Aren’t they all?” I laugh, garnering a small, weak smile from him.

“Do we ever get to breathe?” he asks quietly. “Do we ever get to have some peace without looking over our shoulder or wondering when the next shoe is going to drop?”

“Uh-oh,” I murmur. “You’re starting to sound like me a few years ago.”

“Shit,” he hisses. “I don’t want to give it up, Pocus, I really don’t. I love this job, and I think I’m good at it.”

“The last guy was better,” I tease, but he doesn’t seem to hear me.

“I think I’m going to get us all killed,” he says so quietly I’m not sure I hear him right.

He slouches down in his chair and looks at his hands, tapping his feet nervously on the floor in a complicated rhythm. Anxiety rushes off of him in waves, and I know this isn’t his average, run-of-the-mill concern. He’s hiding something from me. That’s fine. He’s entitled to his secrets. So I quickly change the subject.

“What’s this nonsense about me not getting a letter?” I joke, trying to lighten the mood. “Am I not a threat anymore because I have two kids? Does

this asshole not consider me part of the equation anymore?”

“You’re usually at the top of people’s hit lists,” Seer finally cracks. “Maybe it got lost in the mail.”

“Or worse,” I mutter. “Maybe Abigail found it first and already killed the guy.”

This makes him laugh, a long, hearty laugh. He throws his head back and lets the feeling consume him. Admittedly, no one is quite as intimidating as my wife. Even with our two kids running around, she’s like a superhero. She wrangles them, holds down a full-time job, and has time to do favors for Seer on occasion. I genuinely can’t comprehend how she does it.

“I might have to start making our women attend church,” Seer says wistfully.

I gasp in horror. Women were banned from church, but that obviously had to change. Tory’s basically Seer’s vice-Prez and everyone knows it. Still, the women mostly avoid church as a protest. Abigail complains the meetings are too boring.

“I’ll start sending Abigail in my place,” I tell him. “She’s probably a greater threat these days anyway.”

“Oh, shove it,” Seer says incredulously. “You probably didn’t get a letter because this asshole knows you’d end this before it started. He’s goading us, making us worry before anything even happens.”

“Are you worried?” I ask, hoping he might open up about what’s bothering him.

“I’m always worried,” he answers, shifting uncomfortably. “I’m responsible for these guys twenty-four seven. If anything goes wrong, it’s on me.”

“Your turn to shove it,” I say. “This is me, Seer, you know I can read you like a book. Your stress levels are way higher than normal. Talk to me.”

He sighs heavily. “I wasn’t going to tell you about it,” he says quietly, immediately piquing my interest. “I want to handle it myself, Pocus.”

“Tell me about what?” I ask, confused. “The letters?”

He looks down at his hands again and I feel the shame coming off him. Whatever he’s hiding is so much worse.

“You had a vision,” I guess. “It was bad, wasn’t it?”

He sighs again and leans back in his chair, fiddling with his hands. It’s like he can’t stay still. Whatever he saw is causing him to be anxious and fidgety. It’s so unlike him, it scares me. I’ve never seen him so riled up about

a vision before.

“I don’t know if the two things are related,” he says carefully. “It could be a coincidence that I had this vision right after I got my letter.”

“Tell me,” I demand. He’ll evade the question forever if I let him.

“Everyone will die, Pocus,” he whispers. “You, Bones, Hex. I saw you all outside, completely lifeless. And Tory and Nicky, they—” he stops, his voice breaking.

Tears spring to his eyes. He cries quietly for several minutes. I clap him on the shoulder and sit with him until I feel him calming down. I get up and motion for him to follow me. This isn’t a conversation we need to have sober.

We walk over to the bar where Buffy dutifully waits for us. He pours us each a glass of the top-shelf bourbon, and we take them to Seer’s office to talk about this in private. When the door is shut, we sit down in his easy chairs. I wait patiently for him to start from the beginning.

He does, painting me a grim picture of our beloved home being burnt to the ground. That image is more troubling to me than his recounting of my death. I’m not afraid of dying. I haven’t been for a long time. I would hate to leave Abigail alone to care for the kids, but I know she’d handle it. She’d manage without me. On the other hand, I’d be a wreck without her.

I understand the feeling of panic I sense in Seer as he tells me about losing Tory and Nicky. I would willingly walk to my death if it meant saving my family. His anger and fear strike a deep chord with me. I see how this vision has broken him. He’s had terrible visions before, but nothing like this. On top of the threats, it’s weighing heavily on him.

“Why didn’t you want to tell me?” I ask, trying to help redirect his hopeless thoughts.

“I think I was worried that if I say it out loud, it has more chance of coming true,” he answers after considering my question for a moment. “I can’t let that happen, not under any circumstance. Whether it’s going to happen in a week or ten years, I can never let my family die because of a mistake that I made.”

“How do you know the events of this vision will be your fault?” I ask him curiously. “It’s not like you’re the only one here with enemies. We’ve all had our fair share over the years.”

“I’m in charge, though,” he answers lamely. “The buck stops with me. If I can negotiate peace or stop this threat in its tracks and I don’t—”

“Seer, do you know why I stepped down?” I cut him off. Though we’ve

had a similar conversation several times over the years, it's important that he hears me now.

"Yes, Pocus," he says with an eye roll. "Everyone knows."

"I let my job overtake every facet of my life," I say anyway. "I was willing to sacrifice myself because I thought the buck stopped with me. Because I didn't want anyone else to get hurt because of a situation I didn't have under control."

"How could you have ever predicted Anderson would become some vengeful spirit out to get you?" He laughs. "It's not the same, Pocus."

"It is, though," I argue. "It doesn't matter what the threat is. What matters is that we're always willing to fight, no matter what. Even if that means we have to leave our wives as widows and our children fatherless. Is that worth it to you, Seer? Seriously. Because there's one way you can guarantee that vision doesn't come true."

"I'm not abandoning our club in its hour of need," he argues back. "I can't let that vision come true because then it really will be my fault."

I groan in frustration at my friend's stubbornness. I swirl my drink around in its glass and take one final swig, feeling the smooth liquid move through my bloodstream.

"There's another way to prevent it though," he says quietly. "But you aren't going to like it."

The moment I walk through the door, Abigail can sense that I'm in a mood. She leaves Daisy coloring at the table to embrace me.

"Bad meeting?" she asks. "You were gone a long time."

I move to the kitchen and kiss Daisy on the head. She looks up at me and smiles but immediately returns to her coloring. She's nearly seven now and already becoming more independent. She breaks my heart daily.

"Seer and I talked for a long time after," I tell her, grabbing a crayon and asking Daisy if I can help. She rolls her eyes and hands me a blank sheet of paper. I'm clearly not allowed to infringe on her masterpiece.

I tell Abigail everything Seer and I discussed, and she listens patiently.

"You're not really upset you didn't get a letter, are you?" she asks, placing her hand on my arm.

“No,” I answer petulantly. “I just feel like I’ve been counted out of the fight before it’s started.

“And isn’t that a good thing?” she asks, clearly irritated. “Didn’t you step down as Prez so you could focus on your family?”

“That’s exactly what Seer said.” I sigh. “He wants me to take a step back. He said if there’s any fight at all, he wants me to get you, Tory, and the kids as far away as possible.”

“I agree,” she says. “We have two kids now, Pocus. I was angry when you almost died last time, but I would never forgive you if, after all that, you went and got yourself killed. Whoever’s picking this fight doesn’t want to involve you. So stay out of it.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



Snake

Someone pounds on the front door which is inches from my office window. It's unusual for us to have visitors. It's more unusual for no one to answer the door. The rhythmic pounding breaks my concentration and frustrates me to no end. I guess I'll have to answer it since no one else seems to be capable.

Maybe I'm cruel in thinking this about my brothers, but lately, it seems like I'm the one being saddled with the majority of the work. Seer's been stressed about everything lately and he has me watching a million different threats. Well, fifty-seven to be precise, but it's more than enough. I have eyes and ears everywhere and it's exhausting me. Normally I'm happy to do whatever Seer asks, but I'm exhausted. I need help. No one here knows the first thing about my job.

As if by a miracle, or maybe by a cosmic punishment, when I open the door, Francesca stands on the other side. Her look of irritation is quickly replaced with one of shock, but she masks it immediately. If anyone should be shocked, it should be me, but I'm not. I've been waiting for this moment since I received her email a few days ago. I should've known that no one else would be banging on the door that way. Well, maybe a police officer, but I knew from my scanners that no one was out this way.

"Francesca," I breathe out, feeling unsure and unsteady.

"Sammy," she responds in a cold detached tone.

She thrusts a heavy duffel bag into my arms, nearly knocking me over. I step back from the force, and she steps inside without invitation. She looks around the foyer, taking in the dark wood and large entryway. I've seen others when they first step into the house. Usually there's some reaction.

Whether it's amazement or disgust, everyone who walks into the entryway shows something.

Not Francesca, though. She maintains her steely mask and walks around the room in silence, taking everything in. She moves to the left and steps inside my small office space. It's hot from all the computers running, but I didn't notice until she was also occupying the same small space. Now I feel the need to apologize, to explain the ventilation isn't very good. The large front windows make it hard to keep the room cool.

"They stuck you in a closet," she says simply, continuing her nonchalant inspection of the space.

Like a lost puppy, I follow her around the clubhouse as she slowly explores the place. I've lived here for fifteen years, but suddenly, everything is new to my eyes. I try to decipher what she thinks about what she's viewing. Is she impressed by the turn-of-the-century architecture? Or does she think it's outdated? Is she disgusted by the amount of dust and cobwebs lining the crown molding?

She doesn't make a sound, doesn't acknowledge anything she's looking at. It's like she's at an art gallery and our lives are on display for her. I continue to trail behind her, ready to jump in and defend my home if the opportunity arises. It's been nearly half my life since I last saw her. I can't pretend to know what she's thinking or how she's feeling at this moment.

Once, I felt like I could read her mind. At least sometimes, anyway. There were moments when we were thinking with the same brain, when every brilliant thought flowed between us so seamlessly that we never knew who came up with it first. That was a long time ago, though. We're different people now. We're basically strangers. It suddenly hits me with alarming clarity that she's been out of my life longer than she was in it.

While I cycle through a range of emotions, her face remains impassive. Her steps are steady. She finishes a full circuit of the first floor and ends up back in my cramped office space. There's no second chair. She takes my seat while I stare awkwardly at the ground, not sure where to look or what to say.

A heavy silence grows between us, though I might be the only one to notice. She appears to be completely at ease, completely comfortable. I wonder if she planned this moment, if she was relying on my discomfort. After what happened between us, she probably relishes seeing me unsure. She probably delights in it.

She had the advantage, of course. She's known where I was for fifteen

years. She could have popped in at any time and hash it out with me. She held all the power in that sense. I lost track of her. But that may have also been her doing. I had no idea where she was or how to contact her, not that I wanted to. I couldn't face my shame. I was so young and stupid then.

I should have handled things differently. I would have told her the truth instead of running away. She hates me now and she has every right, but I would do anything to get rid of this damn silence and just—

“Oh, for fuck's sake, Sammy,” she says in exasperation. “You know I was never good at playing the quiet game. Did you forget every piece of etiquette Judy Menges taught you?”

Pulled from my thoughts, I can only stare at her in confusion. She rolls her eyes at me and sighs.

“Go outside and knock on the door,” she instructs.

I do as I'm told, as if I'm a puppet. I'm too stunned to respond any other way. I walk out the front door and close it behind me. I feel ridiculous. I'm sure if any of my brothers saw me right now, they'd think I was having a mental breakdown. I raise my fist and knock on the door in rapid succession.

The door opens and behind it, Francesca smiles at me unsurely.

“Samuel Narkiewicz, as I live and breathe,” she says with an affected southern accent and false charm. “Please come inside, what has it been, fifteen years?”

She ushers me in, and again I feel ridiculous. This is my home, after all, but I suddenly feel like a stranger in a foreign land. I've stepped into another dimension where Francesca is the one who ran away.

“Can I get you anything, sweetie?” she asks in that false sweet tone. “You look like you've had a long trip, maybe a glass of water?”

“Right,” I say dumbly, catching on. “Can I get you a drink?”

“Do you have any vodka?” she asks, switching back to her normal voice. “It was one hell of a plane ride, and I would very much like to forget it happened.”

I lead her to the bar and grab the first bottle of vodka I see. I pour her a shot, which she quickly downs before slamming her glass on the table and demanding another. I pour one more for her, then one for me for good measure. I don't know how else to get through this.

“You're probably wondering why I'm here,” she prompts. Her sarcastic tone sparks something in me. She's still the same Francesca. She's older now, sure, and somehow even more gorgeous than she was when we were

teenagers, but she's fundamentally the same person she always was.

"You did tell me you were coming," I say, finding my voice "Well, you said you'd see me soon, so I should have guessed that you were coming."

"And you didn't have a welcome party waiting for me," she deadpans. "Judy Menges would have your head for that."

"Judy Menges can go fuck herself," I say, remembering what a horrible woman our old foster mom was. "Do you remember that week she didn't feed us because the internet was out in the whole county? We were twelve. We had no control over a county-wide outage."

"I try not to think about the past," she answers me seriously. I pour us each another shot.

The apology is on the edge of my tongue, poised and ready to go. "Listen, I—"

"I didn't come here to rehash the past," she says at the same time. We both stop, unsure of what to say next.

"So why did you come?" I ask after a moment too long of awkward silence.

"Because Ronan is out of jail," she answers simply.

For a fraction of a second, I see her façade slip. That isn't news anyone can deliver without a little fear. She and I both know those six words have effectively blown up our entire lives as we know them. This isn't a casual visit or a tour of memory lane. Without warning, my life is now in the eye of a hurricane, a path of destruction following closely behind it.

I fall onto a stool and pour myself another shot. She takes the bottle from me and walks behind the bar, replacing it to grab something else from a higher shelf. Buffy would be pissed if he saw us messing with his liquor, but he'd understand if I could find the adequate words to tell him the story. I swore I'd take it to my grave, though.

"He can't be out," I say after one more shot. "That isn't possible, Francesca. We made sure of that."

"I don't know what to tell you," she says, a sharp edge to her voice. "I've spent the last fifteen years watching my back and staying out of trouble. Then two weeks ago, this shows up at my door."

She hands me a battered envelope. I open it to pull out the tattered piece of paper inside. A shiver runs through my body because I've seen this before. Not this note, exactly, but some form of it throughout the last few days.

Run, run, run as fast as you can. You'll never see me coming, I'm the

boogeyman.

The words are spelled out in magazine letters, the same as every note that Seer has made us pour over for the last three. But that would mean...

“Ronan is here,” I whisper. “He already knows where I am. He knows everything about my brothers. Shit, Francesca, how could this happen?”

I don’t mean to raise my voice with her, but the panic makes me lose my senses. Everything around me darkens and the only sound in the room is my pounding heart. Suddenly, I’m nineteen again and Francesca assures me this is a good idea.

“By the time he figures out it was us, we’ll be long gone,” she tells me with a sly smile. “Come on, Sammy, take a chance.”

We’re sitting in a small internet café in Boston, debating the pros and cons of stealing from Ronan Burke. Our cons have gone perfectly so far, seamless even. Everything has gone completely according to plan. But I don’t like this. We’ve only stolen small amounts of money from our clients. Well, small compared to their billion-dollar fortunes. But what she’s proposing is ambitious. She wants to clear out all of his offshore accounts.

“I don’t know, Chessy, he’s way more connected than our other targets,” I tell her. Anxiety rises in my chest. “If he traces it back to us—”

“He won’t,” she assures me. “He’s not that smart.”

Her words echo in my head in the present, and the anger scales higher in me now. Because he was that smart. I was the stupid one to trust her. All this time, I’ve been beating myself up for what happened, but now he’s out and he’s threatening my family.

“How could you let this happen?” I ask, this time bellowing on purpose.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Francesca



I hate the Ruthless Kings. I always have. Ever since the day Sammy ran off to hide in their secret, no-girls-allowed clubhouse, it's been the bane of my existence. It's hard to believe this is my first time visiting it in the flesh. I've dreamed of this moment for fifteen years. I've imagined it so vividly in my head, it's like I've walked these halls a thousand times.

Truthfully, though, the house is nothing like I imagined it would be. It's a gorgeous old building with a wraparound porch and Spanish moss covering the trees in the yard. It's a picturesque, idyllic hideaway in the bayous of New Orleans. If I were the kind of person who could settle down, I'd probably want a house just like this.

Of course, there wouldn't be a few dozen men taking up space there. I'd want to build a life with just my husband and children. But that path was never available to me. No matter how my life turned out, I would never get the big, beautiful house on the bayou with the husband and children. After Sammy took all of our money and ran, I had no choice but to start running too and keep running.

But not him. He got to settle down in a charming home and do what he loves, what I taught him to love. He had stability and security and never wondered where he would sleep at night or where his next meal would come from. He chose them over me. Over us. It's been fifteen long years, but the betrayal feels as fresh as the moment it happened. I hadn't expected that. Every time I imagined this reunion, I thought I would come back stronger. I'd be healed and ready to hand him his ass for the way he treated me all those years ago.

That isn't the case, though. I'm overwhelmed with anger and sadness, so

strong it nearly knocks the wind out of me. The vodka helps, but only a little. Nothing will truly take away the sting of embarrassment that's threatening to spill out. And now he has the nerve to yell at me!

"I didn't let this happen, Sammy," I yell back, trying to control my anger so it doesn't spill out as tears. The last thing I'll allow is for him to see me crying.

"This was your plan, Chessy," he says in a low, dangerous voice. It's his use of my old nickname that pulls me up short. It's been so long since I've heard it. I instantly hate him for using it. He doesn't have that right anymore after what he did.

"Don't call me that," I warn him. "You don't get to call me that anymore."

"You still call me Sammy," he responds petulantly.

I want to slap him in the face. "That's because I didn't betray you," I explode, my angry voice echoing in this tiny bar. "I didn't leave you penniless and alone to have to fend for yourself."

"You seem to have done well for yourself," he spits out bitterly. "I tracked your email to Barcelona. It doesn't seem like you suffered too badly."

"You know nothing about it," I hiss, thinking of all the coordinated moves I had to take to get to Barcelona in the first place. It was a long, desperate journey.

The lights flicker, and for a moment, I think I've caused it with my anger.

"Cut it out, Cassandra," Sammy hisses.

I'm terribly confused.

"She's our resident ghost," he explains in a bored tone. "She does this sometimes."

For a moment, I'm completely floored. This news is so random, so out of the blue and extraordinary, the only thing I can do is throw my head back and laugh. The feeling overwhelms me. It overtakes every sense until all I can do is be tickled by the news.

"Get the fuck out of here," I wheeze, hysterically laughing and unable to control it in any way. "You live in a haunted house?"

The lights flicker again. I've clearly upset this Cassandra person. I imagine her as some dour old woman who doesn't like profanity. I'm suddenly attacked by another fit of giggles.

"She doesn't haunt us," he says, almost defensively. "She doesn't like to be ignored. Hex and the kids can see her, but the rest of us just have to guess

when she's around."

Every word out of his mouth is such nonsense. Maybe the jetlag is getting to me, or perhaps the three shots of vodka. Whatever the case, there's no way that Sammy and I are sitting here, casually discussing the ghost that lives in his house. That was absolutely not in any scenario I'd imagined for this conversation.

"Do you remember when we rigged the computers to go off at different times in the morning?" I ask, thinking back to a time when we were innocent kids playing pranks on our foster parents.

Dan and Judy Menges were very religious people, constantly warning us about the dangers of sin and evil. They let me and Sammy use the computers, but they had every parent safety software on the market. Thankfully, they had no idea I knew how to work around the software.

Sammy and I would spend hours in that computer lab, sneaking in in the middle of the night because that was the only time we weren't supervised. I couldn't teach him what I knew if grownups were watching.

But one night, Judy found us in there and naturally came to the conclusion that we must have been doing something inappropriate and sinful. I was teaching Sammy how to code. We were only eleven. Frankly, Sammy and I never did the inappropriate things she accused us of, even when we were old enough to want to. Or, at least, I wanted to.

In any case, she banned us from using the lab for a month, except for our one allotted hour to do homework. She locked us in our bedrooms at night. In retaliation, we programmed the computers with different timers to go off in the middle of the night. The sounds were all different, sometimes a normal alarm clock, and sometimes the sound of a woman screaming bloody murder.

Judy was terrified and had a priest come and perform an exorcism on our computers. He didn't outright laugh in her face, but he did tell her that he didn't sense any evil presence. He told her she would be better off calling the local computer store. He tried explaining to her that whatever was happening was probably a technical glitch rather than demons in her hard drive.

She was furious with him and took us to a different church after that. Regardless, she did heed his advice about getting a computer expert, only she wouldn't pay for one when she had a perfectly good one in the house already. She asked me to fix the haunted computers, and in exchange, I got me and Sammy off computer probation. She stopped locking us in our rooms and all was well. At least until the next time she tried to punish us.

A wave of nostalgia washes over me. It overpowers the anger I felt before. I'm not sure what's more surprising—that I'd forgotten that memory or that it's suddenly popped into my head after all of these years. That's the strange thing about losing someone you love. You don't block out only the bad times, you force yourself to forget the good ones too.

Sammy was such an inextricable part of my childhood. He was basically written into my DNA. Still, I can't forgive him for the part he played in our relationship ending. I refuse to take all the blame for the hot water we found ourselves in with Ronan. Sammy was just as much a part of that plan as I was. He took the easy way out, leaving me standing there alone without any defenses.

I don't want Ronan to come after either of us, but I won't take the blame for it happening. We worked hard to ensure he would go to prison for life. It was the best way to ensure the money we stole would be ours to keep. We were very thorough with our investigation into his past and anonymously sent everything to the FBI. There's no reason he should be out. Except for his extreme wealth and power.

Nothing in life is fair. Sammy and I grew up in an emotionally abusive foster home where we had to manipulate our foster mother to ensure our food. We've spent fifteen years running and hiding from a man who's literally murdered people and extorted the poor. But, sure, he should be freed from prison and we should be living in fear. That makes sense.

"I remember," Sammy says softly, pulling me out of my thoughts. "And I remember you took the blame for it so I wouldn't get in trouble."

"I'm not doing it again," I tell him firmly. "I took the blame for things all the time. I'm done doing it."

"I don't need you to take the blame, Francesca, but Christ," he groans in frustration. "We have to find a way out of this situation or everything we love, everything we've built, is gone."

"You think I don't know that?" I shout, standing up from the bar and stepping away from him. "I wouldn't be here if I had any other choice. I came to warn you, and I came to get your help. I think you owe me that much!"

He looks at me as if I've slapped him in the face. He deserves it. He couldn't have thought I would show up after all this time, completely forgetting that he betrayed me. I may never forgive him. If I do, he'll at least have to apologize. There's no way he can think that a few shots of vodka will

undo fifteen years of pain.

We were barely nineteen. We'd just stolen millions of dollars from one of the biggest crime lords in the city. I was sure we would use that money to start a life together. We could travel the world or make a home somewhere. Instead, he took off with the money and moved here, apparently. He took all the money we'd stolen together, all that we'd worked so hard to con out of targets. That was four years' worth of work, and he stole all of it.

Nothing he can say now will change what he did. No words can fix it. We both know it. But worse than that, he broke my heart. He was so oblivious all the time. I would have done anything for him, and he showed me exactly what he was willing to do for me. Leave me out to dry and never contact me again.

I look at him now and see a cowardly man who's been hiding for years. What happened to all the money, then? Is he saving it for a rainy day? He could leave this place and go into hiding, but he's here hiding in an office that isn't much more than a closet. This is what he left me for. I hope for his sake that it was worth it.

CHAPTER NINE

Graveyard

I'm in the midst of a long, grueling double shift at the hospital when the shrill ring of my phone pierces through the chaotic noise of the pediatric floor. The ringtone is the special one I only use for Meredith. She knows I'm in the middle of a double, so my guard immediately goes up. She would only be calling if something was wrong.

"Graveyard, someone broke into my office," comes her hysterical voice. "They trashed the place. There are files everywhere. They vandalized the outside. There are horrible slurs all over the walls. I don't know what to do. Please come."

"I'll be there as soon as I can, baby," I tell her in a soft, reassuring tone. "I'm coming to you right now."

As I hang up the phone, a sense of foreboding settles deep within my bones. This act of violence, this violation of safety, feels personal and targeted. I know the MC and its members have faced their fair share of threats and adversaries over the years, but something about this incident feels different. It feels like a warning. A preamble to something bigger, something more dangerous.

Without wasting a second, I look for Seer's number. My voice is filled with urgency as I relay what's happened. School is still in session, so none of the kids are there yet. I can't imagine how much more horrible it would be if they were. Meredith couldn't care less about her own safety, but she'd go into battle for her kids.

What the hell is going on? I can't think of anyone who would do such a thing to her. Her only enemy was Damien. I've been keeping a special eye on him recently. Nothing's changed, so it has to be someone else. If this is all

connected to some bigger scheme, to someone who wants to hurt the club, why would they go after her? What can they possibly gain from hurting those kids?

I dial Seer's number immediately as I change out of my scrubs. He's closer. He can get there first. When he answers, I immediately tell him what happened. He promises to send a few more men over there to check it out. This eases my anxiety a bit, knowing that help will be there before I arrive. The last thing in the world I want is for Meredith to be alone with all of this. My biggest fear is that the creep is still there, hiding, waiting to attack her.

If that's the case, he's a dead man walking.

I race toward the community center. My mind is filled with a mix of concern and determination. When I arrive, I find Meredith standing amidst the aftermath of destruction. Her eyes are brimming with tears. The damage itself isn't so horrible. It's nothing we can't fix with a good power wash or some paint. But the words scrawled on the walls are horrible, chilling. Whoever did this is a sick bastard.

Meredith has poured her heart and soul into this place over the last two years. She spent so much time working to get it open, wanting to ensure there would be a safe place in the city for the gifted kids to feel free. She works with all kinds of gifts and talents, and she's been working to get her gang reintegration program off the ground.

Many of these kids had been funneled into the gangs. They've been forced to do tasks for them because Damien wanted him under their control. They didn't know this, of course. They only knew the violence the gangs could inflict if they didn't comply with their wishes. When Damien was caught and the children were rescued from the gangs, Meredith worked tirelessly to get them into safe homes with loving parents who would help them.

She's been working with other social workers, therapists, and psychiatrists to help the kids process what happened to them and the brutal things they had to witness. Some kids weren't fed if they didn't come back with the right amount of money. Some were beaten. The oldest child in the gangs was sixteen, the youngest ten. Meredith has not stopped fighting for either one of them. I don't think she knows how to stop fighting, and I'm so damn proud of her.

Seeing the destruction, though, I can tell that she's losing faith in herself and her security. Her confidence crumbles right in front of my eyes. Nothing

I can say will comfort her. Nothing I can do will remedy this situation. If I could go back in time and stop it from happening, I would. Unfortunately, I don't know anyone with that particular gift. If I did, I'd pay any price to fix this.

"It's like I've put a target on their back," Meredith says as I hold her in my arms. "I've gathered them all in this one place where anyone could find them. It's not safe for them to be here anymore."

I stroke her hair. I have no words adequate to comfort her. I could tell her she's wrong, that these kids need her more than she can possibly imagine. She knows that, though. She knows what an impact she's making. That's not in question. It's the future she's worried about.

"I can't bring them back here until the threat is gone," she says resolutely. "It's not fair to them. It's not safe to put them into a traumatizing situation."

At that moment, we make the difficult decision together. The safety of the children must take precedence. We agree to temporarily shut down the center until we can ascertain the full extent of the threat looming over us. It's a hard pill to swallow, knowing the impact it will have on the kids and the setback it represents to all the progress we've made.

I wrap my arms around Meredith, offering what little comfort I can in the face of this storm. We stand in solidarity, knowing we will weather it together, as a team. As a doctor, I'm trained to be a pillar of strength, to hold on to hope even in the darkest of times. But beneath my reassuring façade, an uneasiness gnaws at my chest. I can't shake the feeling this is merely the calm before the storm.

A hurricane brews out there, a shitstorm that will threaten everything we've built. It's not only the community center. It's our lives in general. Seer's hiding something too. I'm willing to bet he's seen a future where we don't win whatever fight we're about to face. I shudder at the thought, but I know we're due a loss. We've been so strong in the past, so resilient, but everyone has their breaking point. Seeing Meredith in so much pain is mine.

We walk back to Meredith's office where I can see she's made a little effort in cleaning up already. Bones and Gator patrol the building, making sure the attacker isn't still inside. How he got in is a whole matter of security we have to figure out. Until then, we have to clean up the mess.

"I think we can work out some home visits with our providers," Meredith says, though she's voicing it for her own benefit. She's building a plan. "The kids will be disappointed, but closing for at least a week will be the best

move. I know it will take longer, but I don't want to take away all their hope, ya know?"

I nod as she prattles on. She doesn't need me to respond, she only needs to talk everything out so she can take some control of the situation. It's her way of processing things.

"But you're right, we can't let this undo all the work we've done so far. We have to make sure that we come back stronger than ever."

"You may need to hire extra security," I advise, knowing that's the only way I'll feel safe for her to reopen.

She nods. "I can find that in the budget. If not, I know the investors will pay whatever amount it takes to ensure the kids' safety. They're all very invested in making this place work."

"Literally," I joke as I pick up a pile of papers and try to organize them cohesively.

Only Meredith will be able to say for sure if anything is missing. She opted to keep all records on pen and paper, not wanting any of the kids' information to be hackable. She never guessed that something like this would happen. She wasn't prepared for it.

Based on my observation, it doesn't seem like the attacker had a specific plan in mind. There's no rhyme or reason to the mess in here. It looks like he went through everything, causing as much chaos as possible. It looks like an intimidation job. One to scare more than actually harm. We've been a part of a few of those ourselves over the years.

I don't share this with Meredith, not wanting to add more stress to her plate. It's good news for me. I'll sleep easier tonight knowing no one came to cause the love of my life physical harm. They weren't trying to tear down her life's work brick by brick. It's a small consolation, but it holds me together at the moment. It prevents me from having an unpleasant outburst.

For the rest of the week, Meredith will work from our apartment. I'll take off work to keep an eye on her. Even if no one wants to inflict harm on her, I won't let her out of my sight for one second after this. Hopefully she'll see the value of my plan and won't feel like I'm trying to control her or micromanage her. The kids at the center are her number one priority, and she's mine. She'll do whatever she has to do to protect them, and I'll do whatever it takes to protect her.

I wait as she packs a few of her things, then I escort her out of the lonely, empty building. She locks everything up tight, checking and triple-checking

there's no way to enter the building during this hiatus. The last thing she needs is to come back in a week and find another vandalization. I carry her box of things to her car and kiss her on the head before we go home in our respective vehicles.

I drive slowly behind her, perhaps a little paranoid. Even though I'm sure no one was after her, I can't risk letting her out of my sight. It's for my mental well-being that I keep her in sight. I'm ready to pounce on anyone who would try to threaten her further. At every single light, I look around, careful of our surroundings. The person who sent the letters knew a lot about us, including our places of work. It's perhaps not a stretch to think they're watching us even now, looming in some shadow, waiting to strike.

We reach our apartment, and I feel like I can rest a little easier. The moment we walk through the door, I drop her box of things and pull her against me, pressing my lips firmly against hers. It's the only way I can think to get rid of the anxiety sitting on top of my chest for the last few hours.

Meanwhile, uncertainty looms. We steel ourselves for whatever will come next. The future is terrifying, but we've faced worse. She spent years running from her ex, and the club has dealt with horrific threats from all sides. We'll survive this, come hell or high water.

CHAPTER TEN

Seer

The weight of multiple crises bears down on me. It presses against my temples like a compactor. Frustration and stress intertwine within me, coiling tighter with each passing moment. It seems as though the world is conspiring against us. It throws obstacles in our path at every turn. Attacking the community center was a bold move, but it was a misstep to our advantage. Graveyard is sure the whole thing was an intimidation tactic, and I can't help but agree.

For this, at least, there's no need to retaliate. We must simply be patient and wait to see what our tormentor has next for us. He wants to draw us out, to make us feel cornered, and coordinate a strike. But without a clear target, we'll be leaving ourselves vulnerable and dividing our resources in an unwise manner.

Still, this person knows how to get to us. He won't stop until he makes my vision come true. I feel certain of that. Someone paid a guy to try to start a fight with Bones. It isn't difficult to start a fight with Bones, but he heeded my advice and came to me as soon as it happened. We tracked the kid down. He was just a poor schmuck who was trying to make some quick cash. He didn't know he'd be messing with someone who could put him in the hospital.

Now, to add to the mounting chaos, there are electrical issues plaguing the house. Lights are flickering in every room. The breakers constantly tripped. It's been a constant struggle all day, to the point that I asked Hex to come over and have a word with the Cassandra our resident ghost.

He told me that she wasn't at the house, instead playing with Charlie and Daisy at Pocus's home. That gave me pause because the only time I'd ever

seen the lights do this in the past was when she was having a temper tantrum. I convince him to come over anyway, to make certain that no other spirits plaguing the system. When he confirms there are not, I feel at a loss. I'm sure it's a coincidence, but the timing of this is all very suspicious to me.

I sigh heavily, a mix of exasperation and confusion. I've been doing this a lot lately. My brothers are taking notice. I don't want to worry them, to cast my burdens onto them, but it's getting to the point that I don't have a choice. Soon, I'll be forced to tell them all about my vision and gauge who's willing to stay for this fight. Our enemy knows that by weakening us one by one, he's causing the whole club to crumble.

I'm tripping the breakers for the tenth time when the entire power in the house goes off. I holler in frustration, trying all the breakers for good measure. I don't think I caused the outage, but I'm not the most electrically savvy. It's also not Snake's expertise as the resident IT guy. Finally, I flip something and the power comes back on. Now there's an alarm blaring somewhere upstairs. For fuck's sake.

I run up the stairs to the main floor and pop my head in on Snake. To my sheer surprise, there's a woman in the room with him. She's a drop-dead gorgeous brunette with intimidatingly sharp features and a look that could kill. She looks up at me with a mixture of disgust and disdain that I don't have time to unpack at the moment.

I'm completely perplexed by her presence. I'm not sure I've ever seen Snake with a woman before. He hardly ever leaves the house. I would love to let my mind go on a mini-vacation to discover the secret of this mystery woman, but there's no time.

"Snake," I call out, my voice laced with urgency. "Can you lend me a hand? I don't know what the hell that beeping sound is. It's going to push me straight over the edge."

"Your security system is down," the woman responds in a bored, detached tone. She doesn't look up at me as she says this, instead filing her nail and inspecting it. Again, I'm perplexed.

Snake, on the other hand, glances up from his monitors, his piercing eyes meeting mine. I notice a sense of fear in his eyes, an anxiety I haven't seen before. He has bad news for me, I can just tell. Whatever he's going to explain will either be very expensive or very annoying to fix.

"She's right, Prez," he says, much more passionately. "The whole system is down. All of our firewalls and defenses. Everything I've built up to protect

the system is gone.”

His words pierce right through me. I’m immediately reminded of my vision. It’s already started. The fire from my dreams laps at my skin. I feel the ground shaking beneath my feet. I take a deep, steadying breath, reminding myself this is the present and we’re safe. No one is burning us to the ground. Not today, not ever.

“I’m Francesca, by the way,” the woman says, standing and walking over and extending her hand to shake. “Not that you asked. I can see you’re dealing with a great deal of stress, but since when did manners go out the window?”

“Francesca, don’t,” Snake groans.

I’m fascinated by the dynamic. Crises be damned, I need the break. I immediately wonder who she is to Snake and why he hasn’t introduced us. Once again, I’m struck by how little I know about him.

“You won’t fix this problem without me,” she tells him sharply. “You and I both know it, so your boss should get to know who he’ll be working with.”

“There’s a pretty strict probation for new members,” I cut in, trying to ease some of the tension between them. Or maybe stir it up even further. It’s hard to tell by the look on Francesca’s face.

“Oh, I have no interest in joining your little gang,” Francesca spits. “Snake and I have our own problems to deal with, so I’ll help you until we can figure our shit out. Then I’m out of here. No need for any hazing rituals.”

“We don’t haze anyone,” I tell her, feeling slightly offended. “Our organization is built on a foundation of respect and a solid work ethic. All my men have to prove their loyalty. If they are unable or unwilling, they’re allowed to leave whenever they want.”

Francesca scoffs and rolls her eyes. I can see now why Snake is so tense around her. She’s combative and nearly hostile. She has a bad attitude and a big mouth, and she clearly holds many strong opinions about me and the MC. I glare at her and ask Snake if he’ll meet me in private. With everything else going on, the last thing I need is a rude and unexpected house guest.

“I know,” Snake says when he shuts my office door. “She’s the worst. She’s been like this ever since she arrived, but she didn’t used to be like this.”

“Who the hell is she, Snake?” I ask, dumbfounded. “Did you not think that alerting me about a stranger in my house would be a good idea considering our current situation?”

“She has nothing to do with the attacks,” he says, immediately defensive. That, of course, does nothing to allay my suspicions.

“I didn’t think she did, but now you have me questioning it. How do you know her? Why is she here?”

He takes a deep breath and looks down at his feet, clearly trying to formulate a satisfactory response. Nothing he can say will stop me from kicking Francesca out on her ass, but I’m interested in hearing him try. I don’t have the time or the patience to add another element to our already dire equation. Something has to give, or I’ll have a heart attack.

“She’s an old friend,” he says, though there’s obviously more to the story than that. As quiet and compliant as Snake is, I can’t imagine he’d ever be friends with someone who’s so unapologetically aggressive.

“And what exactly is she doing in my house?” I ask firmly. “Now’s not exactly the best time for a reunion.”

“She was threatened too,” he says quickly through gritted teeth. “She received a letter, just like everyone else. She didn’t know where else to turn, so she came here.”

“How long has it been since you’ve seen this girl?” I ask suspiciously. Not once in our fifteen years of friendship has he ever brought her up. The timing can’t be coincidental.

“Not since I joined the MC,” he admits sheepishly.

I applaud him for not lying, at least. “So, your old friend, who you haven’t seen in over a decade, receives a threatening letter and thinks ‘Gee, I better pop in on my old friend, Snake, and see if he can help me with my problem?’ I don’t buy it Snake, what aren’t you telling me?”

He shifts his weight and stares down at his shoes. This is clearly hard for him. He’s uncomfortable, but I can’t risk the safety of this club or my family for some girl he’s never mentioned before. He knows it, too, but he remains quiet for a long time.

“There’s a lot of things in my past you don’t know about,” he says in a low tone. “I did a lot of things I’m not proud of before I came to the Ruthless Kings. I wish the past could just stay in the past. But Francesca’s timing is advantageous. She’s the one who taught me everything I know about computers. Whatever is going on with our security, she’ll be able to help fix it faster than I could on my own.”

“I don’t like it,” I tell him. “I don’t like her, and I don’t trust her. Your business is your business, but now isn’t the time to run a bed-and-breakfast

for old friends.”

“I totally agree,” he says. “I don’t want her here any more than you do, trust me. We didn’t part on good terms. We aren’t on them now. But I need her, Seer. If I can keep this club safe in any way, I need her help. She can sleep in a tent outside for all I care, but she’ll help us stop what’s coming.”

“What is coming, Snake?” I ask, again suspicious. “Does it have anything to do with the two of you?”

“I don’t know for sure,” he admits. “But I’m going to do everything I can to make sure that my past consequences don’t hurt anyone but me. Can you trust me at least that much?”

I consider his words. Truthfully, I’m not sure if I can trust him. Everything he’s presented me makes me wonder if I shouldn’t throw his ass out and hope all his bad karma goes with him. But no one else can do what Snake does. He’s never given us a reason to doubt his loyalty. He’s been a faithful member of our organization from the start. I can’t let my anxiety cause a rift between us now.

“I don’t have a choice,” I concede. “She can stay, but the minute she fucks up, she’s out of here. Deal?”

“I won’t let that happen,” he says quietly. “But you have yourself a deal.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Snake

Frustration settles heavily upon me as I sit in front of my locked computers. My digital fortress has been breached by an insidious virus.

The MC's problems run far deeper than a mere glitch in the security system. Our very existence, our safety, hangs in the balance. I struggle to regain control.

The virus continues to replicate itself inside the system faster than I can keep up. The second I get one fire put out, another one crops up. It's like playing whack-a-mole with an insidious enemy that threatens to take the whole system with it. The defenses I've so carefully built over the last decade and a half are completely shattered. Even worse, the files inside are corrupted. This is a coordinated attack by someone who knows exactly what they're doing.

I turn my gaze toward Francesca. She stands beside me with a smug expression. I feel a mix of gratitude and annoyance. I never expected to rely on her expertise again, but in this moment of vulnerability, she proves herself to be an invaluable asset. Her body language, dripping with self-assuredness, reveals that she knew I would need her sooner or later.

"What's wrong, Sammy?" she asks with a shit-eating grin on her face. "Is this problem beyond your capability?"

"Don't give me that, Chessy," I say with a frustrated groan. "You know you're better at this than I am. Please don't make me beg."

"Leave the room," she says flatly.

That surprises me. This is my office and my system. I have no intention of leaving my work in her hands, especially when she can barely look at me. If she can't give me the decency of eye contact, I don't feel confident in

leaving her alone with my bay.

“Seriously, Sammy,” she says, without looking up at me. “I’m out of practice, I don’t want you to see me struggle through this.”

Once again, I’m surprised by her words. When we were kids, the threat of a beating couldn’t keep Francesca out of the computer lab. What would make her give up her talents? Was it what I did to her?

“Okay, then.” I’m shaken by her revelation. A little guilty. “I’ll just leave you to it, then.”

I back toward the door, not taking my eyes off of her. She closes her eyes and rests her fingers on the keyboard, completely tuned into the machine. It scares me to see her like this, but disturbing her will bring out more anger. It would be a bad move to get in the way of her work. Instead of leaving as I promised, I watch as her fingers fly over the keyboard without ever opening her eyes. It’s like she’s plugging herself into the system, becoming part of it.

I watch in awe as she works. I’ve never witnessed anything like this before. It dawns on me that I never once asked her how she learned to work on computers. We were so young when she started teaching me, I wasn’t thoughtful enough to wonder. Not even to ask. But as I watch her working now, I realize the truth that I missed for nine years. No one taught Francesca anything. She has an innate gift. The way that Hex can see ghosts and Charlie can sense death.

I feel like a total idiot for never noticing, never asking. What kind of person spends almost all their time with their friend and never asks them a single question about their life? I was always so selfish with her. Part of me felt like if I asked questions about before the home, I would lose part of her. We were part of a very specific moment in time. Everything that came before had nothing to do with us.

I’m such an asshole. Of course, Francesca has a gift. She was always leaps and bounds ahead of me in her computer skills. She could destroy a firewall in less than a minute. She could create a legitimate, professional-looking website in an hour. Her skills were always slightly supernatural, but I never knew that could be an option before I met the Ruthless Kings. And I tried desperately not to think about Francesca after I met them.

Francesca works her literal magic. I find myself grappling with a mixture of emotions. On one hand, I am grateful for her presence and expertise, her ability to navigate the treacherous waters of cyberspace. On the other, a sense of frustration and helplessness gnaws at me. Fifteen years I’ve been with the

Ruthless Kings. Fifteen years I've avoided thinking about or talking about Francesca. All this time I've been utilizing the skills she taught me. And I now realize she'd shared a piece of herself.

It's more than I can bear, realizing I would be nothing at all without her. How could I be so arrogant to use the talents she gave me after what I did to her? I finally leave the room. I'm unable to stand my new revelation in such a small space. Especially when she's sitting mere inches away helping me with a problem I can't handle on my own.

With a heavy heart, I stumble toward the bar, feeling defeated and idiotic. There, Seer finds me and pulls a chair out. He says nothing but reaches behind the bar to pour himself a glass of a strong-smelling clear liquid. It could be moonshine for all I know. He indicates the bottle, silently asking if I'd like a swig of the unknown liquid. I shake my head, dropping my head in my hands and groaning.

Seer shifts beside me. I see that his expression is tight. A mixture of frustration and concern is etched upon his features. I feel his anguish, his desire to protect our family at all costs. But at this moment, we find ourselves at the mercy of circumstances beyond our control. It's a bitter pill to swallow, knowing that our fortress has been breached and our loved ones are left exposed.

Here I am, the prick who can't do anything about it. I'm supposed to be the first line of defense against this sort of thing, and I've proven I'm nothing but a coward who runs at the first sign of trouble. Just like before. I wonder what Seer would think about me if he knew my history with Francesca. He'd probably think my nickname is a referendum on my character. I'm a snake, slithering in and out of people's lives, leaving behind panic and fear.

"What's got you so hard up?" he grunts, breaking me from my thoughts. "Does it have anything to do with the pretty girl in your office?"

"Just stressed, I guess," I say, sidestepping his question. "We're dealing with a nasty virus, Seer. I've never seen anything like it before. I can't begin untangling the shitstorm until I stop it, and I'm nowhere close."

Admitting this leaves me feeling raw and vulnerable, but he needs to know. I don't feel strong or confident at all. I feel like a fraud who's based a fifteen-year career on being smarter than everyone else in the room. But I'm not. I'm not smarter than Francesca, certainly. She doesn't have to try. She just breathes and she knows how to solve this problem.

Seer claps a hand on my back and shakes me.

“You’re going to figure it out, Snake,” he says kindly. “You know I don’t know shit about any of that online stuff, but I trust you with my life. I always have.”

“What if I’m not worth your trust?” I ask miserably. “What if I’m a spineless coward who’s never done anything but run in the face of tough times.”

“Well, that’s bullshit,” he says with a confidence I can’t feel. “We’ve been through a lot of tough times and you’ve never run. You’re always there to do whatever is asked of you. I’ve never been in any serious doubt of your loyalty or your capability. This girl must have messed you up pretty badly.”

I look at him with sad eyes. If only he knew the true extent. I feel the words coming up from the back of my throat. I clamp my mouth shut, determined to keep this to myself. In the face of my current colossal failure, I won’t expose my weakness to Seer. I can’t risk losing his trust forever. He’ll write it off as a youthful mistake probably, but to me, it’s the defining moment of my life. It was the moment I proved what a coward I truly am.

“It’s going to take some time to get the system up,” I admit instead, nearly choking on the unsaid words. “Francesca is more skilled than I am and even she’s struggling to get the root of the virus. I’m sorry, Seer. I wish I had better news for you.”

He sighs heavily, his shoulders sagging. He takes another slow sip of his drink. Then he sets it down on the table before hanging his head.

“I won’t let anything happen to this club,” he says more to himself than me. “You’re not in this alone.”

He gets up and leaves the bar, leaving me to wallow in my misery. When there’s nothing left to distract me, I head back to my office to check on Francesca. I enter the small room, and she looks up at me in annoyance. I’d worry I’d broken her concentration, but I can read her better than that. She’s not upset at me, she’s upset with herself.

“No luck, then?” I ask as casually as I can.

“You’re joking, right?” An unreadable mask covers her face. “You saw that thing for yourself. I’ve never seen a virus work like that, not in twenty-five years. I’m chasing my fucking tail and still getting lost.”

“Maybe it would help if we tackle it together,” I suggest with a nonchalant shrug.

I can tell by the look on her face this is the last thing in the entire world she wants to do. She doesn’t want to be in this room with me. She doesn’t

want to be here in New Orleans. But she feels duty-bound to stay for some reason I can't decipher. She won't leave me alone to deal with Ronan, even if that's exactly what I did.

"It couldn't hurt," she concedes after chewing on the idea for a while. "But you need to understand that I'm in charge of this, yeah? This may be your home, but I can see the problem more clearly than you can. You do everything I say, exactly as I say it."

"So just like old times?" I joke and immediately feel a pang of regret.

"No," she says harshly. "Because this time, if you screw me over, you'll be the one who's fucked. Do you understand me?"

Underneath that mask, I hear the hurt and betrayal in her voice. I wish I had a magic combination of words to undo what I did, to fix this between us, but I'll never find a balm for the hurt I inflicted. The only thing I can do is agree to her terms and follow her lead.

After everything, there's no reason she should be helping me, but here she is. The least I can do is respect her authority and respect. She types furiously on one keyboard while I pull out a spare and plug it in. I'm instantly transported to a time when we were partners and this was our norm. But now there's a wall of fifteen years of hurt and betrayal. I'm not sure if I'll ever be able to break it down, and I doubt she wants me to.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Tory

The weight of uncertainty settles upon my shoulders. I pace back and forth in our now-vulnerable home. With the security system down and Snake unable to stop the virus, I feel a sense of unease and vulnerability. My family's safety weighs heavily on my mind. Something is coming for us. I can't shake the feeling of impending danger. I think back to the night Nicholas sat up in bed, drenched in sweat, and I wonder if this is the beginning. Is this how his horrible vision begins?

In a desperate attempt to regain a sense of security, I pick up the phone and dial Mama's number. I haven't seen her in ages. The moment she answers, it's like no time has passed at all. Her wisdom and connection to the spiritual realm have always brought me solace in times of distress. She tells me that she's already on her way, and to have a cup of tea ready for her.

I laugh at her presumption but feel this is something my own mother would demand if she were still alive. Mama is much more of a mother than mine was. She's helped me to become the woman I am today. If it weren't for her guidance, I don't think I would have the strength to protect my family so forcefully. At the very least, I wouldn't have the skills to do it.

When she arrives, she walks through the door as if this is her own house. There have been times in the last few years that she's been here enough for that to be true. I bristle, feeling guilty that she hasn't walked through those doors in months. I need to be better at spending time with her when I don't need her help, but that's a problem for another time.

"We're in a vulnerable spot, Mama," I tell her desperately, handing over the warm mug of tea awaiting her.

Her face is warm and open. I instantly dump out all of my fear and

anxiety. I tell her about Nickolas's vision and his concerns about the clubhouse. About me and Nicky. Now that our virtual security system has come down, I feel it's my duty to help secure the house in whatever way I can. But it's a big job, and I need her help.

Mama's voice, calm and reassuring, fills my ears.

"I'll help you, child," she says compassionately. "But you have to remember that not every problem is yours to fix. You've done so much for these men already. If Seer's vision will come true, you take yourself out of the equation. Don't be here when it happens."

"I won't abandon my husband," I say, affronted. How could she suggest it?

"You're not abandoning him," she says sharply. "You're spending your time and energy to fortify this house. From the sound of it, this is not a supernatural problem. So you fortify it the best you can, and then you protect your boy. Bring him to stay with me for a while. For once in your life, consider your own needs."

"Mama," I argue. "How can you suggest that right now? Nicholas saw everything he loves fall apart in an instant. I can't leave him to protect myself. That isn't who I am."

"Don't let your love blind you," she shoots back. "You've been married to Seer for many years. In all that time, you've put him first every single day. I'm not telling you to leave him defenseless, I'm telling you to consider your own well-being as well. You and I both know he won't leave this place, even if it means protecting you. So that's a decision you'll have to make."

I sip my tea slowly and count to ten. I don't want her to see how her words get to me. I know she knows, though. She's too perceptive not to sense how agonized I feel considering the thought of leaving Nicholas. As the two of us walk through the house putting up protection charms, I wonder if she's right.

I already feel exhausted from the effort. It doesn't help that I haven't been sleeping well since Nicholas shared his vision with me. I'm not strong enough to do much good for anyone in this state. The idea that my son might be put in danger is more than I can bear.

"Nicky won't be the only one in danger," I say when we've reached the front door. "Pocus and Abigail have their two. Hex and Juliana have Charlie. This isn't a good place for any child to be around right now."

"The offer stands for all of you," she tells me, her eyes crinkling at the

edges. “I’ve been very interested in meeting Charlie for a long time now. It will be fun, a vacation to Mama’s house for a few weeks.”

“What do we tell the kids?” I fret, suddenly feeling overwhelmed by the task.

“Make it an adventure for them,” she says simply. “Be honest with Abigail and Juliana. They deserve to know what’s going on. Then tell the kids you’re going on a vacation. You’ll all be much safer away from here.”

She turns to go, but stops at the door and faces me again.

“Remember what I said, Tory,” she says lowly. “Just this once, put yourself first. Protect your son and your friends by getting out of harm’s way. You’ve done enough. You deserve that peace of mind.”

Her words resonate deep within me, a soothing balm to my restless spirit. Mama’s presence has always brought a sense of comfort and grounding. She reminds me of my own strength. In this instant, she’s reminding me that the greatest strength is making the difficult decision for my family. I know Nicholas will understand. He’ll probably be glad I’ve come up with the idea. But how can I live with myself if I lose him forever?

“How would he be able to live with himself if he lost you?” Mama asks as if she’s read my mind. Knowing her, that would come as no surprise to me whatsoever.

Without another word, she leaves. I muster the strength to make another call. This time, it’s to Abigail. I tell her everything that’s happening and how afraid I feel. It’s strange to admit it, but I immediately feel relieved when I do. Abigail and I have built a strong relationship over the years. I appreciate having her to confide in. It makes this all seem less horrible somehow.

“Come over,” she says immediately. “I’ll call Juliana, and we’ll work out a plan together.”

I walk over to her house, basking in the humid heat of Louisiana. With every step toward her house, I feel my burden lessening. Mama’s words ring through my ears, and I realize that I’m not alone in this. I’ve been carrying the weight of this news for days without considering that I should share it with my friends. Now, it feels ridiculous. I don’t have to do any of this on my own. I have a community.

Abigail opens the door when I knock. I step into her significantly cooler living room. I don’t realize how much I’ve sweated on my walk until the cold air hits me. I don’t know if the sweat is more from the heat or the stress of this situation. I feel clammy and unsure.

We wait for Juliana, knowing this is a conversation better had in person. Juliana has been part of this group for much less time, and a mother for an even shorter time. We want to soothe and assure her, and that's not something that happens as naturally over the phone. If we have this conversation in person, she'll understand our urgency without feeling panicked. When she finally arrives, we sit down in the living room to coordinate our plans.

"I can't tell you how many times Pocus has sent me away to protect me," Abigail says with a laugh. "There was a time when I was spending more time away from him than with him."

"It was horrible," I remember. "He was his absolute worst with you gone."

"I guess that's what I'm most worried about," Juliana hesitates. "Of course, I'll do whatever I have to do to keep Charlie safe, but what if Hex is too distracted with us gone? I don't want him to get hurt because he's worried about us."

"That's true," Abigail says quietly. "He may decide to get himself blown up without you there to talk some sense into him."

She looks at me with a glint in her eye. We both break out in laughter. She never has to tell me how much she appreciates me saving Pocus in that instance. Thankfully, it's become the stuff of ancient history. It's a story we can look back on to remember his arrogance and rashness. Truthfully, though, I feel exactly the way Juliana does.

"He'll be more distracted with you here," I tell Juliana, though I also have to remind myself. "He can't keep his head in the fight if he's worrying about your safety. So, I say let's make the best out of this. Let's treat it like a real family vacation and try to find a way to put our minds at ease."

"How long will we be gone?" Juliana asks, still unsure.

"As long as it takes," Abigail answers her, more accustomed to this way of living. As she said, this isn't her first go-around. "Daisy and I were gone for months. It was horrible, but we survived. And that's the point, right? We're doing this so we can survive."

"You forget," Juliana says wryly. "I've already been dead."

"Then it's more important for you to survive," I tell her firmly. "You have to think about Charlie. She's no good to anyone if she's in danger."

"She'll be the hardest sell." Juliana sighs. "She'll say that she's a better asset being nearby."

“She is strong,” I admit. “That’s why we won’t tell her. I don’t want to lie to her, but I also don’t want her volunteering to stay behind. Our kids are young enough not to fight with us.” I gesture between Abigail and myself.

“Then I guess it’s settled,” Juliana says with a nod. “I’ll talk to Hex tonight, and we’ll get the ball rolling. She’ll be thrilled to go on a vacation with Daisy, at least.”

“So we definitely don’t want to stay with Mama?” Abigail asks, a worry line growing on her forehead. “It’s not that I don’t love her, but she has some strange things in her house. It will cause a lot of questions from Daisy. She has absolutely no filter these days.”

“Mama will understand,” I assure her. “We’ll get far enough away to make it seem like a real treat, but close enough that we can come back as soon as possible. I’m not keen on leaving them to their own devices.”

“Absolutely,” Abigail says, catching my eye again. We both immediately burst out into giggles again. Juliana shakes her head at us. But, really, Pocus’s misguided sacrifice attempt will never stop being our source of endless laughter. Now that he’s out of danger, of course.

“Speaking of Pocus,” Abigail says when we’ve caught our breath. “There’s no way I’m leaving without him.”

“How will you manage that?” Juliana asks, knowing this will be a near-impossible task. Pocus isn’t one to back down from a task.

“It’s simple,” she says with a wicked grin. “I won’t give him an option.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Snake

Despite his casual demeanor a few hours ago, Seer's completely shifted gears. Apparently, Tory has decided that while there's an impending threat, she'll take Nicky off on a holiday. In the meantime, Seer's stress level has gone nuclear. He checks in on us every thirty minutes, much to Francesca's annoyance. Every time he knocks on the door, her entire demeanor changes.

The weight of his expectations presses down on me like a vice. It tightens with each passing moment. The urgency to get the system back up and running is suffocating. Finding the culprit is paramount to feeling safe again. I feel the burden of our safety resting on my shoulders, and it's a challenge I don't feel up to. I'll never forgive myself if there's an attack on the clubhouse because of my negligence.

Francesca and I are working as quickly as we can, though. The virus has only been in the system for six hours. In those six hours, it's completely decimated everything I've worked so hard to build. All my protection preparations have completely crumbled. As far as I can tell, fifteen years' worth of data is simply gone. The worst part, though, is wondering if this has to do with Ronan. He has no reason to attack the club, but the timing is much too suspicious to completely count it out.

I desperately want to talk to Francesca about it, to suggest that we find him before he finds us. But our fragile stalemate is only strong enough to allow us to sit side by side while we try to stop the replication of the virus. It wouldn't survive a conversation of that magnitude. As we stretch into hour seven with no hope of finding the root of the virus, I get up from the computer, frustrated.

I head toward the door, opening it to find Seer standing there with his fist raised, as if he was just about to knock again. I sigh heavily and see a dark look cross his face. He knows, without having to ask, that we've been unsuccessful thus far. These have been an agonizing few hours for all of us. It's getting to him worst of all. I can't blame him, though. If I were married and my wife was packing to leave, I'd also feel stressed. We all remember what Pocus was like when Abigail was gone.

Unfortunately, I'm the object of Seer's rage now. Of the million factors he can't control right now, I am the only person he can take his frustration out on. I stand there, stock-still, as his face goes red and he releases all seven hours of pent-up anger.

"I don't understand why this is taking so long," he says, only slightly raising his voice. For everything Seer is, even-tempered is usually top of the list. This small crack in his armor speaks volumes. "You have one job, Snake. Just one. Get the security system back online. Why is that so hard for you?"

"Seer, I'm sorry, I'm working as fast as I can," I say as calmly and repentant as I can. "We are trying our best to get the system back, but—"

"I have no patience for excuses, Snake," he says brusquely. "How can I be sure that this woman isn't the reason this is taking so long? You've snuck her in without a word and now our security system is down. Does that seem like a coincidence to you?"

"She has nothing to do with it," I whisper harshly. I don't want her to hear this argument aimed at her. "She's working her ass off to help us when she doesn't have to," I remind him. "She's saving my ass right now."

"You be sure that stays the case," he says, his face turning a putrid shade of red. "Because, I swear to God, Snake, it'll be your ass on the line if this isn't back up as quickly as possible. I won't let my enemies see me as weak. Not for one second."

He turns to go. His words cut me deep, piercing through my defenses. His disappointment and anger are so evident. They fuel the fire of my self-doubt. I want nothing more than to meet his expectations, to prove myself worthy of the trust he has placed in me.

But as I glance toward Francesca, a pang of bitterness twists in my gut. Her smug expression only serves to exacerbate the ache of my concerns. She taunts me with an expression. I can almost hear the question in her mind. I don't have to wonder long, though, as she voices it with a nasty, dismissive tone.

“Was it worth giving up our friendship to be treated like an unwanted dog?” she asks, her smug gaze unwelcome.

“Seer isn’t usually like this,” I defend, not liking the way she thinks she knows who we are. “This is obviously a tense situation. I mean, Christ, when have you ever seen a virus like this before? This isn’t the norm.”

“I see that,” she conceded. “But you have to admit, Sammy, he’s stuck you in this closet and made you the sole person in charge of cybersecurity. You’re indispensable to him, but he’s threatening to take it all away.”

I immediately want to defend him, to tell her that Seer isn’t the one who put me in this position, but don’t want to get into the club’s complicated history. And how can I begin to admit that I’ve subjected myself to any treatment they throw my way? It’s penance for the way I treated her.

Her words echo through my mind. I find myself drifting back to a time when we were young and reckless, when the thrill of the heist flowed through our veins. We had just pulled off the biggest con of our lives, defrauding Ronan and taking him for millions. We didn’t need the money, though. By the time she’d brought him to my attention, we were already flush with cash from our many other successful heists.

Something about it was so addictive, though. Something about working side by side and using our cunning and skills to talk people into trusting us, then taking from them. It was a way for us to reclaim our childhood, to try to make sense of the world around us. All we’d known was pain, so we wanted to inflict it onto others.

Besides, we rationalized that such men wouldn’t miss the amounts of money we stole. They probably wouldn’t notice it was gone. That was the lie we told ourselves at night to sleep better. At least, I did. But it was a good life for a while. We were no longer the scum of society, high school dropouts and runaways trying to forage for food on the streets. No, we were living large in hotel penthouse suites and dining out at luxurious restaurants.

Taking Ronan’s money was as easy as taking anyone else’s. There was a lot more of it. Even better, Ronan was a huge piece-of-shit criminal who deserved to be taken down. It was a little bit of a Robin Hood act for us. Francesca told me all about his crimes against the community. How he was exploiting the very poor to make himself richer. It felt so good to frame him and put him in jail.

We couldn’t have known that he had such an extensive network. Of course, hindsight is 20/20. If I knew then what I know now. All that jazz.

Because I didn't know people could be so evil and that bad men always traveled with a posse. Ronan wasn't a lone billionaire with no friends. He had deep ties to the Irish mafia. The second he was behind bars, he sent his men after me.

I was none the wiser, just a dumb kid enjoying the spoils of my scheme. I'll never forget the night I was walking back to my hotel suite, playing a game on my handheld game console. I'd just had an incredible dinner with Francesca. I was thinking of ways I could finally admit my feelings to her, to show her exactly what she meant to me.

Then a black bag was thrown over my head and all I knew was fear. They took me to him in the prison. To this day, I don't know how they managed it. When I opened my eyes, I was staring into the black eyes of Ronan Burke. He was much more intimidating behind the glass of the visitor section of the prison. He picked up his receiver and motioned for me to do the same.

He told me, in no uncertain terms, that I would give back all of his money. With interest. It was everything we had, everything we'd taken over the last four years of being on our own. I remember feeling indignant and unwilling, but that was drowned out by the much greater terror. He was clearly a dangerous man. Then he threatened to kill Francesca in front of me.

He knew, somehow, that she was the only thing in the world I had to lose. I was just a poor orphan who only had stolen money and an affinity for technology. He wanted the money, and in exchange, I would get to keep Francesca alive.

Once I'd given the money back, I didn't have the words to give to Francesca. There was nothing I could say to her that would lessen the ache of losing everything. More than that, I was terrified he would still come after us. That he would go back on our deal and kill us anyway. There was no time to explain. I just had to run.

In that moment of desperation, I sought refuge within the protective embrace of the Ruthless Kings. It was the only way to ensure my survival, to shield myself from the threat of a gruesome demise. The decision to join the club, to leave behind our old life, was a choice born out of necessity. Even now, I can't bring myself to regret it.

Francesca's words sting. They dredge up feelings of regret and longing. We were partners, companions in crime. I never imagined a day would come when our paths would diverge so drastically. But circumstances change, and we adapt to survive. She probably thinks I was callous and selfish, but I was

scared. I needed to find people who could keep me safe.

I always intended to find her and explain. Once I found a safe place, I would bring her and we would remain safe together. But once I was gone, the enormity of what I'd done hit me. And I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that it was too late. Francesca was always the resourceful one. I told myself that once I was gone, she'd find someone else to replace me. She'd teach her skills to some other poor sucker. I was nothing more than a liability to her.

I realize now this was mostly wounded pride. I was an idiot not to find her. I should have at least explained my actions. But it was much too late. I had nothing to do but live with the consequences of my actions. So now we have to live with my choices. I have to be okay with that. Seer can yell at me all he wants. Francesca can hate me all she wants, but I know that I did what I had to do to keep both of us safe. And I can't take it back. So there's no point in wishing I'd done it differently.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Seer

Panic creeps in as the day draws on. First thing in the morning, I call emergency church. Despite working all night, Snake and his female companion have gotten no closer to getting our security system back online. We're completely vulnerable to attack. The only thing I can do is go old school. I've created a schedule so my men are always in shifts of three, alert and protecting the clubhouse from any physical threat.

It doesn't help that Pocus has decided to travel out of town with the wives. Well, that's not entirely true. Abigail told him in no uncertain terms that he would go with them. From what Tory told me, it was quite the fight. But I'm honestly grateful he's gone. It makes me feel better to know my family is safe with him, that my vision can't come true if he's there.

But his being gone means I'm down a man when I need a full roster. I'm spreading the guys thin as it is. Usually, I could rely on Snake to keep an eye on our enemies. Without him, I'm blind. Now, I have to send the guys I have left on patrol to check out the other gangs in the city. That means every spare body has a job. I don't have backups.

I know on some level this isn't Snake's fault. He couldn't have predicted someone would attack his system so thoroughly. At the same time, I wonder if it's not his job to do that. Shouldn't he have seen this coming and adequately prepared for it? No, I can't think that way. I'm not angry at Snake. I'm angry at the situation. He's good at what he does. This is just a bad time for everyone.

I don't trust the woman, though. Francesca. She's come from nowhere, and suddenly everything that could go wrong is going wrong. I don't care that she received a threatening letter too. For all I know, she wrote it herself

to pull a damsel-in-distress act. Snake is too kind, of course, he fell for it. But he was firm in his assessment of her. I don't want to pull his focus by suggesting again she may have less than honorable intentions. That doesn't mean I trust her.

My phone rings, and I see that it's Hex. He and Bones are currently out patrolling the Steel Vipers gang. They're a newer gang that's cropped up in New Orleans in the last five years. We've had no beef with them so far, but that doesn't mean they aren't striking first to dismantle us. There will always be a turf war, even if it's unspoken.

I'm hoping that Hex is calling to tell me they're behind all of this and we can plan a coordinated attack. Unfortunately, his news isn't good.

"You need to get to the hospital ASAP," he says in a hushed, panicked tone. "Bones is shot. It's bad, Boss."

Great. This is all I need. As if I'm not already on the precipice of breaking down. One more of my men has been taken out of the game. I don't know how I'm supposed to function without Bones, of all people. He's by far our best fighter. He's my sergeant at arms for a reason. It's like taking out a knight in chess. I'm vulnerable without him.

When I get to the hospital, Hex is there to greet me with an ashen face. I'm immediately worried that Bones is dead, but Hex puts me at ease. His expression is more in response to the circumstances of the shooting.

"We were a good block away from the Vipers, doing some surveillance," he tells me. "There wasn't anything remotely exciting happening. It was business as usual. As far as we could tell anyway. But then this car drove by and started shooting."

"It was a drive-by?" The cowards.

"It was sure made to look that way," he says. "But I don't know, Boss, it felt very targeted. I didn't get a good look at the guys or the car, but it seemed like they only shot at us."

I nod noncommittally and sit next to him, waiting for someone to come out and tell us anything about Bones' condition. It's hell sitting in this waiting room not knowing if my friend is okay. I get a text from Tory, letting me know they arrived safely at their destination. For their safety, I told her I didn't want to know where they were going. My anxiety claws at me, whispering that everything is out of control and I can't do anything about it.

I sit there for what feels like hours. Hex and I don't exchange a single word, too lost in our thoughts to try a conversation. Bones has been shot

more times than I can count, but there's something about this time that feels more precarious. Perhaps it's the fact that everything else is crumbling down around me. This has been the worst week in a long while. I'm not sure how I'll survive much more.

Graveyard eventually comes to find us. His face is calm and impassable. I suppose this is what makes him a good doctor. He has a calming presence and a quiet strength. He gives away nothing about Bones's condition from his face, but that doesn't ease my anxiety. If Bones was okay, he would look relieved.

"Let's go somewhere and talk," he says gently, waiting for me to stand and follow him.

For the second time, I'm sure that I'll hear that Bones is dead. I brace myself for it, though I'm not sure there's any way to prepare for that news. In fact, I'm sure that trying to prepare for it would make it worse. Because it will hurt as badly, even if you've braced yourself for impact.

"Just tell me," I finally say to Graveyard when we're alone in his office.

"Bones will be okay," he says.

I feel a rush of relief. Before I can stop myself, I'm wobbly, gasping for air.

I don't want Graveyard to see me like this, but I know he'll never tell. He takes his Hippocratic oath incredibly seriously. Doctor-patient confidentiality is one of his greatest strengths. I have no fear of news of my breakdown reaching anyone else's ears. It doesn't mean I want one of my oldest friends to see me this way, though.

"I won't lie to you, Seer," he continues. "It's going to be a hard road. The bullet broke apart inside his chest and was incredibly tricky to remove. If it had hit a centimeter to the left, it would have clipped his heart. We'd be having a very different conversation right now."

"He's a lucky son of a bitch," I confirm, wiping my eyes. "I don't suppose you're the kind of doctor who keeps booze in his drawer?"

Graveyard smirks and reaches down. He rifles through his things until he produces a small flask. He holds it out to me and I drain the whole thing in one gulp.

"I'll replace this," I promise.

He shrugs, knowing that of everything going on right now, his empty flask is very low on my priority list. He can take it to Buffy any time and get it refilled. I'll make sure Buffy uses the top-shelf stuff. In the meantime, I

feel the warm liquid working its way through my body, slowing my heartrate by a fraction.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asks, taking in my disheveled appearance.

I know Pocus confided a lot in Graveyard when he was Prez. In fact, he probably talked to Graveyard about his problems more than he talked to me. With Pocus away, no one would make a better confidante right now. So I tell him everything. I tell him about my vision in vivid detail. He sits patiently and expressionless, taking it all in.

“How accurate are your visions, usually?” he asks curiously.

I realize it’s not a conversation I’ve ever had with him. Not with anyone but Tory, really.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve had a really clear vision,” I admit. “My visions never recovered from my brother’s attack. But every now and then, I’ll get one that’s very clear.”

“And do they always come true?”

“Last year I had a dream about an army of child soldiers,” I tell him, remembering with a shudder the dead eyes of the children accusing me of abandoning them. “They told me it was my fault they were in their situation.”

He eyes me perceptively, knowing I’m referring to his fiancée’s psychopathic ex. I’d brought Damien in as an undercover cop, not knowing he was exactly the person I was trying to stop.

“But nothing came of that,” he says confidently. “We stopped Damien. Those kids are all safe now and working with Meredith.”

“And now the center is shut down,” I remind him. “There’s always the chance the resolution isn’t what I think. Maybe Damien wasn’t the real threat.”

“He absolutely was,” Graveyard says, fixing me with a hard stare. “He admitted that was his plan all along. He was exploiting those kids for their gifts. And you were a huge part in taking him down.”

“My point is,” I go on, “the visions aren’t always completely clear. The solutions are even murkier.”

“You’ll figure it out,” he says confidently. “You always do. In the meantime, you can feel confident Bones won’t die a horribly gruesome death in a fire. At least not anytime soon. He’ll be here for a while for recovery and rehab.”

“Somehow that doesn’t comfort me that much,” I say sarcastically. “Just

promise me you'll keep an eye on him," I ask. "I can't lose Bones."

"You won't lose him," Graveyard says firmly. "Bones is a tough bastard. It would take a lot more to bring him down than a gunshot."

"I can't lose any of you, Graveyard." My voice is slightly panicked. "I can't know that the end is coming for all of us and not do anything about it. This is all related. The threatening letters, the cyber-attack, now this shooting. Someone is trying to get the best of us, and it's working."

"Or," he says slowly, "this was just a drive-by shooting in an area that's infamous for them. Maybe Hex and Bones were in the wrong place at the wrong time. That's always a possibility."

I shake my head profusely, sure this isn't a coincidence. How could it be? We're vulnerable. Our enemies know it. They're kicking us while we're down, picking us off one by one until there's no one left.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Francesca



After Seer’s constant disruptions yesterday, Sammy and I decided it made more sense to keep the office door open. I don’t need quiet to concentrate anyway. What I didn’t anticipate, though, is the sheer amount of rubbernecking by every single person who steps through the doors of this god-forsaken house. You’d think they’d never seen a woman here before.

That can’t be true. Seer is married, so she must live here. Not that I’ve met her. Sammy hasn’t introduced me to anyone since I arrived. I’m heartbroken over it. I’m not so keen to meet the people who replaced me in his life. Still, it goes back to his bad manners. How has he survived without me? Well, clearly he lives in a house full of heathens. There’s not an ounce of social grace in any of them.

That being said, I’m shocked when I look up to see another woman standing in the doorway of the office. She’s watching me curiously, so I look up to challenge her gaze. When she realizes I’m staring back at her, she seems to come back to her senses. She apologizes for being rude. I instantly like her.

“Meredith,” she says, pointing to herself. “I’m sorry to be intrusive, I’ve just never met someone like you before.”

“A woman?” I ask dumbly, unsure what she means by this.

She laughs, and her expression instantly warms. She comes in, uninvited, and sits down in front of me.

“I should explain,” she says. “I sense gifts. It’s not something I tell most people, but everyone here knows. And you have quite an unusual gift. I’ve never met someone who can communicate with technology the way you do.”

It's as if it's your first language."

Her revelation catches me off guard. I find myself momentarily speechless. Meredith's acknowledgment of my abilities is unexpected. It leaves me with a swirl of conflicting emotions. I've never talked with anyone about this before, not even Sammy. If he knows about it, he never let on. In front of this woman's kind, open face, I feel exposed.

"Oh, shit," she says, looking embarrassed. "I'm being totally overbearing, aren't I? I'm so sorry, I'm used to being around kids. I've apparently forgotten how to have a conversation with an adult."

She laughs a tinkling, bright laugh. This woman has seemingly no burdens. She radiates positivity and joy. I envy her. She probably has no idea what it's like to merely survive, to not know where your next meal is coming from, or to constantly look over her shoulder for a ghost from her past. She's at ease in life in a way I never have been. I may never be.

"Meredith, is it?" I ask, letting my annoyance seep through. "I don't mean to be rude, but I have a lot of work to do. I'm not sure if you've heard, but the whole security system has gone to shit. So, if you'll excuse me."

Her eyes widen and she stands up, again looking embarrassed.

"Of course!" she says. "I didn't mean to take you away from your work. What you're doing is really important! Is there anything I can do to help? I've recently found myself with a lot of free time. I feel absolutely useless."

I turn to my computer, overwhelmed by her kindness and generosity. She's not the kind of person I can afford to get close to. Instead, I need to make it very clear she's the last person on earth I need. In fact, she's inconveniencing me. She's hovering, one of those people who, in trying to be helpful, ends up being a hindrance.

"Unless you know someone else with a ... what did you call it? A gift to communicate with technology?" I say, putting heavy sarcastic inflection on my words. "Otherwise, I'm fine."

"Actually," she says slowly, thoughtfully. "I do know someone like that. If you want, I can go get him."

Oh, God. Of course, she does. But it would be a huge help if there is someone else like me. Sammy is doing what he can, but he doesn't see the problem the way I see it. He's limited in his capacity to help simply because he doesn't have a ... gift.

"That would actually be great," I tell her and turn to smile at her warmly.

She leaves and I'm forced to stop. An unfamiliar sense of unease washes

over me. This isn't what I expected from this place. The endless parade of men walking in and out of the front door with a heavy burden of responsibility? Yes. But a genuinely kind woman who could sense my ability to communicate with technology? Not a chance in hell. She's rattled me to my core.

I briefly wonder what other kinds of gifts she's seen. On my travels, I've encountered all sorts of people. The world is so much larger and stranger than I ever could have guessed as a child. I used to think I was a freak. I never told anyone about what I could do, afraid they would reject me. They could understand a little girl who was good with computers, but they'd never accept a girl who could talk to them. I would have been institutionalized, especially if I'd told the Menges family.

Then there was Sammy. How could I explain to the boy I loved that I'd never learned what I was teaching him? That it came naturally to me. That when I was old enough to talk, it was like the appliances around me were talking back. It's more than just computers. I always knew when the washing machine was about to break, or when the refrigerator was on the fritz. There was no mechanical problem I couldn't solve because machines told me what was wrong with them.

I knew Sammy would never understand. After he came to live with us, he barely understood how to function. I couldn't burden him with my biggest secret. By the time he had accepted his new life, too much time had gone by. It's not like I could just drop that information on him.

"Oh, by the way, technology speaks to me as plainly as you're speaking to me right now."

He would have thought I was a freak. I wouldn't have been able to handle that. I could deal with anyone else giving up on me, turning me away, but not him. I needed him in a way I couldn't articulate then. I refuse to acknowledge it now. He *was* my lifeline.

With a deep breath, I tear myself away from the computer screen, needing a momentary respite from the digital realm. I find myself drawn to Sammy, the man who once held a special place in my heart. He's been in the home's massive living room taking a much-needed nap. We've both been at this for hours. I enter the room under the guise that I also need a break, but I just need to be around him. I've spent fifteen years without him. I can't deny myself this small indulgence.

As he sleeps, he looks so innocent and childlike. I can see the ten-year-

old boy I once loved. He was always so oblivious, so caught up with his own worries, but that never lessened my feeling for him.

I approach him, the air crackling with unspoken tension. I can't deny the draw I feel toward him. I'll never tell him, of course. I can't let him have any power over me again. It nearly destroyed me once, and I've come too far. Once we deal with Ronan, I'll disappear again and wallow in my misery alone. While I'm here, though, I allow myself to enjoy the way his face has matured, the way his figure has filled out.

Despite being constantly hunched in front of a computer, he's lean and well-built. He must find time to work out. I imagine in this line of work, he needs to be in fighting shape. Faint lines show on his face now, showing that he's inching closer to his forties than his twenties. And I missed it all. Because of him, this new look is a stark change, rather than a gradual one.

He stirs and catches me staring at him. I cough and look away, trying to pretend I just entered the room. He sits up and makes a space for me on the couch. We both stare forward, awkward with one another.

"I don't get this place," I say, needing to fill the loaded silence. "Why do you like it so much?"

He shrugs and takes a deep breath. "They're my family," he finally says. "In a way, they're the only real family I've ever known."

His words cut me deeply, leaving me feeling raw. It's like picking at a fresh wound. Fury wells up within me, an inferno ignited by his assertion. The only family he's only known? What about me? How could he dismiss our bond so easily? We were best friends, inseparable, partners in crime, on our way to what could have been something so much more. Something indefinable but permanent. But at this moment, I am faced with the bitter reality that I was merely a chapter in his life, a part of his past.

I try to quell the storm of emotions raging within me, reminding myself this isn't the time or place for such a confrontation. His home is in turmoil. Our focus should be on protecting our loved ones, not dwelling on past grievances.

As I take a moment to gather my thoughts, I wonder if this is how it will always happen. If our paths were destined to part at some point. Maybe our choices were necessary for our individual growth and survival. Yet, the pain of his absence lingers, a constant reminder of the void left behind.

I long for the ease and camaraderie we once shared, the effortless connection that seemed to transcend the confines of the physical world. But

as I glance at Sammy, so oblivious to my inner turmoil, I realize our lives have taken different paths. We are bound by our shared history, but the present has pulled us apart.

Maybe I should be grateful. We clearly aren't compatible anymore. I constantly worried about that. It would have been so much worse to find him here and see a spark between us, an indefinable connection that keeps me constantly longing for him. This is better. Once I've helped him reinforce his little clubhouse, we can face down Ronan. Once that threat is neutralized, I can move on with my life once and for all.

He's found this place that is so perfect for him. I deserve the same. I'll leave in search of my own community, a place where I belong. Maybe I'll find someone I can be open with about my gift. Someone who will accept and love me unconditionally. If he can find his family, I deserve the same. I'll make him a footnote of my past rather than the boy who destroyed me.

Resolute, I tell him I need a break. It's his turn to take on the endlessly replicating virus while I get a few hours of sleep. It's the least he can do.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Snake

This is pointless. No matter what I do, I can't get anywhere with this virus. I don't know why Francesca is pretending I can without her. It's become clear to me over the last thirty-six hours that we get more accomplished when we work side by side. We're both exhausted, but taking this in shifts won't help.

I lean back so I can see into the living room, where she is sprawled out on the couch. She's less threatening in sleep. She isn't constantly looking at me like I committed murder. Not that I don't deserve her hatred. She's jumped into helping me. We haven't had a moment to talk about the past.

I'm not sure that she wants to. Maybe helping me is her way of avoiding any discussion. Anything I could say to her would fall flat. Maybe I was being noble fifteen years ago. Maybe what I did was selfless and fueled by my need to protect her. But I have no way to justify not telling her. Nothing I can say will adequately make up for the fact that I didn't contact her in all that time.

Still, I can't get the way she looked at me when I woke up out of my head. I saw something kind and loving in her eyes that I haven't seen in years. It reminded me of the old her, how she would wake me up excitedly in the morning before school. When we woke up before the other kids, we had full use of the computer lab. She would come into my room and shake me awake, that determined, excited look etched on her features.

The morning we decided to run away from our foster home, her expression was hopeful with unreserved glee. We both hated being in the Menges' house, especially as the other kids had moved on. It was a revolving door of lifeless-looking foster kids. We were tired of being the constants.

Plus, it was easier to run away and make our own path at fifteen than wait to age out of the system with no plan or hope for the future.

When she woke me up just now, for a moment, I thought I'd been transported back fifteen years. But then she shut down again, seemingly out of nowhere. Maybe she was tired and wanted me to vacate the couch. More likely, I said the wrong thing. That's me, always saying the wrong thing, always upsetting her.

There hasn't been a single moment since she stepped back into my life a few days ago that I've felt I've done the right thing. Maybe it's lingering guilt. Or maybe I'm this inept. I always imagined she would show up and I would know exactly what to say. I'd show her that I've changed. That I've figured out how to man up and apologize. She made me better. It was when I'd been separated from her that I stopped functioning.

But her presence now proves that too much has happened. Now she makes me worse somehow, like she's a weight around my neck, drowning me. She's a mirror, exposing my deepest flaws. She's a constant reminder of my greatest betrayal, my greatest moment of weakness. Maybe it's for the best. She'll be gone the second Ronan is handled. I'll still be stuck reliving my greatest mistake.

With a sigh, I push aside the confusion and return my focus to the task at hand. The computer screen before me is a tapestry of intricate codes and algorithms. It's a labyrinth that taunts my every move. What has been my greatest strength since I was ten years old is now the thing causing me the greatest stress.

Each time I think I'm remotely close to finding the root of the virus, I get tripped up again. Our system has been completely corrupted. I can't do anything to stop the spread. I've tried every single trick I know. I've pushed myself to the absolute limits of my knowledge, and I'm totally at a loss.

There was a time when I didn't have these skills. Everything had to be carefully learned from Francesca. She was patient with me, guiding me through complicated algorithms and code. Other times, she challenged me, wanting me to apply what I learned all on my own. Those were the most frustrating moments in my training, but they were also the times when I learned the most.

I remember when we were sixteen and Francesca bet me that I couldn't hack into a government database without her. She liked to throw me these challenges often. She wanted to prove that I'd actually learned something

from her. It was a two-part challenge. The first part was to get into the database. The second was to not get caught. I mulled over it for a few days before coming up with the perfect plan.

It was a basic breaking-and-entering hack, but there couldn't be any evidence. If I left a crumb of evidence, it had to be a misdirect. It was a crime worthy of several years in jail, but I felt pretty confident I could do it. She'd been doing it for years, never once being noticed. I had to prove my salt to her, to show her that I was as good as she was.

I knew even then that I was nowhere close. What took her hours took me weeks. It was an intricate, delicate job that required a lot of finesse. For several moments, I was sure I wouldn't get past their cybersecurity and I would have to succumb to the terms of our bet. I would have to buy our food for the next month.

There was no way I would fail. Eventually, I got into a low-level computer at the Pentagon. She was impressed, which was all the reward I needed. She'd never gotten into such a high-level database before then. Being useful to her was so addicting. It was an instant hit of dopamine.

I lived to impress her back then. I didn't care what new principles I learned or what new skills I was able to master unless I got her approval. When we were younger, I didn't want her to think of me as a nuisance. But as we got older and my feelings for her developed, I wanted her to see me as an equal, a partner. I wanted her to think I was someone who was worthy of her time and effort.

Hacking into the Pentagon was one of the first times she gave me that coveted look of admiration. I lived for it. I constantly pushed myself to earn that look, to do something to impress her. Now all I'm doing is disappointing her. For fifteen years, I've been disappointing her, never showing up when she needed me to. Never apologizing or explaining.

The safety of my family is at risk, and I can't do the basic work necessary to keep them safe. I feel like such a failure. If she weren't here, the virus would be worse. She's at least helped me make some headway. Without her, I'd be completely lost. I'd never have any hope of getting the system back online.

I long for a time when Francesca's approval was my only goal. Strolling down memory lane is never a good idea, especially now, when the stakes are so high. The safety of my family is dependent on us stopping this virus, getting our security system back, and rebuilding our defenses. If I can't do

that, anyone can attack us at any time. We're vulnerable.

I hesitantly walk into the living room and wake her up. She looks at me with tired, grumpy eyes.

"That was only half an hour," she complains, her voice thick with sleep.

"I'm sorry," I say quietly, sitting down next to her. I wonder if she can hear how deep my apology goes. "I wanted to let you sleep, but I'm not making any progress without you. I think we'd do better working together."

"We'll burn ourselves out," she says, closing her eyes and throwing her arm over her face. "Neither of us will get anything done if we're too tired to function."

"I'll get us some coffee," I promise, standing and pulling her up with me. She's so close to me, I can smell her shampoo. I'm surprised how I instantly recognize it. She's been using the same scent since we were kids.

She groans and walks like a zombie back into the office. I hear the sound of her fingers rapidly moving across the keys. I make us a strong pot of coffee. For the next several hours, we work side by side in complete silence. As the coffee wears off, our progress is stalled. I start to worry we'll never crack this. If my home is attacked with no warning, that will be on me.

The pressure weighs too heavy on me. A sudden craving for respite and fresh air tugs at my senses. I tell Francesca I'll be right back and step outside, seeking solace in the warm embrace of the bayou. I pull out a cigarette, something I rarely have use for. I only turn to them in the direst circumstances of my stress. I think this qualifies.

I close my eyes, inhaling the sweet nicotine. It fills my lungs, instantly soothing my nerves. I pull the smoke between my teeth, reveling in the feeling of warmth and calm it brings me. For this moment, I can be present and forget all my worries. It's not much, but it's a little relief from the barrage of memories and the worry about our safety.

Soon the smell of nicotine mixes with something deeper, more substantive. I open my eyes. In the distance, I see a huge, dark smoke cloud forming in the direction of Pocus's house. I know he's not home, but the sight immediately causes me panic. No one is home to put out the flames, if there are any. Maybe my sleep deprivation is getting to me.

I inch closer to the source of the smoke. My insides squeeze with fear with each step. I stub out my cigarette, not wanting to cause yet another fire. My heart pounds against my ribcage as I break into a run. The closer I get to the house, I see that the structure looks fine. Completely intact. The fire is

beyond in an open field.

That's not much better, though. It's on a particularly dry part of the bayou. It can catch and still bring harm to the house. That is absolutely the last thing any of us needs right now. Pocus will murder us if we let his house catch fire. More importantly, though, is the question of how it started. It can't be a coincidence. Nothing is a coincidence these days.

When I finally reach the source of the fire, my heart stills. It's a small fire in the brush, easily contained and put out. Only then do I consider that running out here to check it out may have been a bad idea. I realize belatedly that I don't have my phone with me. That was a rookie move. I never leave the house without it. I barely leave the house as it is.

Before I can worry about it too much, I feel a sharp pain against the back of my head. Then everything goes black.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Seer

Returning from the hospital feels like coming home from battle. I feel no closer to any solution. I feel like every second I'm under attack. The only solace I can possibly find is that my wife and son are far away from this madness. That, at least, brings me some comfort. Not much since Tory isn't here to soothe my worries. But I know they're safe. That's the best I can ask for right now.

I pop my head in to check on Snake's progress. Instead, I see Francesca sitting there alone. I try to say hello, to get her attention, but she doesn't seem to hear me. I cross over to her and realize she's in a trance-like state. I've seen it before dozens of times on Tory. But it's freaky seeing it on someone else. I at least know what Tory is up to, but this woman is a mystery. And, what's worse, I don't know if she's for us or against us.

I call her name louder and she doesn't respond. Much like Tory, she likely requires a huge interruption to notice that anyone else exists. I leave her for now, too consumed with worry to add her to the list. If she were a problem, Snake wouldn't have let her in the house. That's what I keep telling myself, anyway. I haven't seen any proof that she's helping at all. She may not be in a trance, she may be adept at napping while looking busy.

Regardless, that's mental energy I can't afford to spend right now. I have to plan my offensive and get my men ready for a fight that none of us can anticipate. We're entrenched in warfare. Every new attack comes from a different direction and a different delivery method. First were the letters, then the community center, then the security system, now Bones. If these things happened over a month, I wouldn't consider them. Things like this happen all the time.

But it's been days. Just days since I had my vision, days since the community center was vandalized. As far as I know, the oldest letter was received two weeks ago. Someone wants us to know they're here. They aren't going away and they aren't afraid to step on our territory. For the second time in my life, I feel like I'm fighting a ghost. Unlike Anderson Grey, there's no evidence this problem is supernatural. No, someone is definitely coming after us in the physical world.

Maybe they want to provoke us. Maybe they plan to draw us out so we're in the open and have to fight. If that's the case, they'll be disappointed to see how strong we are. We can handle outright combat. This sneaking around isn't ideal. I like to know the face of my enemy, to get intel on them and exploit their weaknesses. That obviously won't happen now.

Stress radiates through me. It makes me feel like I might implode at any moment. I hear Tory's voice in my head, telling me to breathe deeply and slow down. Maybe if she were here, I could calm down a bit. She'd touch me in ways only she knows how and wrap me in her embrace. She'd kiss me senseless until the only thing I can process is her. I miss my wife, and that adds to my long list of concerns.

I'm glad she's safe, but I need her more than I could imagine. She's done so much over the past few years to keep the club safe, but she keeps me sane. She is the glue that holds me together, especially since I took over the leadership of the club. But then I see the image of the clubhouse succumbing to flames and feel the knowledge that she and my son are trapped inside with no hope of escape.

That's why she's gone. She's helping to ensure my vision never comes true. She's taken herself out of the equation, along with Pocus. I keep asking myself what he would do in this situation. Under normal circumstances, I would ask him, but he's made the smarter decision to protect our loved ones. I'm glad he did, relieved even. If he's gone, he's safe too. He'll keep both of our families safe, and he won't die in a gruesome fire that takes everyone else.

Still, it would be amazing to have him here for me now, when I need him most. I wouldn't have him put himself in danger again, but I don't feel like there's anyone else I can talk to about this. I can't turn to anyone for advice. No one who can understand my unique struggles as the leader of this place. Pocus is the only one who can talk to me about this and somehow make this better. Now he's another person gone, a man off my roster.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” comes a hesitant, yet somehow self-assured voice.

I turn and see Francesca standing in the doorway, looking nervous. The look on her face mirrors the anxiety I feel. My stomach immediately drops. What now?

“Francesca, right?” I ask, trying to be friendly despite how I feel toward her. She nods.

“Have you seen Sammy?” she asks. When she sees my look of confusion, she corrects herself. “Snake, I mean. That’s how you know him.”

Sammy. Interesting. I file that one away for further inspection and give her my full focus.

“I haven’t,” I tell her honestly. “Is there something I could help with?”

She shakes her head quickly and looks like she might run at any second. Then she takes a deep breath and plants her feet, making her look less movable and fiercer.

“He stepped out over an hour ago,” she tells me, her voice strained. “He looked stressed, I assumed he needed some air. But he isn’t back yet. I popped my head outside and he’s not out there. I called him, but he left his phone here.”

She holds up his phone for my inspection. Snake knows better than to go anywhere without his phone. He must have been feeling the same amount of pressure I am. He’s usually much more careful.

I nod tersely, already knowing in my gut that something is wrong. I’ve never known Snake to clear his head. I try to block the ungenerous thought that this is all down to her. Before she came, he was just Snake. He never faltered. He never had issues doing his job. If he had secrets, they were so well-buried that no one bothered to look. But now she’s here. I’m daily confronted with the fact I don’t know Snake. Then again, maybe she doesn’t either.

“It’s probably nothing.” Her face betrays her fears. She doesn’t think it’s nothing. She knows something she’s not telling me.

“I’ll have a look,” I tell her. She nods, disappearing back into Snake’s small office.

Francesca is related to all of this somehow. She must be. There’s no such thing as coincidences. I know she didn’t happen to show up at the same time the notes did. She’d gotten a threatening note as well, but who’s to say she didn’t write it herself? She’s been working tirelessly to get the system back

up, but we're not any closer to fixing it. For all I know, she planted the virus and she's making sure it's replicating.

I should trust Snake enough to trust her, but I know nothing about her intentions. Is she trying to help us, or is she covering her tracks? Did Snake go to get fresh air, or did she lure him outside somehow and knock him out? As soon as I find Snake, I will make him explain her to me. This isn't the time to have an unknown ally. In my eyes, she's guilty until proven innocent.

I step back out on the porch, feeling weary. Part of me hopes Snake decided to play hooky for a few hours. Maybe he ran into Gator and they decided to catch frogs for dinner. Maybe he's on the dock, smoking a pack of cigarettes and listening to the cicadas sing him an early lullaby. I'd be pissed at him for slacking off, but I'd be relieved that he's shooting the shit and my worries are for nothing. I know in my heart that isn't the case, though. I haven't been that lucky in a very long time.

I walk the grounds twice, not seeing hide or tail of him. No one's around, for that matter. I should know Gator isn't catching frogs because I've asked him to stand guard on the third floor and act as a sniper if we need one. I hope to God we won't, but I don't think anyone's up there answering my prayers. If there were, none of this mess would have started.

I call Gator quickly, hoping he might have seen something.

"You need me to come down, Prez?" he asks, sounding almost relieved.

"Actually, I was hoping you might have seen Snake," I tell him hopefully. "He went out a while ago and I can't find him. His bike is in the driveway so he couldn't have gone far, but I've gone around the whole property and can't find him anywhere."

"Sorry, mon ami," he says. "I saw him head toward Pocus's house a bit ago, but nothing since. I've been trying to scope the whole area, maybe I missed him."

I groan in frustration, wishing he had better news. Half of my men are still on patrols. Everything is so quiet it's almost eerie. In contrast to my inner turmoil, the bayou is silent and still. Snake isn't here, that much is clear. I walk back to the garage and see his bike is safely inside. He hasn't willingly gone anywhere.

I take off in the direction of Pocus's house on Gator's suggestion, thinking maybe he went for a walk. That's an uncharacteristic behavior for him, but at least it's an idea. It's something concrete to move me past the panic and dread. If he didn't go on a walk, then something bad has happened

to him. I can't allow myself to think about it.

I'm halfway to the house when I see a faint trickle of smoke. It's near the house, but on the other side of it. It's a weak stream now, but I would bet my life that it was black and dense not long ago. I'd bet my life on Snake seeing the smoke. He would have assumed that Pocus's house was on fire, and he would have gone to check it out. His phone was inside with Francesca, so he couldn't call for backup. To be safe, I pull my phone out, ready to dial for help the second I run into trouble.

I run toward the dying smoke, slightly worried of what I'll find. My heart races. A sense of foreboding washes over me. That familiar anxiety gnaws at me. It tells me that Snake is probably dead and someone's burned the body. But it doesn't smell like burning flesh. It smells like a brush fire. I take in a big lungful of the smoky air, satisfied it has the clean smell of earth.

When I reach the smoke, I find nothing but a pile of charred grass and no sign of Snake at all. I know he was here. Snake wouldn't run from danger, he'd run to it. There may be a lot about him that I don't know, but I'm sure about that without a shadow of a doubt. Snake is always willing to put himself in danger to help a brother in need. If he thought Pocus's house was in trouble, he would have come to check on it.

As I look around, I see no other sign of him. No footprints or tire marks. It's as if he simply vanished from the spot. Panicked, I run down the road in one direction, then another. My body acts without my mind, somehow convinced that if I do the right thing and go in the right direction, I'll find Snake. I'm frustrated. My senses are heightened by the immense heat and the sun beating down on me. I bellow into the empty bayou, letting out all of the pent-up frustration I've been holding back for days.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Snake

I slowly open my eyes. My head throbs with an intensity that matches the darkness surrounding me. My thoughts are a haze of confusing images. In the dark, nothing makes sense. I try desperately to decipher what's real and what is a useless image in my head. The last thing I remember is running toward the smoke, terrified that Pocus's house would catch fire. Even now, I smell the scent of stale smoke on my clothes, as if I've returned from a campfire.

Wherever I am, though, I'm inside and it's freezing cold. It's a sharp contrast to the humid heat I was standing in. I was running toward the flames, but now I can't feel my legs. It's a strange sensation, a numbness that feels less like my legs are asleep and more that they don't exist at all. I try to move them, but nothing happens. I can't feel anything. I can't see anything. The darkness is stifling.

My eyes strain, searching for any hint of my surroundings. The silence is deafening, broken only by the ragged rhythm of my breath. Fear and adrenaline course through my veins. It's a potent cocktail that heightens my senses. I concentrate on slowing my breathing so I can better listen for any sounds. Every so often, I hear the wind shifting against the roof. It sounds like metal. A warehouse, maybe. I continue to slow my breathing, trying to tamp down the rising panic in my chest.

I'm temporarily blinded when bright lights flicker on with no warning. I slam my eyes shut, afraid of what I'll see when I open them. Someone is obviously trying to scare me, and I can't pretend it isn't working. I open my eyes slowly, letting them adjust to the light as slowly as possible. I break out into a cold sweat and feel my heart pound when I see the face in front of me.

He's older now, the lines on his face much deeper, but I'd recognize him anywhere. Ronan. He smiles at me with a sick, cruel twist of his mouth. His teeth are a startling shade of white, especially considering he's spent the last fifteen years in prison. His pale skin hangs off his body, giving him the appearance of being much older than his sixty years, but he's the most intimidating man I've ever seen.

Time seems to stand still as I stare into his cold, calculating eyes. I'm transported back to the first time I ever saw him. Even then, he scared the shit out of me. Francesca and I were fronting as consultants, meeting with him to talk about his cybersecurity needs. The moment our eyes met, I was sure the jig was up. His stare was so icy, so intimidating that I was sure he knew exactly what we were up to. After we finished our spiel, I told Francesca we should drop it. I still wish we had.

Now, he takes a deliberate step toward me. His posture is stiff and regal, as if he's a member of the royal family or some shit. I guess in some ways, he thinks he is. In the Irish mafia, he's certainly considered as such. His willingness to get his hands dirty is more terrifying. Despite his clean-cut appearance, he'll be the first one to throw a punch.

He proves this when his fist connects with my face. It's enough to turn my head. I already feel the bruise forming. I spit blood out of my mouth, but otherwise, I don't react. I grit my teeth, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing my vulnerability.

He sinks another punch into my stomach. I fight back the urge to retch. He knocks the wind out of me, and my head is already pounding from being knocked out earlier. He takes a piece of pipe and slams it into my knee. The pain shoots through my body, and I can't stop the scream from escaping my lips.

"Does it hurt, Samuel?" His voice is sickly calm despite his violent actions. "Would you like me to stop?"

I don't respond, knowing he wants me to beg for mercy. I'm not strong like my brothers. I'm not used to this kind of abuse, but I won't cave in. That's the only thing I know for certain. He wants me to give in, to show some sort of emotion that I'm not okay. He wants power over me, but I won't give him the satisfaction.

"Aw, come on, Samuel. Or, Sammy, right? That's what she calls you."

My stomach turns at the mention of Francesca. He can't hurt her the way he's hurting me. She's smart and she's tough, but she can't endure pain like

this. She's been through enough emotional pain. She can't withstand the same amount of physical pain. I won't let him hurt her. I've hurt her enough.

As the onslaught continues, Ronan's words cut through the air like a dagger. His tone is a sharp contrast to his words, which makes him more dangerous. The fact that he can maintain his calm while beating me down shows that he's been thinking about this for a long time. He's had an opportunity to regulate his emotions as he does this. He's letting out fifteen years of emotion without letting it show on his face. In fact, he seems to be drawing pleasure from the pain he inflicts.

Through clenched teeth, I manage to utter a response, my voice laced with defiance. "I did what you ask," I rasp, the pain strangling my words "I gave you the money back. I gave you everything I had. I owe you nothing."

My words give a sense of bravery that I don't feel. But I won't let him see me crack. He doesn't deserve it. He takes a step back and eyes me with something akin to surprise. He almost looks impressed. He smiles a sickly smile at me and doesn't say a word, instead moving to my left. I see a tray full of metal objects, and I know he's only getting started.

"You're stronger than I expected, Samuel," he says, his back to me. His slight Irish lilt drips from his words, another stark contrast. "Though, I suppose it's been a long time. You've toughened up from that young kid who immediately handed over everything to me. But you left me to rot in prison. So, yes, Samuel, you do owe me something. You owe me everything."

He picks up a set of brass knuckles from the tray and slowly puts them on. His fists are strong enough without them. I brace myself for impact. He stands straight in front of me, again smiling. Anyone else would mistake his expression as kind, but I see the glint in his eye, the evil intention behind his façade.

"Why don't you just get it over with?" I ask calmly. "Put a bullet in my head and end this."

"Don't crack so soon," he says with a chuckle. "You think I've spent all this time planning my revenge to end it with a bullet and a few seconds? No, I want to make this last as long as possible."

"Do you want me to beg you to stop, Ronan?" I ask, my voice cracking slightly. "You want me to show you how scared I am? I've been scared for fifteen years, I've gotten used to hiding it. I'm not cracking, Ronan, I'm exhausted. I've been trying to survive."

His laughter echoes through the room, a haunting sound that chills me to

the core.

“Survive, huh?” he sneers. “You’ve been sitting pretty with those friends of yours, Samuel. You’ve had the freedom to do whatever you’ve wanted while I rotted away in a cell. You tried to take my money from me, but you ended up stealing something much more precious. You took my time. You took everything from me. So, Samuel, I’m going to take everything from you. And I’ll make sure you watch it all happen before I decide to put you out of your misery.”

Each word strikes a nerve, the culmination of all of the worries I’ve held for fifteen years. Guilt and regret intertwine in my gut, but I refuse to let them consume me. Maybe I was stupid to build a life for myself. Maybe I should have taken the same route Francesca did and kept to the shadows for fifteen years. She has nothing to lose anymore. At this moment, I envy her.

The beating intensifies, a relentless barrage of punches and kicks. Pain pulses through my body. It threatens to overpower me. Amidst the darkness, a flicker of determination ignites within me. I will not allow Ronan to break me. He can’t strip away everything I hold dear.

I see the faces of my brothers, of Pocus, Seer, Hex, Bones, Graveyard, and so many others. I focus on them, the years we’ve had together, the experiences we’ve gone through. We’ve taken down so many evil men together. We’ve helped restore order to this city. Because of Ronan, I was strong enough to take down Anderson Grey and Damien. I was able to help Seer find his brother.

I did that. I won’t let myself regret any of it. I refuse to let him take it from me. No matter what Ronan does, I’ll fight him. ’Til my last breath, I’ll fight him, fight for them. He has no idea how strong my brothers are. He won’t destroy them, no matter what he does to me.

“You’re pathetic, you know?” I spit out, the blood gathering in my mouth. I’m sure he’s knocked at least one tooth out. “You think you’re strong enough to take on the Ruthless Kings? Keep me here as long as you want, but they won’t let you win. We’ve dealt with worse than you, and they’ll keep fighting. All you’ll succeed in doing is making a martyr out of me. They’ll fight on my behalf.”

“And they’ll lose,” he shouts, his calm demeanor cracking. “You think I haven’t planned on your friends intervening? I have big plans for them.”

A cold chill settles over my body, and I know now. I’ve been speculating for days, but now I’m sure Ronan is behind everything that’s happened the

last few days. The threatening letters, the attack on our security system. He planned it all.

“They’re stronger than you think,” I tell him with all the strength I can muster. “You have no idea how hard they’ll fight. You may get a few hits in, but they’ll destroy you. I guarantee it.”

He strikes me with one final blow. Darkness once again claims me, pulling me into its abyss. I drift on the edges of consciousness, battered and bruised, but my spirit remains unbroken. The fire within me refuses to be extinguished, fueling my resilience.

When I wake up, the ache in my body reminds me of the brutal beating I’ve endured. I wouldn’t be surprised if I have a few broken bones. I’m sure I’m covered in bruises. I’m bleeding in several places. But I refuse to be overtaken by despair. No matter what happens, I’ll find a way to escape this prison, to thwart Ronan’s twisted plans. I won’t let him win.

My mind races, seeking any glimmer of hope, any opportunity for freedom. I tug at my restraints and analyze my surroundings. I search for any weaknesses in this prison he’s designed for me. He’s planned it perfectly. There’s no way out of here.

But he doesn’t know Francesca is with my friends. Together, they’ll figure this out. They’ll see that I’m missing and they’ll send someone after me. She’ll know he has me. She’s the key to all of this. Even if I don’t survive, she will, and that’s enough to keep me going for the time being.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Francesca



When Seer doesn't return after a few minutes, I know in my heart that Sammy is gone. Seer is out there looking for him, but he won't find him. Ronan's found us. He's found Sammy. I scream at the useless computer and see my reflection in the dark screen. I look pale and haggard. I've barely slept in two days, and what do I have to show for it? I haven't stopped the virus, and now Sammy is gone.

Unable to sit there for one more second, I run into the bathroom and slam the door. I run the faucet and splash cold water on my face as I feel the panic attack starting. I heave into the sink, unable to control my body's reaction. My hands shake and my breath becomes shallow. I gasp for air, unable to breathe. This is all my fault. That thought repeats in my head on a constant loop as I think about Sammy.

I look at myself in the mirror. I know without a doubt that it's my responsibility to find him. His computers are out of commission, but I know him. He always keeps a spare laptop just in case. I go back into the small office, looking for any place it could be hidden. I check the floorboards, but they're all nailed down. It must be in his room.

I haven't been in Sammy's room since I got here. When I toured the house, he showed me where it was and offered to let me sleep there while I'm here. I refused, unable to bring myself to enter a place so private. A place so full of him. Now I don't have a choice. I run upstairs and burst through the door, tearing up the room until I find a hidden compartment in the back of his closet.

It's just as I suspected. The laptop is an ancient model, at least twenty years old. But when I plug it in, it turns on. It's not much, but it works. It will

have to do. I close my eyes and focus on the task at hand. With a little finessing, I'm able to access the traffic cameras through the Department of Transportation. It's a start.

Time slips away as I hunch over the old laptop, desperate to find any trace of Sammy amidst the sea of video footage. My heart races with each passing moment. My fingers fly across the keys as I tirelessly search for any sign of him. There is nothing—no stray vehicle leaving the area, no clue to his whereabouts. Ronan has covered his tracks well, erasing any evidence of Sammy's presence. It's as if he's vanished into thin air.

Frustration gnaws at my insides as I realize the futility of my efforts. Ronan knows us too well, knows our capabilities. After all, we were able to defraud him and get him sent to prison. We did all that with a few strokes of our keyboard. He has left no digital footprint for me to follow, no breadcrumbs to guide me. He's playing a cruel game, taunting me with his expertise in evasion.

I feel a surge of desperation rise within me, an overwhelming need to find Sammy, to bring him back to safety. I grab the laptop and pad back downstairs. I grab my keys and head out the front door, planning to look for Sammy myself. When I open the front door, though, Seer is on the other side. He looks at me with surprise.

"Are you going somewhere?" he asks, a slight edge in his voice.

"I'm going to find Sammy." I push past him.

He stops me and turns me to face him. An argument happens behind his eyes. I know he doesn't trust me. He doesn't know me. I understand his hesitation, but he doesn't know our history. He doesn't know what I'm willing to do to get Sammy out of trouble.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" His voice is even. "You don't know where Snake is, and you don't know who's taken him. You might be walking into a trap."

"I don't care," I tell him forcefully. "None of that matters. Someone needs to go after him."

"Someone will," he says, his voice almost gentle. "I already have my guys on it. But Francesca, you are the only one who can help get our security system back online. If Snake were here, he'd tell you that's your main priority."

"You don't know anything about him," I spit at him, venom behind my words. "He's another soldier to you, someone you can exploit to do your

bidding. He's loyal to you for some crazy reason, and he's willing to put himself in harm's way for this place. I bet he always says 'yes sir,' and doesn't question you."

Fury courses through my veins, growing with every second as I look at Seer's calm, impassable expression.

"With all due respect, I've known Snake since the moment he walked through those doors." He points behind him. "I may not know everything about him, but I know exactly what he's willing to risk for this place. What every one of my men is. Which is why I won't stop until I bring him home safe. That's my job, Francesca. Your job is to do your computer magic and get my security system back up so nothing else happens."

His words strike a chord within me, a reminder of the responsibility I carry. He's right and I know it. I am their last hope. I'm their only chance at regaining the protection they so desperately need. With a heavy sigh, I reluctantly push past him and walk back into the house. In the office, I set up the ancient laptop, continuing to run searches on the video cameras. Something will show up. It has to.

As I sit there, memories flood my mind. I'm transported back to a time when vengeance consumed my thoughts and fueled my actions. I remember with a sharp pang the day I first found out about Ronan. I'd hacked into a local police department record, trying to find any evidence of where my family could be. It was a stupid thing to do, so childish and naïve. But I had to know what happened to them.

All I'd ever known was foster care. For years, I'd bounced around from group home to group home. I never knew anything about the people who were supposed to love me the most. I couldn't believe that any parents could hate their child so much that they'd subject her to years of abuse and neglect in the foster system. Something within me told me that something bad had happened to them.

The records were sealed, but I knew by then how to get past any defense system. I learned that my father worked for a crime syndicate. It was a crushing blow, but at least I knew. Even worse, he'd been murdered by his boss. He'd agreed to testify in a federal case against him, but he was murdered before he got the chance. As if that weren't bad enough, the man had murdered my mother as well. I was only eighteen months at the time.

I traced down the records and found that the police had put me in the custody of the state. They had no record of any other relatives, but maybe

they thought making me an anonymous kid in a sea of anonymous kids was safer. Whatever the case, I was placed in a system that would do nothing but bring me harm for the next thirteen years, until Sammy and I were old enough to escape together.

I'd just turned nineteen when I learned all this. I was angry, but I was smart. We'd already stolen a lot of money from clients. Together, Sammy and I had the power to take down the man who killed my parents. It was a personal vendetta, a desire for retribution that drove me. I didn't tell Sammy that, though. He was too kind-hearted, all things considered. He would have tried to talk sense into me, tried to make me let it go and pick a different target. I didn't want to be stopped.

I bear the weight of that, knowing that if anything were to happen to him now, it would be my fault. I spent so much time being angry with him after he left me. Part of me felt like I deserved it. I put us in serious danger because I was young and cocky. I thought I had the power to take down a crime lord like Ronan Burke, but I had no idea what I was doing. I still don't.

I can't dwell on regrets or past mistakes. I have to summon every ounce of strength within me, every bit of knowledge and skill I possess, to get this system back online. No matter how much I hate this place for stealing Sammy away from me, it's keeping me safe and hidden now. Without protection, I'm as vulnerable to Ronan's plan as they are.

Thankfully, Meredith returns, knocking me out of the negative thought spiral.

"Hey, you," she says brightly. "I never got your name."

Talk about bad manners. I'm getting as bad as Sammy. It must be the house.

"Francesca," I tell her, feeling embarrassed. "Were you able to find someone to help?"

She nods and smiles, then moves out of the doorway to produce a young boy who can't be more than thirteen. My heart sinks for a second, thinking there's no way this kid can help me. But I remember what she told me. This boy is gifted, like me.

"This is Data," Meredith tells me, standing behind the boy. He smiles at me widely, glasses taking up half of his face. "Data is a literal wizard with computers."

"Not a wizard," Data chimes in, cutting her off. "That's a bad metaphor for what I do. I'm more like a mole. I can get into any database, no matter

how hard. I dig my way in.”

“Do you think you can dig your way out of a self-replicating virus?” I ask him warily.

His eyes immediately light up and he moves toward me. I move out of the way and let him sit at the computer. His fingers move across the keys almost as quickly as mine. Even Sammy can’t type that fast.

“Wow, this is like a video game,” he says in an excited voice. “I keep killing them, but they keep coming back like zombies.”

His enthusiasm is a breath of fresh air. I turn to Meredith and mouth a quick thank-you. She gives me a thumbs up and tells us she’ll be in the living room if we need anything.

“I’m waiting for Graveyard,” she tells me.

“Seriously?” I ask, annoyed by yet another strange nickname. “Why can’t any of these guys go by normal names?”

“Trust me, Graveyard is a huge improvement on his real name.” She laughs.

When she’s gone, I turn back to Data and drop into the seat Snake was using. I grab the laptop and scan through the newest video images, but I see nothing. I turn back toward Snake’s computer and try to help Data however I can.

With renewed determination, I join forces with him, our fingers dancing across the keys in a synchronized rhythm. He does treat this like a video game, killing each virus before turning to the next. Every now and then he giggles in delight, in a way that only a preteen boy can. He’s enjoying this a lot.

“We have to find the big boss,” he tells me. I stare at him blankly. He rolls his eyes at me and sighs. “In my favorite video game, there’s a big boss. He’s like the main zombie. He’s able to control the other zombies and send them to attack. But if you take him out, you can stop the other zombies.”

“Any idea where we might find the big boss?” I ask him, intrigued by his youthful perspective.

“He’s hiding, but I’ll find him,” Data answers confidently. “It’s my specialty.”

I sit back and watch him work, grateful for the extra set of hands and the renewed confidence. Data focuses on finding the “Big Boss” and I focus on finding Snake and Ronan.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Seer

This isn't happening. Bones is out of commission and now Snake is gone. Whoever took him was smart enough not to leave a trail. There's no trace of him. No indication of which direction his kidnappers drove off. I don't know what the hell is happening. I feel like I'm losing my damn mind.

What's next? What else can possibly go wrong? All I know is that I can't sit here and wait for assailants to take us out one by one. Enough is enough. I officially don't have the manpower to keep the club safe. There's only one thing I can do. I need reinforcements.

When Pocus handed the reins of the club over to me, he told me in very rare and very dire circumstances, we had brothers in arms we could reach out to. Our closest allies are a branch of the Ruthless Kings in Houston. I call their leader, Daniello, and he assures me he'll send a few of his toughest guys today. In a few hours, we'll have ten more guys here to protect us. For the first time in days, I breathe a sigh of relief.

With our numbers filled out, I can focus on getting Snake back. Unfortunately, Snake was the only guy who outright refused to take a tracker when I offered them. He said that he didn't leave the house enough to require a tracker. Besides, he was the one who would have to do the tracking. He didn't see how it would be any help. If he went missing, he argued that no one would know how to find him anyway.

At the time, it sounded like a good argument. He was right in saying he hardly left the house. In all the time I've known Snake, he's never taken a vacation. Now, I feel like an idiot for not insisting that he wear a tracker. I should have anticipated that everyone in the club is in danger of one day

going missing, even Snake.

I lack the time to curse myself now. It's a much better use of my time to deploy a few men to track Snake down. Gator is our best tracker. He's able to see things the rest of us can't. He's been hunting his whole life. If there's any trail to follow at all, he'll find it. Hex and Buffy will provide extra muscle, in case they get into a tight situation. With everything going on, I can't risk sending them out in twos. It's difficult to sacrifice so many of my men for one rescue mission, but it's the only way I can see them getting Snake safely home.

All three men meet me at the site where I think Snake was probably taken. The splatter of blood is dried now, but Gator seems to catch something I can't see.

"Footprints," he says, pointing to the mud.

I don't see anything, but I don't doubt his skills. If anyone has any chance of tracking down Snake, it'll be Gator. He follows the prints to the road and gets on the ground, carefully assessing the hot pavement.

"He went west," Gator says, standing up and looking back at us. "We'll find him, Boss."

Hex and Buffy look at me with matching confident expressions. They're all strapped and ready for a fight. We walk back to the house. They get on their bikes, ready to start their search. Before they leave, I pull Hex aside.

"I need you to be my eyes and ears out there," I tell him. "You know I'd go if I wasn't worried about leaving the house vulnerable."

He puts his hand on my shoulder and looks me directly in the eye. "You're running yourself ragged, Boss. We've had a series of unfortunate events lately, but you have to take a beat for yourself. Don't make any stupid decisions while we're gone."

I smile at him half-heartedly. We both know I'm not Pocus. No matter what happens, I won't willingly sacrifice myself to stop the bad guy. That was a very personal vendetta for him. But I won't leave the house unprotected. I've called everyone back to the house until our backup arrives. I'm not taking any chances on our safety.

"Take your own advice," I tell him, bristling. "If you get hurt out there, Juliana will never forgive me."

He squeezes my shoulder hard then lets me go. I watch as my men get on their bikes and ride off, feeling a sense of dread. Maybe it's anxiety or a ridiculous overprotective instinct. It seems like every time someone leaves

the house, they don't come back. I sit on the porch, my gun on my hip, and keep my eyes peeled for anything suspicious.

Maybe if I'd been out here earlier, Snake wouldn't have wandered off. At the very least, he wouldn't have been alone. I would have been here for backup, and he wouldn't have been taken. The sun hangs low. I know it will completely set in less than an hour. I see a headlight coming down the road, and my hand instinctively moves to my gun.

As the bike gets closer, though, I recognize the drive. It's Graveyard. He gets off his bike and nods, taking a seat next to me on the porch.

"Everything all right, Prez?" he asks, warily eyeing my hand on my gun.

"I guess that depends on your definition of 'all right,'" I answer truthfully. "How's Bones doing?"

He chuckles and leans back against the steps. "Bones will be just fine," he tells me cheerfully. "He woke up from surgery and immediately started flirting with his nurse. The meds he's on are keeping him in very good spirits."

"I could use some of those," I half-joke.

"I'll do you one better," Graveyard says, turning to look at me. "Meredith called me before I left the hospital. Some of the older kids heard about what's going on and they want to help."

"Help how?" I ask, thinking of the young kids at the center. They're all gifted in some way, but they're hardly fighters.

"Hold on," he tells me.

He gets up and goes into the house, leaving me there on the porch confused. When he comes back, he has Meredith in tow. I didn't even know she was inside. So much keeps happening at the club without my notice. I need to get my head in the game.

"So, Graveyard says you have kids who want to fight?" I ask her warily as a greeting.

"Not the kids," she says, shooting Graveyard a dark look. "You guys have been helping with the center since day one, and they love you guys. As soon as some of the teenagers heard about what was happening and why we had to shut down for the time being, they asked to help."

"What exactly do they want to do?" I ask skeptically. The last thing I need to do right now is babysit children.

"Well, I have one of my kids inside helping Francesca get the security system back online," she tells me. "They all have unique gifts that can help."

They want to protect the people who have protected them.”

Her words strike a chord in me. I’m touched, but I can’t let them get in harm’s way for us. The Houston Kings will be here in a couple of hours, so I’m good on manpower. More than that, I don’t want to have anyone else’s blood on my hands.

“It’s a nice offer, Meredith, really,” I tell her. “Please send them all my thanks and appreciation. But there’s no way I’m going to let them put themselves in danger for us. I can’t guarantee they won’t get hurt, and I can’t take responsibility for that.”

“You forget that a lot of these kids were rescued from the gangs,” she reminds me. “They aren’t risk averse. They know what they’re signing up for. Trust me, I don’t like it any more than you do, but they’re chomping at the bit to come over here and help you defend the house.”

“That gang reintegration course is going well, I see,” I joke. She swats me on the shoulder. Graveyard laughs at our interaction, and we all look out on the bayou, caught up in our own thoughts.

“I tell you what, though,” I say. “Do you think you could talk Brody into helping us?”

Meredith stiffens, and Graveyard shoots me a look. I know that it’s a big ask. Brody is a boy Meredith took special care to hide when she was running from Damien. Brody is able to track people down with just a picture. It’s a psychic gift he has, made stronger when he’s actually met the person. He was of particular interest to Damien, who would have exploited him to find more gifted children. He’s only fourteen, but the true power of his gift is that he can use it from anywhere. He won’t need to put himself in harm’s way, and I could use all the help I could get to find Snake.

“I’ll have to talk to his parents,” Meredith says quietly. “But if you really need him, I’m sure they’ll be happy to help. Brody likes you.”

“Thank you,” I tell her. “Can you make the call? Snake is missing.”

She nods and heads back inside to call Brody’s parents. Graveyard and I remain on the porch, scanning the horizon. If there’s any threat, I want to see it as soon as possible. I have a strong feeling in my bones that another attack will come soon. Bones’s injury and Snake’s disappearance happened within hours of each other. Bad things seem to always come in threes.

“I have to get back to the hospital,” Graveyard says, breaking our silence. “I’m on the night shift tonight. But you call me if anything happens, and I’ll get here as soon as I can. Okay?”

I nod and watch him go. Once he's gone, I feel more alone and vulnerable than before. The men slowly trickle in from their various assignments, but we don't have many bodies available. A sick feeling lingers in the pit of my stomach, telling me that we're sitting on a powder keg. It's only a matter of time before that vision comes to fruition. It will be different, sure, but that doesn't mean it won't happen.

The sun sets. I remain on the porch, listening to the creatures come out and begin their nightly symphony. This should be a place of peace, but I'm tenser than a bow string. Eventually, I have to force myself inside as the mosquitos make a feast of my flesh. I position myself in the living room, watching the front yard despite the darkness. I'll be ready for whatever happens next. No more surprises.

A sense of relief washes over me when the Houston Kings arrive a while later. They come in a convoy, riding in a tight formation. When they knock on the door, I feel like I may fall over out of sheer happiness. No matter what happens, I now have ten more men to help protect the club. It might be a long night, but at least we'll have backup for whatever may come.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Francesca



“I can’t believe you did it!” I look at a blank, virus-free screen.

Data shrugs without a hint of pride or arrogance. I imagine at his age, he’s made fun of for being so good at this. I was when I was younger. Worse than Sammy was because I was a girl. Girls shouldn’t be so good at tech. That’s what all the boys in my classes said.

Of course, they weren’t laughing when I went into the school database and gave them Ds in their classes. I didn’t fight with words or fists. My payback was using the skill they most hated me for.

“It was nothing.” He pushes up his large glasses over the bridge of his nose. He leans back in his chair with a relaxed posture, as if this is something he does on a daily basis. “I told you, you just have to find the big boss.”

I smile and ruffle his hair. He clearly doesn’t like that as he pushes me away. If he’s anything like Sammy at that age, he wants to be seen as a colleague, an equal. He’s still a kid. I can only hope his life is a little easier than ours was. My heart aches with the thought that Data may go home to an abusive home at night.

Dan Menges never dared to hit us girls, but he was horrible with the boys, especially Sammy. He wanted them to be manly men, alpha males. If he sensed any hint of weakness or vulnerability in the boys, he extinguished it without hesitation. Many of the new foster boys would learn quickly if they mouthed off to him, or if they cried too much. Either extreme was unacceptable to Dan.

There was always a before and after. It was clear to the girls when one of our foster brothers went through his first beating. Whether the boy was a sarcastic asshole or a broken, weepy runt, they would inevitably change.

After the first time, they seemed dazed, more cautious. Nothing carefree about them, if there ever was. The boys who cried would hide it better.

Sammy was no different. I saw something special about him when I first met him. I couldn't let him endure Dan's wrath. I'd already been at the home for two years. I knew what the before and after looked like. Sammy was such a sad, broken shell of a boy. His eyes were wet with tears the moment he stepped in the door. He clung to his social worker's skirt.

Dan would beat him extra bad for that. Sammy didn't know what monsters our foster parents were, but kids have a way of sensing these kinds of things. We have a natural intuition, a strong bullshit radar. Sammy was afraid from the moment he walked over the threshold, and Dan didn't like that. It made him look cruel and uncompassionate.

Sammy made it two whole weeks without his first beating. That was a house record. But I made sure that one was all he ever got. As soon as I saw the after, the detached look in his eye and the fearful demeanor, I refused to let it continue. Dan liked me, so if I showed him that Sammy was my friend, that he was valuable, I could protect him.

Once I taught him basic computer skills, he was an asset to the Menges parents. Getting out of the beatings meant he was tortured in more creative ways. Sometimes there wouldn't be enough food for him, or he'd find his bed bare and be told that his bedding was being washed. Then it would take days for the bedding to reappear. But he never broke.

Judy was more of a psychological abuser. She liked to tell me that I was an ugly little girl no one would ever love. Then, when I developed and grew into my looks, she switched tactics. She'd say that all I would ever be good for would be whoring out my body to dirty men, her exact words. She was a vile woman who was jealous of us, I think. Many of my foster sisters developed eating disorders to deal with her constant criticism.

It didn't matter. We were too fat or too thin, too pretty or too plain. We couldn't win with her, with either of them. We endured as long as we could, but by fifteen, we knew we could make it on our own. Alone, we never would have made it. The two of us together couldn't be stopped. We were a dream team.

I'm shocked by how much I'm reminded of that time. I'd blocked it out. I'd blocked nearly everything about Sammy, mostly for self-preservation. It doesn't do to dwell on the past. Sammy never wore glasses, but he was no less nerdy than Data. He was skinny and his ears were too big. He was

ghostly pale with a smattering of freckles across his nose.

Then, one day, he grew into his looks. I can't remember when it happened, just that my body reacted differently to him. He was no longer the sad little boy to protect. He was a handsome teenager who looked like he'd last a few rounds in a fight. I shake my head to clear out the thoughts. That boy is long gone now, replaced with a yes man who's loyal to this club to a fault. A man who broke me in a way I'm still trying to comprehend.

My heart races as I sit in front of the computer screen. My body is in a state of panic about those horrible memories. Here in the present, the virus is dead. Thanks to Data. I was useless in that struggle. The kid has serious skills. Now he'll see what I'm capable of as we work to get the security system back online and fortify the defenses against future attacks.

I can't say for sure what the security looked like before I arrived, but I have to imagine Sammy forgot something. A hole in the wall, a crack somewhere. I can't blame him for not knowing what I know. After all, I was his teacher. Any flaw in his knowledge comes down to me. I make sure the system is completely impenetrable as Data and I rebuild it.

Once the system is back up, a task that takes the two of us hardly any time, I'm able to take a look around. I'm pleased that what Sammy thought was completely gone can be restored. It takes us a while, but we find his original files. Not all is lost. A warm sense of peace washes over me. The frustration from the last two days falls away.

My relief is short-lived as I delve deeper into the system. My eyes widen as the realization hits. Someone has combed through Sammy's files, leaving behind a trail of their intrusion. Panic grips my chest as I uncover layer after layer of unencrypted files that are meant to be encrypted. Some files are completely corrupted, and traces of a talented hacker are left behind.

Fear and frustration surge through me as I navigate the labyrinth of compromised data. Every click of the mouse feels like a step into the unknown, a confrontation with the shadows threatening our existence. The weight of responsibility settles upon me, a reminder of the stakes at hand. For now, this place is my shelter. We cannot afford to be blindsided again.

With determination, I piece together the puzzle, deciphering the remnants of the breach. It is an arduous task, fraught with uncertainty. Sammy's absence is painfully obvious. His expertise about his system is a void that can't be filled. But I won't let despair consume me. I owe it to him to fix this as much as I can.

Of course, if he were here, he could tell me what the hell to look for. I can always go back through the system with a fine-tooth comb when he's sitting next to me. Right now, he's in danger. I might be the only person who's able to find him. I leave Data to look through the files and make a note of what looks corrupted while I return my full focus to the old laptop.

I delve into the surveillance footage. I rapidly scan the screen, searching for any sign of Sammy. Every flicker of movement becomes a source of hope, a fleeting possibility that he's within reach. It feels like it takes hours, but another perk of my ... gift, as Meredith calls it, is that I can comb through data very quickly. It's probably only been a few minutes, but I can barely keep my eyes open.

That could also have to do with the straight forty-eight hours I've been awake. Thirty-minute power naps don't fortify me the way they used to. I envy Data and his youth. He has a glow about him. He's going through files as if it's the most exciting task he's ever heard of. I inhale deeply and try to suppress a frustrated groan.

A sound snaps me to full attention. The sharp crack of metal hitting wood spurns me into action. I immediately dive to the floor, pulling Data down with me. I cover his head protectively, but I don't know where the shot came from. It was close, though. Sammy's office is at the front of the house with exterior walls. If someone shot at the front of the house, we're in a vulnerable position.

Another shot reverberates through the air. My growing terror intensifies. Adrenaline fuels my actions as I grab Data's hand. I lead him out of the room and deeper into the house. I remember from my tour that there's a door towards the kitchen. I didn't open it then, but Seer made an offhand comment about how it led to a haunted basement. I'll take ghosts over bullets any day.

With Data's hand firmly grasped in mine, I make for the basement door. More shots ring through the house and I hear the sound of heavy-footed men running through the house. Unlike me, they're running toward the noise, but I can't worry about that now. I need to focus on getting the hell out of here.

I yank the door open and pull Data to the landing, muttering a warning to mind the steps. It's dark, and I can't see the stairs, but adrenaline moves me forward, not caring if I trip. Thankfully, we reach the bottom of the stairs safely. I pull Data towards me, hugging him in a tight embrace.

He's shaking. His breath is ragged. I feel the wetness of his tears as they fall on my arms. I cradle him like a child, trying to hide my own fear and

dismay. I hold him as much for my own sanity as his.

In the safety of the basement, the chaos unfolds above us. The muffled sounds of violence and chaos reach our ears. Each thud and shout is a painful reminder of the dangers lurking beyond our sanctuary. I hold Data close, shielding him with my body. I try to think of a plan in case the shooter manages to get inside the house. I'll pull him deeper into the basement, safer in the heart of the house.

Again, I'm transported to my childhood. How many times did I comfort Sammy when I panicked? How often did I share my food with him when I didn't even know when my next bite would come? How many times did I think us out of our misery, only to be thwarted by cruel fates? No matter what happens, I'll protect Data the way I couldn't protect Sammy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Seer

The deafening sound of gunfire pierces the air, shattering the tranquility of the night. Somehow, I knew they would come. It wasn't a vision, only an intuition that tonight would be the night. Everything has been building to this. Every threat, every seemingly random confrontation. I thank whatever deity exists that the Houston Kings arrived when they did. Whoever's shooting must know I have three men looking for Snake.

I don't have to question if it's a coincidence. I don't believe in coincidences anymore. This was a coordinated attack meant to weaken us. The message is that we can't defend ourselves. They've attacked us after dark, probably assuming we're settling in for the night. Everything about this attack feels coordinated and well thought out.

I look out the window and see the signature blood red of the Cuatros Locos gang. Of course. Diego Velez seems to think he has a score to settle with me, but I've never had a feud with him. This is an egregious and unacceptable show of force. As soon as I get us out of this mess, my revenge will be swift. I think back to church a few days ago.

"Whoever's doing this seems to have a personal vendetta against us," I told my men.

They looked back at me with bored, expectant expressions. They were all asking the same silent question. Who doesn't have a vendetta against us? But the who and how aren't important. The only thing I could truly prepare them for was action.

"Until further notice, I need someone watching from the third floor with a sniper rifle at all times."

This had garnered a reaction from the men. We'd never taken such severe

action before. I looked at Pocus, who watched me with a sure, steady gaze. In his eyes was a silent approval that I couldn't have begged him for. It was exactly what I needed to know. I was making the right decision.

“The rest of you need to be ready. You have to trust me on this, someone will attack this house. We can't be caught off guard. We'll patrol every gang in town and find what we can. Otherwise, I want you here, ready for a fight. It may not come today, or tomorrow. Hell, it may take weeks. The moment we let our guard down is when they'll attack. Let's not give them the opportunity.”

I noticed the fire in my men's eyes at my words. They loved a good fight, and all the better if the action came to them. Bones especially looked ready to break someone's neck. He'll be so pissed that he missed this. He caught his own gunfire, though. The Cuatros Locos probably saw him as a huge threat. He'll be happy to know that.

Adrenaline courses through my veins. My senses are heightened as I take in the unfolding mayhem. Without hesitation, I pull out my gun and head for the door. Most of my men are already outside, returning the fire of our rival gang. We're outmanned, but not by much, thanks to our recent reinforcements. In the midst of the fight, I see that the Cuatros Locos weren't prepared for this. They thought we'd be a much smaller group.

I see a man go down. I'm sure the shot came from upstairs. I can't remember who's manning the sniper rifle, but I'm grateful. Two more men go down. The angle of the hits mean they undeniably come from above. It's hard to see, and I'm sure they planned for that too. While the moon shines bright, they have their cars parked in front of the house, lights blinding.

They have this advantage. They can see us better than we can see them. They're backlit, their faces obscured in the darkness. Every part of this attack has been carried out under the shroud of darkness. It's been cloak and daggers, the sign of a scared, weak leader. If Diego had any respect for himself, any respect for me, he would have threatened me out in the open.

There's a code for these things. When gang members have a problem with another gang, they make it known. None of this clandestine, anonymous shit. When I get my hands on Diego, he'll wish he'd stayed in the shadows. I will show him no mercy. He will see exactly how frightening I can be.

One of my guys cries out in pain. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him go down. I tell myself it's a flesh wound and keep shooting. My eyes are sharp on the darkened targets in front of me. Each time my gun fires, I feel

the small kickback, but I continue. My adrenaline pushes me through any pain or soreness I'm sure to feel tomorrow.

I jump down from the porch and hide behind a bush for cover. I need to reload quickly. I won't run the risk of one of the Cuatros Locos using my distraction to their advantage. The second the clip is in, I move from behind the bush, shooting at the closest attacker. He goes down easily. I take slow, calculated steps toward our assailants. My fury propels me forward. I take out four men before I feel someone behind me, pulling me back.

"Are you crazy, Prez?" comes Frenchie's distinct Cajun accent. "I'd rather die tonight than deal with Tory if you get shot."

The fact that Frenchie can joke in this situation is a testament to his strength. This is fun for him, a fight he's been waiting for his whole life. As we retreat toward the porch, I see the faces of my men and the Houston Kings. They have a serious, stonewalled expression. I would bet if I look in their eyes, I'd see nothing but unbridled glee.

They love this. And they can handle it. All this time, I've been carrying this burden alone, thinking it was solely up to me to save them from destruction. But here they are, fighting their hearts out, fighting for their home and for this brotherhood. Fighting for me. I'll never be able to express how much this moment means to me.

From the safety of the porch, I turn to take more shots, but I'm faced with the retreating backs of most of the Cuatros Locos. A few men are shooting, shouting for the others to get in line. Without their cowardly friends, they're easier targets. I take a shot at one large man's leg. He goes down, howling in pain. Two retreating men turn reluctantly and pull him away, toward one of the waiting cars.

Slowly, headlights pull away until only two are left. We shoot at the remaining men, taking down nearly all of them. If I had to bet, I would say these men are part of Diego's inner circle. They're high-ranking officials in his organization. They're supposed to be the bravest, the toughest. They think they have to stick it out until the bitter end, but without backup, their end is coming sooner than expected.

I don't want to kill anyone. I don't want their lives on my conscience. But they started this fight. We're simply defending our home, shooting back at those who shot first. The message becomes clear and they retreat. At least, those who can do so. A handful of bodies are scattered on the ground. We'll have to check on them, take care of them.

I'll allow Diego to bury his dead, but anyone who is injured and on my property will spend time ruminating in the basement. They need to think on their decisions, reflect on their choices. I'm sure after a few nights with the ghosts, they'll see the errors of their ways. The Cuatros Locos gang is finished if I have anything to say about it. They will not come back from this night.

When every car is gone, I feel like I can breathe. I relax my arm. My gun feels like a permanent appendage. I take a few, unsteady steps toward the door. This is a mess. In my heightened, adrenaline-fueled state, I see every ounce of blood, every single bullet that missed one of my men and instead hit the exterior of our home. In some places, they've gone through the walls. Broken glass covers the porch. I need a drink.

Instinctually, everyone shuffles into the room where we have church, some nursing wounds. I do a quick headcount and realize a few men must still be outside. I need a plan, to decide what to do next. Curious faces look up at me, waiting for a sign, any indication that I have a plan.

I back out of the room and head toward the bar. With Buffy out searching for Snake no one can pour us drinks. We'll have to do this old school. I grab two of our most expensive bottles, that are used for weddings and funerals. Pocus would murder me if he saw me grab them, but he's not here to object. Lucky bastard. He'll be pissed he missed the fight.

I carry the precious bottles back into the meeting room. I take a swig of one, straight from the bottle. I feel the heat radiate down my body. It dulls my senses, taking away the heightened sense of dread. Even with the worst part over, I worry this was the precursor.

I hand the second bottle to Hemlock. He does the same, taking a long swig before passing it down. I pass the other bottle to a newer member, Dread. He passes it without taking a sip, instead dropping his head in his hands, his whole body sagging. I sink next to him and feel like I've hit a brick wall. I don't have the energy to do anything but lean back against the plush couch.

Footsteps approach. I look up to see Evanescence, Francesca, and Data approaching, looking timid. Shit, I forgot that any of them were here. Data has to be twelve years old. Despite the circumstances, he seems to be holding up pretty well. His face is tear soaked, but otherwise, he looks calm. Francesca, on the other hand, looks pale and sick. I don't blame her.

"Is it over?" Evanescence asks, the self-appointed leader of the small group.

A blur comes and someone rushes in, scooping up Evanesce. Knix embraces his wife, not caring how it looks to anyone else. The two share a private moment, and I think of Tory. What I wouldn't give to hold her now. More than that, I'm so glad she's not here. I wouldn't have been able to function if she'd been inside during the fight.

"Knix," I address, and he looks at me, his arms tightly wound around Evanesce. "You were on sniper duty tonight?"

He nods affirmatively.

"Those were some good fucking shots," I tell him, standing and grabbing a bottle that's been set on the ground. I thrust it into his hands. "You've earned this. You all have," I say, looking at my men. They're battered and bruised, but they're alive. I'll make sure they stay that way.

"Evanesce." I turn to the girl with the power to take away pain. "Can you please check on the wounded?"

She nods, reluctantly pulling away from her husband. She leaves the room, going to check on those who went down. We need to get them inside. We need to do a lot of things. The fight may be over, but the long night ahead of us has only begun.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Graveyard

The shrill sound of my pager jolts me from my momentary respite, It's a brief interlude of calm within the hectic chaos of my overnight shift. It had been quiet on the floor, so I thought I'd sneak to the on-call room for a quick power nap. I was almost guaranteeing I would get paged, naturally. I'm well accustomed to the unpredictable nature of my profession. I'm always on call to respond to emergencies. But I belatedly realize it isn't my hospital pager ringing. It's the pager I use for Seer.

I immediately pull out my phone and call him. He picks up before it rings once. The urgency in his voice sends a surge of adrenaline through my veins. My heart pounds with a mix of anticipation and concern.

"Graveyard." His voice is steely and slightly hoarse. "It's bad. We were shot up. We have at least five down, a dozen more with minor wounds."

Without hesitation, I call in my backup doctor, knowing my brothers need me. Gunshot wounds can be precarious. He gave me nothing to go off of, but I know how well a gunshot wound can be the difference between life and death. Bones is a few floors above me now, recovering from his gunshot wound. He got lucky, but it was a tense surgery from what I heard.

The trauma surgeon told me it was touch and go for a long time. I didn't tell Seer any of that, of course. He had enough on his plate at the time. His plate seems to be overflowing now. He needs me more than the hospital does.

As I rush to gather my medical supplies, my mind races, preparing for the task at hand. I grab more than I think I'll realistically need because I don't know. Sometimes minor wounds can turn serious with no warning. The last time I was at our in-house clinic, supplies were dangerously low. I load up in case.

The drive to the clubhouse is a blur. My focus is solely on reaching my brothers. The streets fly by in a flurry of motion. My anxiety propels me forward. I try to wrap my head around what's happened, unable to comprehend such a brutal attack. It's uncommon for something of this magnitude to occur on our home soil. It's an unspoken rule since the gang attacks a few years ago. All the leaders came together, making sure it was clear that if a home attack was ever carried out, it wasn't done by another gang.

But many of the old leaders have been replaced. Hell, even Pocus stepped down in favor of Seer. Seer would never commit such a blatant violation of trust. This isn't how we settle our disputes anymore. The leaders fought so hard to find common ground so things like this wouldn't happen.

My mind spins with the possibilities. Seer didn't tell me who did the shooting, but I can wager a guess. My assumptions are confirmed when I pull into the driveway and see at least seven bodies lying on the lawn. In my headlights, I can make out their gang memorabilia. There will be no talking Seer down from retaliation. I fear he may make it worse if he does enact revenge. I hope I can talk a little sense into him, perhaps when the sun comes up.

As a doctor, I feel like I'm betraying my Hippocratic oath by abandoning these men in the yard as I walk toward the house. But I can't be responsible for them when my brothers are wounded. I hear no groans of pain, no cries for help. I have to assume the worst, that they're beyond my help. My focus has to be my brothers, no matter what.

As I step through the doors of the house, the scene before me is resigned chaos. Someone's pulled the unconscious men through the door. Their blood trails from the porch into the hallway. I see the faces of my wounded friends, peaceful. That's not a great sign. They've either passed out from the pain or they're too far gone for my help.

I hear the sound of light footsteps and look up to see Evanesce coming toward me. She greets me with a small, reserved smile. Her face is pale and her eyes are dark.

"I've done what I can," she tells me in her lyrical voice.

I nod and motion my head toward the front door.

"The men on the lawn?" I ask. "Have you checked on them?"

She nods gravely, and I know it's as I've feared. They're already gone. That will be another call Seer will have to make. Someone will need to

remove the bodies before the sun comes up and the blazing heat causes them to decompose. Death is a messy business.

I set about my task, getting the vital signs of each of the men in the hallway. Some of them stir as I work, but Evanesce has taken away their pain. Even if they wake up, they won't experience the full extent of their wounds. She stays with me as I work, helping me set up IV bags and wrap wounds. Thankfully, I find an exit wound on every single one. It would be much trickier if the bullets didn't exit. They would need surgery.

Another pair of heavier footsteps approaches and I look at Seer standing over us. He watches us as if he's not sure we're there. A stiff wind could knock him over. A glass is in his hand, but the brown liquid's nearly gone. I wonder how many he's had in the time it's taken me to arrive. I can't blame him for his demeanor. He's probably in shock. I make a mental note to check on him the second I've bandaged everyone.

I work swiftly, getting the men who aren't injured to help me move the ones who are. I get the unconscious men situated in the clinic before I return to the meeting room to find more men lounging on couches, all looking like they've come back from war. I guess in a way, they have. I can't believe Evanesce was here for this. Knix must be furious. I quickly scan the room to confirm he isn't one of the wounded.

Then I think about Pocus. He'll definitely have someone's head for his sister being in harm's way. Someone needs to tell him. I add it to my ever-growing list of responsibilities. A quick look at Seer confirms he's in no state to have that conversation. He looks like he's barely survived. I see no sign of physical damage, but now that his greatest nightmare has been realized, he seems broken somehow.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" comes a small, familiar voice.

I turn around and see Data standing there, clutching the hand of an unfamiliar woman. I'm shocked to see him there, unable to comprehend it. No one his age should have to experience what's happened.

"You sure can, Data," I tell him. "You can call Meredith and ask her to take you home."

"I don't want to go home," he tells me defiantly. "People are hurt. I should help them."

His stubbornness and determination remind me of many of our younger members. They feel it's their responsibility to fix every problem, never understanding that they have to pace themselves or burn out. But Data is

much too young to be here.

“I know, buddy,” I answer kindly, grabbing his shoulder and pulling him toward me in an embrace. He lets go of the woman’s hand and wraps his thin arms around me. When he pulls away, I’m sure he’s been crying. “I appreciate all your help, but I think the best thing for you would be to go home.”

He shakes his head profusely. I look up at the woman who stares at him sympathetically.

“Actually,” she says. “I can take him home. I was with him during the...” Her voice falters, clearly at a loss to describe what’s happened. “It might be best for me to explain to his parents what happened.”

I look down at Data, then back to her. I’m missing something here. As if sensing my confusion, she takes a step forward with her hand extended.

“I’m Francesca,” she tells me. I take her hand and shake it. “I’m a friend of Snake’s. Data’s been helping me with the security system while Snake’s... taking his break.”

She widens her eyes at me and indicates toward Data so I don’t correct her. The boy lets me go and moves toward her, clearly comfortable in her presence. It’s strange to see someone I know so well so comfortable with this stranger who’s popped up out of nowhere. Now is clearly not the time to prod for more information, but I struggle to understand who she is and what is going on.

“Right,” I say, lost for any other words. “Well, I have a lot of work to do, so thank you for offering to take him. I’m going to call Meredith and have her meet you at his house. They’ll want to talk to her, I’m sure.”

She nods and heads for the door, but I stop her.

“For his sake, you may want to go through the back.”

Data is too young to witness the carnage in the front yard. She nods and pushes him in front of her, leading him toward the kitchen. I sigh in relief, knowing one problem will be taken care of. But there’s still so many other things to do.

I get my injured friends patched up, grateful most of them have very minor injuries. It looks like the house took the brunt of the bullets, a fact that sobers us. A gunshot wound will heal, but the front façade’s damage will take a long time to patch up. We’ll be constantly reminded of this night for awhile but thankfully it’s nothing we can’t fix with time.

Around me, men move and work. They clean up shell casings and put

plywood in front of the windows that have been shot out. A couple of the men are sweeping up the glass from the porch and working on the bloodstains. Everyone moves in silence. They don't need to be asked or told what to do, jumping in where they see a problem. It's all hands on deck and everyone is willingly doing their part despite the shared trauma they've experienced.

Before I help, there's one task that's more important than the rest. I need to check on Seer. He sits alone now in the room where we have church, his glass empty in his hand, staring straight ahead. This room was miraculously untouched. He sits alone, his burden evident. He looks like he's aged ten years since I saw him a few hours ago.

"This was preventable," he says, not looking at me. "I could have stopped it. I should have."

I sink down next to him then take the empty glass from his hand and set it on a nearby table. Up close, I see how pale and exhausted he looks.

"You didn't know that would happen," I tell him calmly. "Seer, when was the last time you slept through the night?"

"It's been a few days. Since I had the vision. Maybe longer."

I can tell by his tone that he's empty. He has nothing left to give to anyone. He needs to rest and recover from this night more than anyone else. I reach into my coat and pull out a small bottle of sleeping pills, then thrust them into his empty hand.

"We've got it covered, Seer," I tell him. "I'll oversee the cleanup tonight. I was planning to be awake anyway. It's no problem. Go rest. Doctor's orders."

One side of his mouth quirks up in what could be construed as a smile, but I think he's too exhausted for any real emotion. I help him to his feet and watch as he slowly shuffles to the stairs, then disappears on the second landing. I'll check on him in a while to make sure he's actually sleeping. He won't last much longer if he keeps going at this pace.

There's one more task left that I've been agonizing about since the moment Seer called me. I have to inform the wives. I pull out my phone to call Tory, already dreading the conversation we'll have.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Hex

We're out looking for Snake well beyond sundown. Gator stays hot on whatever trail he's able to see. He ignores Buffy and me as he relentlessly follows a path we can't detect. Watching him reminds me of a bloodhound sniffing out a trail. It's almost comical, cartoonish. I love Gator, but he's definitely the oddest of the bunch.

Unfortunately, the trail runs cold about a mile out of town. Frankly, I thought the trail ran cold from the bayou, but that's why Gator is the best hunter of all of us. He's got a knack for this. But even he has his limits. Part of me thinks this is hopeless and we'll never find Snake tonight. The second we do find him, I'm slapping a tracker on him. Stupid bastard.

Another, larger part of me knows we have to find Snake as soon as possible. If we wait, if we falter, something horrible could happen to him. I don't know exactly what he's gotten mixed up in, but he's pissed off someone enough to hunt him down. He hardly leaves the house. It's not like when we get into bar fights. This was personal and coordinated. It's already been several hours. I shudder to think what's already been done to him.

I can't think like that now, though. We pull over to the side of the road and wait, hoping for any sign of what to do. Gator walks around in circles, carefully scanning the ground for anything. I can tell his search is coming up fruitless by the way he keeps shaking his head and muttering. Buffy, ever the soulful bartender, is writing down a list of everything he and Snake have talked about in the last month. He's hoping to find an indication of Snake's whereabouts in previous conversations.

I feel useless, unhelpful. I kick the dirt and groan. My dread for Snake rises with every passing second. We're sitting ducks here, waiting for

something that may not come. When my phone rings, I nearly jump out of my skin. I'm so lost in my thoughts that it takes me by surprise. I look down at the screen and see it's Meredith calling. That's odd. Apart from Charlie, she and I don't have much of a relationship. She's friends with Juliana, of course, but our relationship solely revolves around my daughter.

I ignore the call, thinking she's got impeccably horrible timing. My mind is already racing with worry for Snake, I don't have much room for anything else tonight. When she calls a second time, and then a third, I decide I probably should answer it. She's tenacious and she'll keep calling.

"Hi Meredith, it's not a great time right now," I say as a way of greeting.

"You'll want to hear this," she says cryptically. Then a sound of shuffling follows.

Another voice comes on the phone, one I recognize. He's one of Charlie's friends from the center, a teenage boy named Brody. I'm equally confused and intrigued.

"Do you have something to write with?" Brody asks me. "I know where Snake is."

A few minutes later, with Brody's information in hand, we're riding down the highway toward a shipyard. I feel bad for ignoring Meredith, not realizing she was doing something to help. Help Snake. Brody apparently has the gift of location. He was able to immediately pinpoint Snake's location. It's a handy trick. I hope we don't have to rely on him again in the future, but something tells me he'll be an invaluable help to us.

We park our bikes and walk the yard, looking for the storage container Brody described. It takes us several minutes to locate the beaten-up, faded blue container. I'm shocked that no one is around. We were ready for a fight, but no one is here. Just to be safe, I break away from the group and circle around, making sure there are no surprises. I scan the tops of nearby containers but don't see anyone ready to shoot at us.

It's eerie. The shipyard is ghostly quiet in the humid night. Well, that's an expression. It's quieter than that. As far as I can tell, no ghosts are around at all. They aren't big fans of water, in my experience.

When I'm satisfied that no one will ambush us, I give the order for Buffy and Gator to open the container. We duck down behind the doors, in case someone's guarding Snake on the inside. But no one's there. Just Snake, slumped in a chair by himself. He's unconscious from the looks of it. It's hard to see by the light of our phone flashlights, but the second we enter the

container, bright lights flicker on.

We stiffen and turn, ready to defend our friend and get out of here. But, again, we find no one. The lights seem to be motion-activated at the threshold. I look back to Snake to see him barely stirring. He's in a bad way. There's blood on his shirt. I see that it mostly comes from his mouth and nose. He's battered and bruised all over. The sight turns my stomach.

I'm glad, no one is there to stop us as we untie him. I try to rouse him. I shake him gently and he tries to open his left eye—the one that isn't swollen shut. When he sees me, he looks resigned and miserable. There doesn't seem to be any fight left in him, which is just as well. There isn't any more to be had. We have to get him out of here quickly and bring him home. He needs to be checked out by Graveyard.

“Snake, can you stand?” I whisper urgently to him. “Do you think you can hold on to one of us on a bike?”

He nods slowly, but his eye rolls back into his head. I'm not entirely sure he's processing anything I'm saying. The only thing I can do is help him to his feet and hope for the best. Buffy flanks my other side, and we help him limp out of the container and toward our bikes. Gator covers us just in case, but no one has magically appeared to stop us. Whoever took Snake is gone now after beating the shit out of him. They probably left him to die in that storage container.

I shudder to think what we would have done if Brody hadn't been able to help us. With no food and water in the state he's in, Snake wouldn't have lasted more than two days. If it took us longer to find him, we might be carrying out a corpse. The fury courses through my veins, propelling me forward. This is my second time today having to drag one of my brother's injured bodies out of a place.

I'm frustrated by this turn of events. Someone is clearly trying to hurt our family, trying to demonstrate a show of brute force. Bones getting shot earlier was no coincidence. This was obviously a very targeted, very personal beating. Snake can barely make it on his feet, and I'm worried about how we'll get him home.

On our way back to the bikes, we devise the best plan we can think of. Gator and Buffy secure Snake's weak body to me. He can hang on as we ride. I hate doing it to him, but we have to tie his hands around me so he doesn't lose his grip. None of us trust him to hold on in this state.

Gator positions his bike in front of mine. Buffy rides close behind. We

make the trek back home very slowly, ready to stop at any moment if it seems like Snake isn't able to hold on. Thankfully, he seems to have his wits about him to cling to me and not let go. I feel vulnerable out here. I'm worried his assailant will come after us. But no one comes, and soon, we're in familiar territory.

The whole way home, the thought nags at me. Besides trying to find him, it was so easy. Who would go through all the trouble of kidnapping Snake and holding him hostage in a shipyard only to let him go without a fight? They were careful, luring him out and covering their tracks meticulously. It was so meticulous and careful that I can't believe it was an accident that we were able to get him out as easily as we did. Somebody wanted this.

My fears are realized when we pull into our driveway and see the carnage there. My stomach turns as I see bodies strewn on the lawns. I'm unable to tell who they are in the dark. The three of us park and get Snake untied as quickly as possible so we can inspect the hellscape that's become our front yard. As I approach a body, a wave of relief washes over me. I realize I don't know him. A quick glance at his gear makes it clear where he's from. The blood-red bandana is an easy identifier.

I hear the front door open. Graveyard sticks his head out. His demeanor changes when he sees Snake, a mixture of relief and concern on his features.

"Leave them there," he tells us, regarding the bodies. "They're next on the list. Get Snake inside now."

We do as we're told, half dragging him up the porch stairs and into the foyer. A strong smell of bleach lingers and I know blood must have been shed. The floors of the foyer are absolutely spotless.

"There isn't room in the clinic," Graveyard says in a low, careful voice. "Get him to his room. I'll be there as soon as I can."

It takes all three of us to carefully navigate up the stairs and to Snake's room. He's more lucid now, muttering under his breath. I'm too focused on getting him upstairs to listen to what he's saying. When we finally reach his room, Buffy and I carefully lower him to the bed.

"It's all right now," I tell him. "You're safe, Snake. Graveyard's here, you're going to be okay."

"My fault," he mutters back. "This is all my fault."

With that, he loses consciousness, as if he was holding on long enough to get back into his own bed. He needed to feel safe before he could let himself go. I tell Buffy and Snake to go ahead so they can see what's happening

downstairs. I'm itching to have a look myself, but I won't leave Snake alone until I know that he's okay. When Graveyard comes in and takes his vital signs, I feel the freedom to roam the house.

On the inside, there isn't much to see. We've clearly missed the majority of the cleanup. The only indication that anything is out of the ordinary is the strong smell of bleach that burns my eyes. A few windows are boarded up as well. Outside, it's a totally different story. While the porch is also immaculately clean, bleach can't take away the dozens of bullet holes covering the front of the house.

The sight turns my stomach. I know immediately why it was so easy for us to rescue Snake. No one was there to guard him because they were all here, attacking our home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Pocus

My ears immediately perk up when I hear Tory answer her phone and address Graveyard. He wouldn't be calling her if something weren't wrong with Seer. My mind races with the possibilities, images of Seer in the worst possible scenarios flashing before my brain. I try to take a deep breath and steady myself. She'll tell me when she's ready.

I look around the small house we've rented. I try to find something to focus on so it's not obvious that I'm eavesdropping. Tory's voice is low and calm, but when I glance at her, her body is full of tension and frustration. Her words to Graveyard are vague and tell me nothing.

"I understand," she says.

"I'm glad to hear it."

"I'll tell him."

I hope I'm the *him* in that sentence. My curiosity is so strong that I can barely stay seated. It takes every ounce of self-control not to pop up and grab the phone out of her hand. But there's a reason Graveyard didn't call me. If something bad has happened to Seer, she needs to be the first one to know.

I'm glad I insisted that we stick close to town. We found a little house in the middle of nowhere, halfway between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. We made sure to find a place with a pool for the kids. They think we're on vacation. All the kids except Charlie, of course. She's too perceptive to be deceived. She's been mirroring my hypervigilance, always listening to conversations when she thinks no one notices.

The women have tried to make this as fun as possible, to keep up the ruse. Abigail has, naturally, been the lynchpin of it all, planning fun activities for the kids throughout the day to keep them entertained and distracted. She and

Juliana could open a daycare for how well they've kept the kids busy. The kids have no idea how afraid on edge their parents are feeling.

Charlie's participated and kept up a good façade for them, but I've already seen it crack several times today. It's like she senses something is wrong. Perhaps it's part of her gift. Her powers seem much stronger than when she stayed at my house nearly two years ago. She's got a look in her eyes that is wise beyond her years.

I look up now and see that she's standing in the doorway of the kitchen, listening intently to Tory's conversation. When Tory hangs up and turns toward us, Charlie disappears down the hallway. I hear the sound of her door closing. But Tory doesn't notice, too distracted by whatever news she's received. The need to know is physically painful. I literally bite my tongue to stop myself from asking her.

"That was Graveyard," she says, and the anticipation could choke me. "He called to say that there's been an incident at the house."

Her voice is calm, but her demeanor betrays the shock she feels. She doesn't have to say a word. I see on her face how bad it is. I can no longer stay seated, springing to my feet and heading toward the door.

"Pocus." Her voice is steely and forceful. "Sit back down. You need to know what you're walking into."

I do as I'm told, not wanting to upset her further. I hear another door close somewhere in the house. A moment later, Abigail approaches. It's as if she knew I needed her, knew that whatever Tory says next will shatter my world.

"There's been an attack," Tory says, not breaking her calm. "The Cuatros Locos came to the house and began shooting. From what Graveyard told me, there's been a lot of injuries, but no casualties on our side."

"On our side?" Abigail asks, her tension palpable. "You're telling me that there were casualties."

Tory nods quickly. A single tear rolls down her cheek. She swipes at it quickly.

"Seven dead," she says in a detached, dispassionate voice. "All on their side."

"Serves them right," I mutter, garnering me glares from both women.

"Also, Snake was taken, but he's home now. He's badly beaten, but he's alive. And Bones was shot today, but he's also fine."

"Jesus fucking Christ," I groan. "This isn't happening. Is there anything

else, Tory, or can I go?"

Abigail grabs my hand and squeezes it hard, indicating I'm not leaving until she gives me the say-so.

"Graveyard said that he's made Seer rest," Tory says, her face growing paler. "He's really out of it. Otherwise, there's nothing else."

I nod and look at Abigail, who's still squeezing my hand. I see the resignation in her eyes. She'll let me go. But I don't move until she says the word.

"I promise I'll be safe," I tell her. "It sounds like the danger is past."

"Or maybe that's what they want you to think," she whispers hoarsely. "This could be a trick to lure the rest of you out and lower your defenses."

"If that's true, they'll need help." I kiss her forehead. "And if Seer is out of commission, I need to be there and help him lead. He needs me."

She nods weakly, a sign that she's releasing me to go. I'm back headed toward the door when another, smaller voice calls after me.

"I want to come with you."

We all turn to see Charlie, back in the room and looking determined. She has her backpack over her shoulder and she looks ready for a fight. I glance at Tory and Abigail, who are both assessing her with shock. She's just turned twelve and she's much too young to be around this violence. But who will be the one to disappoint her? The women turn to me. It will have to be my job.

I walk over to Charlie and take a knee in front of her so we're at eye level. Up close, her desire to fight is stronger. That light in her eyes won't be extinguished, even if I tell her no.

"Charlie, sweetie, I need you to stay here and help keep the little ones safe."

"No," she says, shaking her head hard. "My dad is out there and he might need me. And if anyone else is really hurt, I can help. You know I can, you've seen what I can do!"

She's emotional, but she's thought this out. I look at Tory and shrug, but she rolls her eyes at me and shakes her head. She steps forward and puts her hand on Charlie's shoulder.

"We all know you're strong enough, Charlie," she says gently. "You have amazing powers that could be helpful in this situation. But Graveyard told me that your dad is totally fine. He wasn't there when it happened."

Charlie deflates. I see that her desire has immediately waned now that she knows Hex isn't in any immediate danger.

“Plus, Graveyard says all the men will be just fine. If it were more desperate, we would tell you, but your skills are much more valuable here right now.”

“As a babysitter,” Charlie mutters, and I can’t help but laugh.

In Charlie, I see a lot of my own frustration. I’ve been sidelined recently too, and I hate it. If it were up to me, I would have already caved, so I’m glad Tory and Abigail are here to help sway her decision.

“Charlie, one day you’re going to be a grown-up, and there won’t be a choice for you,” I tell her. “You’re always going to have to run into danger, even if you don’t want to. Just this once, enjoy being a kid. Enjoy not having the responsibilities. And I promise you that if it gets bad and I need your help, I’ll come right back and get you.”

Abigail shoots me a warning look, but I know what I’m doing. Because we aren’t going to need Charlie. This is the best way I can convince her to stay.

“Do you pinky promise?” she asks, betraying her youthful innocence. She holds out her pinky to me, and I wrap my own around it firmly. Satisfied, she turns and sulks back toward her room.

“I should probably go before she changes her mind,” I tell the women, blowing out a breath.

Abigail throws her arms around me, squeezing tightly. I know she’s worried. I feel it coming off of her, but I promise her that I’ll stay safe. No stupid, self-sacrificial actions this time. I’m the substitute, not the leader. It’s not my job to put myself in harm’s way for the good of the group. Unfortunately, she seems to think that’s exactly what I’ll do. I kiss her quickly on the lips and turn to go.

The drive back to the house is quiet. It would take less than an hour under normal circumstances, but I’m speeding fast. I keep my eye on the police radar Snake installed for me. Thankfully, it’s all clear. I make it to the clubhouse in record time.

When I pull in, I’m assaulted with the smell of blood. I can’t see any, but I can tell by the look of the house that a lot must have been shed. As I approach the front door, rage shoots through me at the sight of our home. The evidence of the fight is everywhere, in bullet holes and broken wood fragments. It looks like the men have done a thorough job of cleaning up, but the aftermath is evident.

I step into the house and feel the weight of the tension. It hits me from

every corner of the house. This fight took a lot from the men, I can tell from the atmosphere. Their exhaustion is nearly debilitating. I walk from room to room downstairs looking for anyone, but they seem to have all retreated for the night, seeking solace for the moment. I hear light footsteps coming down the stairs. I look up to see my sister standing there, staring at me expectantly.

“About time you showed up,” she says with a sarcastic smile.

She runs into my arms, hugging me tightly and takes a step back. I’d begged her to come with us when we left, but she told me she was done running. I just had to learn to deal with it. My little sister is plenty old enough to take care of herself, but I may never stop worrying about her. It’s my right after everything we’ve gone through together.

“Are you okay, Coco?” I ask her, though I can see that she’s in good spirits. She seems to have enjoyed being part of the excitement.

“I’m fine,” she tells me with a smile. “But you should really check on Snake. He wasn’t here for the fight, but he got the worst of it.”

I nod and pass her, heading up the stairs toward his room. I’m shocked when I open the door and see a woman sitting on his bed, rubbing his hair. It’s an incredibly sweet, intimate moment, and I feel intrusive. But I’m also completely floored. I’ve never seen Snake with any woman, let alone have one in his bedroom.

“Pocus,” Snake calls out hoarsely from the bed. “I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

As I approach him, I immediately see what my sister meant. One eye is completely swollen shut. The rest of his face is a kaleidoscope of color. He’s covered in bruises, and his lip is swollen as well.

“What are you apologizing to me for?” I come to stand next to him. “You’re the one who looks like shit.”

“Don’t start,” Snake says weakly, but his words are directed toward the woman, not to me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Snake

I take a deep breath, not remotely sure how to begin. I served Pocus for over a decade when he was Prez. My loyalty to him might run deeper than any bond I've ever had, even with Francesca. I can't imagine the disappointment and anger he'll feel when I tell him the truth. Everything that's happened over these last few days is my fault. His family is in danger because of me. The whole club is in danger because of me.

Pocus stares at me curiously, waiting for me to speak, and I decide the best thing I can do is just at the beginning.

"I met Francesca when I was ten," I say, pointing toward the woman who's been by my side since I woke up an hour ago. I must look horrible because she's been incredibly kind to me the whole time.

"Okay," Pocus says slowly. He looks around and grabs the chair from my desk, pulling it closer to the bed and sitting down. He can tell this will be a long story. He's settling in for it.

"My mom had just died, and I was sent to live with a foster family. They had a lot of kids already, but Francesca was the only one who was ever nice to me. She taught me everything I know about computers."

Francesca blushes and bows her head, never letting go of my hand. She squeezes gently, and I'm transported back to that time. I think about walking through those doors, of how terrified I was. Of her steady, reassuring gaze, a silent gesture that it would be okay.

"Our foster parents were horrible people," I say, earning a scoff from Pocus. He looks at me as if to say, "whose weren't?" I go on.

"Our home was a revolving door, kids always coming in and out. But Francesca and I were smart enough to make ourselves valuable to the family.

We didn't love being with them, but we knew from others that there were much worse homes to be in."

"I can attest to that," Pocus says with a small smile.

He's trying to connect with me, I know. To make this all okay. The worst is yet to come, and I'm not sure if he'll be so forgiving when he knows what hell I've brought down on my brothers.

"By the time we were fifteen, though, enough was enough. We couldn't take it anymore, so we decided to run away. We knew enough to make it on our own, and soon, we'd started a small business. Francesca looked a lot older, and she was pretty, so a lot of creeps would latch on to her. Once we had their business, we'd steal from them."

"We called it Snake Oil," she interjects. "It was a computer virus we built together. We packaged it as malware protection, but it was specifically created to get into the bank accounts of our extremely wealthy clients."

"I'm impressed," Pocus says, his eyebrows raised. "We could have used some of that ourselves back in the day. Remember when we almost lost the house to Anderson Grey?"

"I couldn't have," I tell him, my voice firm. "That's the bad part of the story."

"You don't owe him anything," Francesca tells me, her voice defensive. "None of this is your fault, Sammy. You don't have to tell him this."

I try to decipher the look on her face, but as always, I can't understand what's wrong. I thought we'd come to an understanding about this, so I can't comprehend why she doesn't want me to tell Pocus. He's watching us carefully, trying to understand our dynamic. He can feel our emotions. That's a skill I'd kill to have right now.

"Francesca," he says, his voice smooth. "I can tell that you really care about Snake. I can also tell that you're terrified. We can help you. We can protect you. It's what we do."

"I didn't come here to be protected," she says, always ready for a fight. "I came to warn Sammy that we were in danger. Then your stupid security system was hacked. Well, it's fixed now, so I'm taking my friend as soon as he's well enough to go, and we're getting the hell out of here."

I'm shocked by her words. Hell, I'm shocked by Pocus's. I didn't think there was any part of her that still cared about me. Her motives have certainly changed since she arrived. She told me she'd come to warn me, but now she wants to run away with me. My kidnapping must have terrified her.

“It won’t help,” I tell her, remembering Ronan’s words. “Francesca, he’s here. He told me he wants to take everything away from me. If we leave, he’ll burn this place down to the ground. It will be my fault. I can’t go.”

She sighs heavily and looks at me with determination in her eyes. No matter how you spin it, we’re beaten. The least we can do is let the rest of the club know so they can help us. I try to convey this to her, but she crosses her arms and shuts down, turning toward the window and pretending she’s not listening.

Pocus watches her movements curiously. I know he wants to ask her more, but he returns his attention to me so I can finish my story.

“We were living a pretty good life,” I tell him. “We’d gone from stealing enough to eat to stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars at a time. We’d defrauded a dozen or so men and we felt unstoppable. We were just eighteen, dumb kids who had no real idea what we were doing. No clue what impact we were having in society.

“There was this billionaire in the city. His name was Ronan Burke, and he was a really scary guy. A lot like Anderson, actually. But we had no idea what he was capable of. We only saw that he was richer than God. We were able to set up a meeting with his tech guys, and they liked our product.”

I look at Francesca, She’s visibly stiffened. She’s listening intently and her breathing has gotten shallower.

“We didn’t know then what a bad guy he was. He had deep ties with the Irish Mafia. He was a slumlord and the head of a weapons syndicate. He hurt a lot of people. Killed families, that sort of thing.”

“You didn’t know,” Pocus repeats, sensing our trepidation in discussing this.

“No,” I agree. “We had no idea what kind of man he was when we targeted him. But once we got access to his database, it became clear to us. And we had this bright idea that we could kill two birds with one stone. We could take his money and get away Scot-free. We had all the leverage we needed to get him put in jail for a very long time.”

“I’m impressed,” Pocus says with a small smile, leaning back in his chair. “When I was eighteen, I’d just joined the Ruthless Kings. I was a mouthy punk who had to be told how to get in line.”

Francesca scoffs again. I lay my head back against my pillow, drowning in frustration. I know she hates this world, but this is my home. She doesn’t understand it, doesn’t want to accept it, but these are the people who saved

me when I was sure my life was over. Because of Pocus, I found a new home, a safe place where I knew Ronan couldn't touch me. Or I thought he couldn't. I was obviously wrong about that too.

"Well, like I said, there was a lot we didn't know," I tell him.

"How much money did you steal from him?" Pocus asks curiously.

"Yeah, Snake," Francesca says, putting a nasty emphasis on my nickname. It's the first time I've heard her use it, and I instantly miss being called Sammy. "How much did you steal?"

"Half a billion dollars," I say quietly.

Pocus whistles lowly and Francesca fumes.

"I had no idea I was in the presence of such a wealthy man," Pocus says with a shit-eating grin. "Why have you been slumming it with us all these years?"

Francesca snaps her attention back to me. I'm sure she's wondering the same. She doesn't know this next part of the story. I hesitate, but take a deep breath to ready myself for the bomb that's about to drop.

"I had to give it back," I say simply, not sure I have adequate words to go on.

"You what?" Francesca roars. Her voice clangs through my head like a giant bell.

"He sent his men after me." I direct my words more toward Francesca than Pocus. It's time she finally hears the truth. "He knew it was us. He threatened to kill you if I didn't give him the money back. And more."

"How much more?" Pocus asks, clearly picking up on the tension between Francesca and me.

"Millions more. It was everything we'd stolen over the last three years. Every penny."

Francesca looks at me with shock, and at last, she understands. Finally realizes. This wasn't the way I imagined telling her, but the cat is out of the bag. There's no going back now.

"You gave the guy his money back," Pocus says with a shrug. "Why would he want to hurt you?"

"Because he spent fifteen years in jail," Francesca answers, looking at me as she says it. "We got him put away for his crimes. He hates us for what we did to him."

"He kidnapped me, Pocus," I tell my friend. "He all but told me that he wants to destroy the MC. After what happened tonight, I think he's just

getting started.”

“Graveyard said it was the Cuatros Locos,” Pocus tells me, shaking his head. “You really think this guy has gotten involved with one of our biggest rivals to stick it to you? Come on, Snake, the world doesn’t revolve around you. They’ve hated us for years.”

“Don’t underestimate him, Pocus,” I tell him seriously. “He’s a man on a mission to destroy me, to destroy everything I love. After I gave him back the money, I ran away. I came to New Orleans to start a new life and find a place where I could feel safe. He wants to take that away and he’s resourceful.”

“I still don’t think it’s your fault, Snake,” Pocus says with a determined gleam in his eye. “Do you know how many people we’ve pissed off? You’ve been here for fifteen years. You’ve been front row, center for a lot of it. If this guy is after you and Francesca, he’ll have to do a lot more than shoot up our house.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” I tell him gravely.

I feel every inch of pain Ronan inflicted upon me earlier. He’s left his mark on me physically, but he isn’t anywhere close to done. No one is going to be safe until we neutralize this threat. Francesca wants to run, but it’s far too late for that. I can’t run knowing that my brothers will be in danger. I came to them for protection, I didn’t come to leave a steaming pile of dogshit at their door and let them deal with the mess.

“No matter what, Pocus, I’ll find a way to put an end to this.”

“I know you will,” he tells me kindly. “In fifteen years, you’ve never given me a reason to doubt you, Snake. You’re one of the best men I have. You clean up your mess, but know that we have your back. Always.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Francesca



Pocus isn't like what I expected. I'd obsessed over him for years. When Sammy ran away to this place, I found out everything I could about him. At the time, he was the youngest leader the Ruthless Kings had ever had. He was said to lead with an iron fist. He has severe, intimidating features. Apart from that, I find him to be much kinder and more understanding than I would have expected.

Pocus leaves us alone with the reassurance that he's on our side. It's strange how I immediately trust him. I see the draw. I've clashed with Seer from the start, and I truly don't like the way he speaks to Sammy. But Pocus has the air of a leader. Even if he's not the president of this club anymore, he maintains the respect of the men.

But with him gone and just me and Sammy alone with the information he's shared, I can't stop my mind from reeling. Sammy's shared a lot with Pocus that I never knew. I'm angry that I didn't know, but part of me is also relieved. He didn't betray me. He protected me.

I've hated him for fifteen years because he ran away with our money and left me with nothing, not even an explanation. Now I get it. He was put in a bad situation and he had to make the decision he thought was best. I think about what he told Pocus, how he emphasized our youth. I can't help but feel how awfully young nineteen was. I knew nothing about the world. I thought I knew everything. I thought I was invincible. Still, the worst thing that ever happened to me up to that point was having my heart destroyed by the only person I loved.

But he did it to protect me. Everything I know about the world is suddenly thrown into sharp focus. I realize I knew nothing at all. Everything

I've accused him of—every ounce of hate I've felt toward him since he left me—was false. My feelings were real and valid at the time, but they were based on a lie. I just didn't know it all. He didn't tell me. I suppose I could be angry at him for that, but I'm tired of being angry. After tonight, I want it all to be over.

“Why didn't you tell me?” My quiet voice hangs in the air.

“Would it have made a difference?” he responds, not looking at me.

“At the time, maybe. But, no, probably not when I showed up. I was too angry and afraid to hear anything that didn't fit the narrative I've been telling myself for fifteen years.”

He's lying down, looking up at the ceiling. He must be in a lot of pain right now, and I feel awful about that. Because if it weren't for me, he never would have stolen from Ronan. If it weren't for me, we wouldn't be in this position. I got us in a shitty situation, and he did what he thought was best to get us out of it. Ronan holds a grudge after all these years, but that isn't Sammy's fault. He tried to protect me.

I lie down next to him and rest my hands on my stomach. I copy his position, staring up at the ceiling and focusing on the pristine white paint as I try to collect my thoughts. I need to tell him so much, starting with my part in it all. When I open my mouth, a much more personal revelation comes out.

“I thought you left because I wasn't good enough for you,” I say in the dark. “You were my only family, and then you were gone. And I thought, ‘Great, there goes another one.’”

He turns his head to look at me, I meet his gaze. In his eyes, I see pain and grief that I can't begin to comprehend. He reaches out his hand on the bed and intertwines his fingers with mine.

“I didn't want to leave you, Chessy. You have to believe that. I was stupid, and I was afraid. He threatened to kill you if I didn't give the money back, so I did. But then I worried that he would come after me. So I ran.”

I nod, knowing this probably made a lot of sense to his young brain at the time. I probably would have done the same thing.

“You never worried that he would go against his word and kill me anyway?” I wonder aloud.

“Of course, I did,” he whispers to the darkness. “I worried about that all the time. But you were the brave one, the resourceful one. You knew how to take care of yourself. I was the one who was always dragging you down. I guess I thought that without me as a burden, you could get away faster, hide

better.”

“You were never a burden.” Tears spring to my eyes. “I loved you, Sammy. I loved you more than anyone in this entire world.”

The words sit heavy between us. I feel like I’m holding my breath. I’ve never admitted this out loud, never allowed myself to indulge in the feeling of releasing these words from my mind. Loving him in secret was fine. It was safe. But admitting my feelings out loud is terrifying. Even if I’ve said it in the past tense, lying next to him now with that admission has the potential to ruin everything.

“I loved you too, Chessy,” he says back. I feel like I’ll shatter. “It’s why I had to leave. I loved you too much to let you be dragged down.”

Hot tears roll down my cheeks and I have to keep myself from sobbing. I use my free hand to rub my face, and he catches the movement. He looks at me with so much tenderness and kindness, I feel like I’m nineteen again. All we ever had were these looks and these stolen moments. We were both too afraid to be honest and live in our truth. I’m done being afraid.

I turn toward him and inch myself ever so slightly closer. He’s already there, closing the space between us. He puts his hand on my cheek, pulling me closer to him. Then his lips are on mine. I kiss him gently, aware of the pain he’s been through tonight. His lip is slightly swollen. I taste the saltiness of his blood as I dart my tongue into his mouth. I pull away slightly, worried I’ll hurt him, but he moves me on top of him, his hands pinning me in place.

Every ounce of my teenage hormones rushes through my body. I can’t believe this is actually happening. When I showed up at this house a few days ago, I never would have believed that we’d end up in this position, finally laying our feelings bare for one another. Then again, something about it feels so inevitable. We were always a powder keg ready to explode. We needed something to light the match, and I’d say Ronan has done that in spades.

I slip my fingers under Sammy’s shirt, feeling his tight muscles underneath. I’m surprised how hard his abs are, how hard all his muscles are. He was always skinny, but never remotely toned. We spent most of our time hunched in front of computers. There was no time for working out. I always imagined what it may feel like to be in this exact position with him, but back then, the fantasy was of a much skinnier, softer body.

My insecurities pop into my head, but we’re too far for me to give them any serious consideration now. We’re quickly reaching a point of no return, though I think we probably passed it the moment our lips touched. A sense of

urgency strikes, the unspoken feeling that, with Ronan after us, this may be our one and only chance to experience each other. And I want to experience him, every single inch.

He tug my shirt up over my head, and gingerly pulls himself into a sitting position. He quickly discards my top and my bra, almost expertly. I try not to imagine the other women he must have been with to master that move. It doesn't matter now. All that matters is the way he's looking at me in awe, as if he's never seen anyone so beautiful in his life. I feel beautiful under his gaze, invincible. I kiss him hard as his fingers explore and his hands grope. He sets my body on fire with his touches.

I trail my hands down to his jeans, and I slip my hand inside, feeling the hardness of his girth. He briefly stops his exploration of my nipples so he can wriggle out of his jeans completely. He winces at the effort, but the lust in his eyes shows me that he's fueled by desire. Despite his injuries, he wants this with every fiber of his being. So do I, for that matter.

I miss his hands immediately, but once he's free, I focus on touching him. My fingers trail down his long, full shaft, and I need him now. I can't waste any more time. I have to know what he feels like inside of me.

I always imagined the two of us would fit together like puzzle pieces. I don't want to waste one more second not knowing. I quickly pull down my jeans, kicking at them furiously to get them out of our way. I want nothing between us now. No clothes, no secrets, no past mistakes. All we have now is this moment where I'm dripping wet, panting for him.

I reach down to gently guide him to my entrance. This is it. There's no going back from this moment. I straddle him fully, giving him easy access. His touch is tentative at first, moving his fingers down so he can open me up and make me ready for him. He doesn't know how ready I am, how ready I've been for so long. When he finally slides inside of me, every muscle in my body feels weak. The feeling is so good, so perfect.

My imagination never did him an ounce of justice. He's larger than I expected him to be, but we are no less pieces of a puzzle that were meant to find each other. With him inside me, I feel a sense of fullness, of wholeness, that I never thought I would experience again. We're so much closer than we ever were before. Literally.

I lower myself on top of him, pulling him in until I'm sure I can't take more. Yet I want more. I want to open up my heart and pull him in until there's nothing left of either of us but a single heartbeat. I want to roam every

part of his body and discover what makes him come undone. I want, I want, I want.

I cry out in pleasure as I move slowly and carefully on top of him, so gentle and careful, yet also intentional. I move and stretch myself into him so I can feel every delicious sensation. I want to experience every ounce of pleasure his body can provide me. I slide my fingers down between us so I can get more friction, but he moves them away, touching me expertly, softly, then harder and faster.

He knows what I need without me saying a word. He knows how badly I need to fall apart. My breathing grows ragged. I flail wildly as he urges me closer to the edge. I squeeze my eyes shut, seeing nothing but a white light as the sensation crashes over my body. It leaves me breathless. I feel him come apart inside of me, and I can't stop my moans as my orgasm overtakes me. Nothing is left in the entire world except the two of us. We've decimated everything, including each other.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Snake

Francesca's rhythmic breathing is hypnotic. I can't believe I've wasted so much time getting to this point. All this time I could have had her beside me, bringing me endless pleasure and giving it back to her in spades. Our lives would have gone so much differently if we had been honest with each other from the start.

There's no going back now, though, and that's what I can't get past. We made the decisions we made and now a lot of people I love are in danger. I can spend the rest of my life playing the what-if game. What if I'd never been dropped off at the Menges home, what if I'd never met Francesca? What if we never decided to take down Ronan? What if I hadn't decided to leave her? What if I'd never met the Ruthless Kings?

These scenarios keep looping in my brain, telling me that if I'd made one decision differently, we wouldn't be in this position. But I did make those decisions. So did she. We are a product of our choices. There's no denying that. I see Ronan's deathly calm face in my mind, and I know that he's only just begun. This attack on the house was his way of showing his force. He can do so much worse. He can destroy everything,

Despite my exhaustion, it keeps me awake. It's the unknown, the feeling that he can attack at any time. He has all the power in this situation, and we both know it. Even now, he's probably awake in some part of town plotting his next move against us. The Cuatros Locos may have suffered tremendous loss tonight, but I doubt they're his only resource. It's like Pocus said, we've pissed a lot of people off. All Ronan has to do is find them, and he could amass a whole army against us.

His resources are unlimited. He has money, he has power, and he has

time. Time with us sitting on our hands, clueless of what's coming for us. Time that could take away more of my friends. Ronan wants to destroy me. He knows he can achieve that by razing my home to the ground. I can't let him do that.

I can do only one thing to help my friends. I can't run. I can't fight. I have to surrender. It could all go to shit anyway, but I have to try to turn myself into him and let him do whatever he wants with me in exchange for letting the MC go. I turn this over and over in my head. It's the only solution I can see. If he wants to kill me, I'll let him. If he wants to destroy me, I'll let him. But I can't let him hurt anyone else. They can't suffer for my youthful indiscretions.

Francesca stirs next to me. I hear her breathing become more shallow. She turns toward me, her eyes slowly flickering open. When she sees me watching her, she smiles slowly. I lean down to place a chaste kiss on her lips, and she becomes more alert. Her hand wraps around my head and she holds me to her, wanting to give me more access to her mouth.

I would love to give in to this and be fully consumed by her again, but I have to tell her what I'm thinking. I won't ask her to walk into battle with me, but I have to let her know that I'm going either way. If she wants to keep running, if she wants to find another place to hide, I'll understand. I could never blame her or begrudge her that choice. But as for me, there's only one way forward.

"What's wrong?" she whispers against my lips as I pull away from her. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No," I tell her. "Of course not. I've been doing a lot of thinking."

She sits up and stretches, rolling her eyes at me as she does. "Well, that's never a good thing, is it? What have you been thinking about?"

"I can't let my friends die because of me." There's no reason to beat around the bush. "What happened was my fault, and I have to own up to that. Ronan wants me, so I'm going to let him have me."

She sighs heavily and nods. She was expecting this, I know. She doesn't try to put up a fight or tell me that I'm being stupid. Self-preservation went out the window the moment my home was threatened.

"Chessy, we fucked up. There's no way around it. We were young and dumb, but it's time to face it. I'm not asking you to come with me, but I have to face him. I have to put an end to this."

Her eyes flick up to mine, and a look of disappointment crosses her face.

I think she's upset with me until she speaks.

"How could you possibly think I would let you go alone after this?" she asks, gesturing to our naked bodies. "I don't love you in the past tense, Sammy. I love you now. And I'm going with you, whether you like it or not."

"Okay," I whisper, leaning down to kiss her lips.

"Okay," she agrees, opening her mouth to pull me in.

We lie there for a long time, lazily kissing and enjoying each other for as long as we possibly can. This could be the last time we ever touch, the last time we get to show each other our love. I don't expect Ronan to be merciful. That thought has never occurred. I know what this means. When I surrender, I'm probably going to die.

"He'll kill us," I say, pulling away once more. "Are you sure you're ready to die? You could get away, Chessy. I told you, you're the clever one. You have a chance."

"How could you possibly think I would leave you?" she asks softly, tracing her hand over my face. "I'm with you 'til the bitter end."

Her eyes grow dark, and I can't decipher the look on her face. She pushes me away and sits up, moving to the edge of the bed and wrapping her arms around herself. I want to go to her, to make her feel better, but I don't know what's wrong. I don't know if I've earned the right. I haven't been a safe space for her in a long time. I can't say for sure that I am now just because we had sex.

"Sammy, there's something I need to tell you," she says quietly, and I can hear the tears in her voice. "You were so honest about what happened. I need you to know that none of this was ever your fault. This was all on me."

"What are you talking about, Chessy?" My curiosity gets the best of me.

"If we are going to die, you need to know exactly why. Even if you hate me, even if you die hating me, I need you to know."

Now I move toward her and wrap my arm around her. I pull her against me so her back is flush with my chest. She relaxes into my embrace, and I kiss the top of her head, waiting with bated breath for whatever she thinks is so terrible.

"I didn't target Ronan because of his wealth," she says slowly. "I wouldn't have cared if he was the poorest man in the world. He killed my family, and I needed to make him suffer. The money was nice, but when I realized I had the power to take his life away, I jumped for it. I sent him to prison to punish him for what he did, and now he's punishing us."

She stiffens against me, waiting for my reaction, but I don't let go of her. It is unexpected to hear, but what can it possibly change? I can't go back and change the past, so her motivations don't matter. Either way, we've ended up here. Either way, we have to face the consequences.

"How did you find out that he killed your family?" I ask, clearly taking her by surprise.

She turns to look at me with an expression of concern, as if I've asked her something absurd.

"It took a long time," she breathes. "I spent years going through DCF documents and trying to find anything about my parents. Once I found out they'd been murdered, I tried to access the police records, but they were sealed. Believe it or not, I did have some limitations back then. When I managed to get into the files, I saw. And I wanted to punish him. I wanted to take away the life he took away from me."

I nod, holding her closer. I think back to the many enemies the MC has made out of revenge. Anderson Grey tried to destroy us multiple times, and he nearly succeeded. Seer still struggles with his visions because of what his brother did to him. The Cuatros Locos nearly killed my friends, not only because of Ronan's influence, but because they've hated us for years. There have been so many times where we nearly lost everything, all because someone wanted payback.

But beautiful things happened too. Abigail and Pocus met. Seer and Tory met. Meredith was able to open her youth center after her ex tried to destroy her. So much ugliness came in our past, but so much beauty too. Our worst mistakes don't define who we are, they only open the door for better choices to be made.

I lost fifteen years with the woman I love because of the choices we both made. I have to think that if Ronan hadn't killed Francesca's family, we would have targeted him eventually. We got greedy after a while. We would have worked our way up to him. It may have played out exactly how it did.

And here now, holding Francesca in my arms, I feel like there's still hope. Even if we don't make it through this, I hope that my friends will be okay. She and I have finally admitted our feelings for each other. I don't know if we ever would have done that without a huge push. I'm not saying I'm grateful to Ronan. I wouldn't take it that far. But I have to believe that everything happens for a reason, even this.

"I don't blame you," I tell her honestly. "I would have done the same

thing. If there was someone to blame for taking my mom away, I would have stopped at nothing. I don't blame you, Francesca."

"I blame me," she sobs weakly. "Because if I hadn't done it, I wouldn't have lost you, Sammy. And we wouldn't be walking into certain death. Are you really willing to die for my massive fuck-up?"

I lift her chin and look her in the eye. "I love you, Francesca. I have since I was ten years old. So, yes, I'm willing to die for you. But maybe we can negotiate. Maybe we can talk him down. Either way, we have to face him and fix this mess before anyone else gets hurt."

She nods and rests her head against my shoulder, breathing in deeply. In this quiet moment, with just the two of us, I can almost believe we still have a chance. With her in my arms, I feel invincible. Even facing certain death, I refuse to lose hope.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Snake

The weight of what we're about to do hits us as we get ready to meet our certain ends. To spend so much time running from Ronan only to give ourselves up willingly seems like a tragic fate. But we agree it's what we have to do if we can keep the MC safe. It's the only thing we can do.

We've spent fifteen years messing everything up. She lied about why she wanted to take Ronan down. I ran away from her after I gave him everything we had. We both made mistakes that led us here, but we can't go back in time to fix them. Literally the only thing we can do now is hope that Ronan is merciful to our family. I feel fairly confident that Francesca does view them as family now. After what we've all been through, an unbreakable bond has been forged.

I look at her now, her quiet strength radiating off of her. After all the running she's done, I'm surprised she's agreed to it. She could leave me to walk into hell by myself, but she's not. She's walking with me hand in hand, keeping her head held high.

After we agreed to face Ronan, I had to get some things in order. If this really is the end, I at least needed to say goodbye to my brothers.

I sat down and wrote a long letter to Seer, explaining everything, almost exactly as I told Pocus. I told him that I didn't deserve any of the kindness he's given me, but I appreciated it nonetheless.

***Y**our friendship and leadership have meant everything to me over the last few years. I know the Ruthless Kings are in good hands with you, and I*

know that you are going to keep leading them toward bigger and better things.

I'm so sorry for what I've done to bring danger to our home. I promise you I'm going to fix it. This is my mess, not yours, so please put your mind at ease. You don't have to do everything all the time. There are plenty of people who are willing to help share the burden. This is on us, we started this and now we are going to fix it.

I felt a great surge of sadness as I wrote, knowing these might be the last words I ever say to him. He'd put so much faith and trust in me throughout the years, and I don't want to die thinking he did it in vain.

Then I wrote a note to Meredith. After Francesca told me about Data and his gift, I knew he was the perfect person to help with the MC's tech issues once I'm gone. Sure, he's young now, but in a few years, he may want to join all on his own. In the meantime, they'll need help with even the most basic things. I love my friends, but they're hopeless with technology.

I ask Meredith to keep an eye on him as well. It isn't my place, but I don't want him to make the same mistakes as I did. She does an amazing job with all those kids and she's fought hard to keep them safe. I know she won't do wrong by Data, and he's lucky to have someone like her looking out for his best interest. Francesca and I didn't have anyone like that growing up.

With the letters written and left in the room where have church, I go into my office to find it mostly the same. The window is boarded up from where a bullet broke the glass, but someone's already been in here to clean up. Thankfully no damage was caused to my machines.

It's strange walking into a room and knowing it will be the last time you're ever there. I spent twelve years in this room, hunched over various computers, constantly fighting with Pocus or Seer to get better systems so I wouldn't be working on outdated machines. Before I had this office, I was working off of a dingy laptop in the basement, getting basically nowhere. This has been my kingdom, my refuge.

I'm not sad to say goodbye to the space that's hardly larger than a broom closet, but I am sad to let go of the memories. I worked magic in this room. I saved lives. No matter what happens next, I know what I did here had value. I was part of an amazing team, and this is where I grew into the man I am now.

Francesca enters, and I sigh, knowing we can't put this off for much

longer.

“Are you ready?” she asks, watching me closely.

This decision isn't easy for either of us, but we've agreed it's the right thing to do. Francesca's never had a home, and that's partially my fault, but I know she doesn't understand how hard it is to say goodbye. She's spent her life on the run, always saying goodbye and never having to dwell on it. Leaving her was the most awful experience of my life, but this is a close second.

My stomach turns as I think about what comes next. It's mainly the not knowing. I don't expect Ronan to show us any kindness. I cling to the off chance that he'll surprise us somehow. At the very least, he may not kill us. Even if he doesn't, I'm certain this is the last time I'll ever see this place again.

I move aside and let Francesca sit. Neither of us knows how to get in contact with Ronan, where to look for him, but she uses her abilities to find his now. It takes her five minutes. Once she's sure she has him, we send our message.

W e'd like to negotiate the terms of our surrender.

A reply comes back quickly with instructions. He's going to send a car to get us. It's a power move, naturally, because it leaves us with no exit strategy. He provides the transportation, and we can't get away if we want to. Even though we won't try, it's hard to leave my home without any hope.

We sit on the porch waiting for the car, already sweating from the humid Louisiana heat. It's strange to think that a few hours ago, this was the scene of a gruesome battle. The bodies of the Cuatros Locos members have been removed. Blood stains show in the grass where they died. I shudder to think about my brothers in the clinic, recovering from their gunshot wounds. All of their blood is on my hands, even the members of our rival gang.

The sun is starting to rise. The weak light causes the sun to break out in hues of pink and gold. This is probably my last sunrise. I soak it in, committing it to memory. I never took the time to appreciate sunrises before. I was too busy locked in my office with the blackout curtains drawn, trying to

avoid the sun at all costs. Now I crave it and wish I had more time to enjoy it.

It's funny what your mind latches on to when you know you're going to die. I've never fully enjoyed or appreciated the sun before, but now I'll miss it. I close my eyes and listen to the sounds of nature, of the birds chirping and the insects buzzing, and feel the gentle breeze on the bayou. I didn't grow up in New Orleans, but this is home. It took more than half my life to find it, but I'm glad I've had so much time here. In a way, it's the perfect place to die. I wonder if I'll come back as a ghost.

I'm pulled out of my thoughts by the sound of tires hitting the pavement. I look up to see a black SUV pulling in, ready to take us to Ronan. I grab Francesca's hand and we walk together, determined to keep our heads held high. I open the door for her and help her inside, not letting go of her hand as I climb in myself. If we go down, we go down together.

The driver says nothing, just pulls out of the driveway and begins the trip. I look mournfully back at the house, committing that to memory as well. If I happen to see my life flash before my eyes before it's all over, I want to remember this house. I want to remember Seer and Pocus and Bones and Hex and Graveyard and Gator and Buffy and Hemlock and Knix and all the others. I want to remember the women who've come in and changed our lives. Abigail, Tory, Juliana, and Meredith. The last face I want to see is Francesca's. If I have any control over my final thoughts, I hope that's how it goes.

The scenery of the city flies by. I watch with a certain level of apathy. I'm more terrified than I've ever been, but I refuse to feel it. I don't want to run away from this, don't want to be cowardly. If nothing else, I want it to be said that in my final moments, I was strong and brave. Francesca squeezes my hand, and I draw strength from her.

Within minutes, we're pulling into an affluent neighborhood. It's an old-money neighborhood, full of houses that span back generations. They're renovated, of course, some rebuilt from the ground after Katrina. But the air of wealth drips from each mansion, reminding us that in this society, there's a clear division.

People like Francesca and me, kids who got lost in the system and never had a fighting chance. Then the men like Ronan, who have more wealth and power than they'll ever know what to do with. I can't say that in his position I wouldn't abuse my power the same way. When we briefly had money, we always wanted more. No amount could satisfy us. Now, I'd give my last cent

for more time.

The car pulls up to an old, ironclad gate, which immediately opens. He's been waiting for us, watching for our arrival. We drive down a long driveway until we reach a gothic-looking mansion. It's fitting that this is where he's been hiding. It's a statement home, one that should strike fear into the heart of anyone who dares cross the owner.

The driver gets out of the car and opens the door. Perhaps he's thinking Francesca and I might change our minds. He must know there's no going back now. We haven't come this far to run away. I don't miss the way his hand moves to his waist and the brief show of his gun. I don't need motivation to move, but if I did, that would be a good one.

We walk slowly up the large stone steps until we reach the front door. A well-tailored butler opens it for us. His face is pinched and sour. He ushers us through the door and leads us to a large, grand sitting room. The furniture looks ancient, but pristine. Everything about this place is gaudy and expensive in a very purposeful way. I wonder if Ronan owns this house or if he's renting.

As we enter the living room, the man stands up, smiling at us as if we're welcome guests and not lambs for the slaughter. He's been waiting for this moment for a long time, I'm sure. He wants to control every second of how it goes. We stand hand in hand, a picture of strength that we don't quite feel. At least, I don't feel it. But I was always better with her next to me. That's the only certainty I have in this life.

As we stare Ronan down, I see movement from the side and realize we aren't alone. A man comes to stand by Ronan, and I recognize him immediately. I should, I'd spent months trying to dig up any kind of dirt on him. Diego Velez, leader of the Cuatros Locos gang, stands in Ronan's living room with him.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Francesca



In all the years I've pictured seeing Ronan again, I definitely didn't think I would be willingly there. I'd wake up from nightmares of being kidnapped and tortured, much like Sammy was. I shoot him a sidelong glance. The guilt of his physical appearance weighs heavy on me. It's my fault he's in such an awful state. He assured me that it didn't hurt him much, but the sight of it pains me. I know he must be lying.

Ronan did this. Ronan killed my family. He's a horrible, evil man, and he needs to be destroyed. But if I can't bring about his demise, I can pray Sammy's plan will work. Despite my initial hatred of the Ruthless Kings, I've found myself caring about them. If Ronan hurts them, I won't just carry my guilt over getting Sammy involved. All their blood will be on my hands.

The trade seems fair enough. We surrender, let him do whatever he wants with us, and he leaves the Ruthless Kings alone. I'd say the deal is that he'll leave our loved ones alone, but only Sammy loves them. I love Sammy, but it's clear we won't make it out of this alive. At least we're going down together.

The man next to Ronan eyes me suspiciously, and I immediately shoot him back a glare. But as I observe his face, I think I understand his suspicion. Something is oddly familiar about him. He must be thinking the same about me. I try to scan through my memory, to find a time and place where I may have encountered this man before. Nothing comes to mind. I've traveled the world. I've come across many faces. But no one has made such an impression on me. It's like looking at a distorted mirror.

"Samuel," Ronan addresses, his voice formal and icy. "I'm sure you know all about my friend, Diego. He's become a dear ally to me. It seems we

have a very important thing in common.”

“What’s that?” Sammy asks calmly. I admire his grace under pressure.

“We both want to see the Ruthless Kings burn to the ground,” Ronan replies with a sick smile.

I feel a cold chill run through my body, but I fight the urge to shiver. I don’t want him to see that he has any kind of effect on me.

“See, I was rotting in prison, and I was thinking about the two of you.” He points between the two of us. His face is placid, but his words drip with hate.

“I thought, ‘The second I’m out of here, I’m going to destroy their lives. I’m going to take away everything good. Everything they’ve ever loved.’ But there was a problem, Samuel. You are the only thing Francesca loves.”

I focus the full weight of my glare on Ronan as he says this. He’s not wrong, but the fact that he could know this shows me how closely he’s been watching me. I was never safe from him. I’ve been deluding myself all this time.

“And it reached my ears that the two of you had a big fall-out,” Ronan tells Sammy, his face a mix of fake sadness and unbridled glee. “So I’d already destroyed Francesca as much as I could. Or so I thought.”

He turns to look at me. I’m frozen to the spot.

“Because who did she turn to the second she received my little note?” he asks Sammy, though his gaze is fully on me. “She ran straight to you, Samuel. I can’t say why. Maybe it was fear. Maybe she thought you could protect her.”

I bite my tongue, fighting the urge to tell him how wrong he is. I came to protect Sammy, not to seek his protection.

“But you,” he goes on, now focused back on Sammy, “you’re part of this fabulous, strong, incredibly intimidating little gang. I’m surprised at you, Samuel. I never pegged you for a joiner. I wonder, did you hope the Ruthless Kings would protect you from me? Or was it to protect you from her?”

My hands clench into a fist. I try my best to retain my composure. He wants to break us down before he puts us to an end. He’s a lion playing with his food. I won’t be his prey. He’s done enough. He’s not allowed that satisfaction.

“Because I bet she was quite angry when you stole all that money, weren’t you, doll?”

He has the audacity to wink at me. I feel the urge to lunge at him, but

Sammy grabs my hand and squeezes tight.

“That’s in the past,” Sammy says firmly, with more strength than I can imagine. He’s so calm in the face of this assault. Has he really resigned himself to this being the end? Is this his last show of strength before he completely gives up?

“So it is,” Ronan smirks, eyeing our clasped hands. “Which is great for me. Because now Francesca has something to lose again. As soon as I ensure each one of your Ruthless Kings has died a gruesome death, I’ll kill you. Francesca, love, I’ll be sure you have a front-row seat.”

“And then what?” I spit, no longer able to contain my rage. “You’ll kill me like you killed my family?”

Ronan cocks his head to the side and smiles at me curiously. “Your father was brave too,” he tells me, as if he’s reminiscing. “I had a gun to his head and he didn’t back down. I threatened his life, your mother’s life, even your life. He didn’t crack. You’d be proud. He died a hero. He didn’t beg. He went out with honor.”

“It will be a family trait,” I tell him through gritted teeth. “You took my father away from me before I met him, but rest assured that his spirit is alive and well in me.”

“Don’t worry, Francesca, I’ll break you,” he tells me with a twisted smile.

“Why did you do it?” My curiosity controls my tongue. “If you’re going to kill me anyway, please tell me that. Why did you kill my parents?”

He chuckles and nods, considering my words. “It’s fairly simple, love. Your father wanted what I had, and he challenged me. I don’t take kindly to people stealing my things, as you well know. But I have to admit I never expected I’d be dealing with his bratty little daughter nearly two decades later. You had no idea what your father took from me. You just acted on instinct. And, by the way, love, I have no intention of killing you.”

His words shock me. I stumble back in surprise.

“I’ll take everything from you until you have nothing left to live for,” he says with a sneer. “What good would killing you be? You’d want it too much. That’s no punishment, love. That’s a reward. You don’t deserve it.”

“You’re a monster,” I scream. Sammy has to physically hold me back.

“Oh, but that isn’t the best part.” He takes a step toward me. He’s close enough that he reaches his hand out and tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. Again, I’m forced to hold back my shudder. My skin crawls where his fingers make contact. “You’re going to come work for me.”

“Like hell I am,” I say, spitting down at his shoes.

“Well, see, you won’t have a choice. Because when I’m done, and you have nothing left, you’ll still owe me. Your debt will remain unpaid. Fifteen years of service for fifteen years of prison sounds about right to me.”

“Service?” I ask, bile rising up in my throat.

“Your skills are legendary, Francesca.” He winks. “You took me down once, and let’s be clear. We both know you had much more of a hand in it than your pale little friend here.”

Sammy stiffens, though I can’t tell if he’s offended or trying to hold me back.

“You’ll put your hacking abilities to work for me. You’ll ensure that no one can ever get the upper hand on me again, and you’re going to make sure I’m the richest man in the entire world. I think you can handle that.”

“And if I refuse?” I challenge, because there’s no way in hell I’ll do anything for him. “You’ve already told me that you’re going to kill Sammy. You’re right. I don’t love anyone else. So you’ve blown your leverage. In what world am I going to help you?”

“After your fifteen years are up, I’ll reunite you with your family,” he says with a sick gleam in your eye. “You see, Francesca, your parents had two children. You have a sibling out there, and I know their exact location.”

He’s dangling a carrot in front of my face. I’ll be damned if I don’t grab for it. I’m slightly ashamed of my weakness, but I can’t help it. I have family somewhere. Not a cobbled-together family, not a man who took two decades to admit his love to me. I have a real, biological, blood-related family.

“In fifteen years, I’ll tell you who he is. You agree to my terms, or I’ll kill him too.”

If I know Ronan at all, he’ll probably kill the man anyway. My hope is quickly dashed. I will immediately find a way to end my sentence. I’d rather him shoot me right now than continue to torture me about a family that probably doesn’t even exist. He’s a cruel man, evil to his core. He deserves everything we did to him and more.

“I’m not sorry for what I did,” I tell him defiantly. “You deserved every second you rotted in that cell. And you’ll lose. We came to surrender, but you’re only encouraging me to fight harder.”

“No,” Sammy says firmly. “That’s enough. We’re turning ourselves into you, Ronan. We’ll do whatever you want, both of us will. Leave the Ruthless Kings out of it, and we’ll both help you for however long you want.”

He catches my eye, daring me to defy him. I don't, not wanting to undermine his offer. I don't want to help Ronan, and I definitely won't do anything for him if he kills Sammy. I'll kill myself before I let him have that pleasure.

"Fine," Ronan says as fury crosses his face. "You've forced my hand. Francesca, meet your bother, Diego."

I look at the man standing next to him and my shock is mirrored in his face. I couldn't see it before, or maybe I didn't want to, but now I understand. He looks so familiar because he's my brother. The one I didn't know existed, but who no less shares a striking resemblance to me.

Diego's expression immediately becomes angry. He turns on Ronan. He doesn't like being blindsided like this, and he has the same spirit as our father. The same blood runs through both of us. He has no time to argue, though, because the second he turns on Ronan, a gun is placed against his head and the trigger is pulled.

No hesitation comes in Ronan's actions. There's no bluff. He's given me back my family only to take it away once more in an instant. A horrible cry fills the room, and I belatedly realize it's my strangled screaming. I lunge at Ronan, ready to tear his eyes out, but something holds me back, keeps me from getting at him.

Sammy's strong arms hold me firmly, pulling me against his chest as I scream. I fight against him, kicking and punching, unconcerned about any pain I may cause. There's no room in the world left for anyone else's pain. The little glimmer of hope I had for the briefest moment has been extinguished. This rage coursing through me is all I know, all I can focus on. Ronan has to die. I have to kill him. He's taken enough from me. I won't give him the chance to take one more thing.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



Snake

I hold Francesca tightly against me as she screams out her horror. The sound pierces my eardrums. A puddle of blood quickly gathers around Diego's head. All life has drained from his eyes. His dark skin already looks paler, dull. It's sickening to watch the life leave him, especially so unexpectedly. My stomach turns, but I breathe through my mouth to settle it. I hold on to Francesca for dear life. Everything around me feels fuzzy and unreal.

I'd come to this place to offer myself up to Ronan, knowing he may kill me. I naively thought sacrificing myself would stop his attack on my family. The futility of my plan is so obvious. Francesca's heart is shatters, blown to bits the second Ronan put the bullet in Diego's head. He has so much worse planned for my brothers I'm sure. I can't let him do this.

This can only end one way. My stomach turns again. I thought we could atone for our sins, but it's clear we only have one option. We have to kill him. If we're to put an end to the violence and the fear that's plagued us for the last fifteen years, he can't leave this place.

I don't want to be the one to pull the trigger, but I will. After all, we're only here because of me. Francesca wanted to run. I should have gone with her. Now, we're trapped here with nothing to do but watch our lives get destroyed in front of our eyes. Francesca is a fragment of who she was. I know of only one way to help her. If I end this, it will all go away. I've never killed anyone before, that's never been my role, but I will if I have to.

I've failed her in the past so many times. The big one, obviously, but I think about every time she needed me to be strong and I was weak. Coming here was a sign of my weakness. I've put us both in grave danger because I

thought that surrendering would be easier. Francesca's the strong one. I've always been the one who followed along. Now it's my turn to be strong, to be the man she needs. We'll fight side by side and go down swinging.

I look around the room. I only now notice the guards standing at the door to the parlor, and another two in the corner. They're armed with AK-47s. We don't stand a chance on our own. We're unarmed. I'm not sure that Francesca is in any state to fight. But we have to try. We owe it to ourselves. I owe it to my brothers. My surrender will sign their death certificate. I can't let that happen.

The weight of despair settles upon me like a suffocating fog, threatening to consume every ounce of hope within me. Francesca's anguish reverberates through the room. The darkness that envelopes us now feels insurmountable. Each breath is weighed down by the knowledge of the impending destruction that awaits us.

But a glimmer of hope remains, a voice whispering in my head to get up and keep fighting. We can get out of this and take him down in the process. It will be one hell of a fight, but together, we can do it. Only together, though. I can't do this without her.

"Francesca," I whisper desperately, not sure if she can comprehend my words. "Be strong. We have to make him pay, but I don't stand a chance without you."

She collapses to the floor. I think I've lost her. She's dead weight. I'm forced to let her go, to let her succumb to the pain threatening to consume her. I watch helplessly as she weeps on the floor, her body limp and helpless. A quick look up at Ronan reveals the man has a sick smile on his face. He's achieved his goal of ruining her. He relishes in it. I hate him with every fiber of my being. I will kill her for him.

The room goes dark. I realize Francesca collapsed on purpose. She's created a distraction and she's taken out the lights to give us a chance. I take the cover of the darkness to lunge toward Diego's lifeless body. He had a gun in his hand when he went down, and another shoved into his pants. I feel around until I find both. The one in his hand is easy to grab, but I have to climb over his body for the other. I again feel sick. I'm not sure how I'm going to kill Ronan. Just touching Diego's lifeless body makes me want to throw up.

As I grab the other gun, I'm fortified. The cold metal encourages me somehow. We have weapons now. We aren't helpless. We can do this. I

quickly move back to Francesca's side, shoving one of the guns into her hand.

"Get ready," she whispers.

The lights flicker back on dimly. I see the two guards from the back of the room moving around frantically, uselessly. The light surprises them, and they don't see me pointing Diego's gun at them. I take aim for the closest one, shooting him squarely in the arm. He goes down, but I shoot him again, ensuring he can't get back up and shoot me.

The other man pulls out his gun and shoots at me, but I duck behind a large armchair. Feathers and stuffing fly in the air as he shoots in my direction. Thankfully, the chair is so thick that the bullets don't penetrate to the other side. I peek out to one side and shoot back at him. I miss. The bullet lodges itself firmly in the wall behind him.

I curse under my breath. I should have taken him out when I had the chance. I look at Francesca, who is similarly crouched behind a matching armchair. I glance at the door to see that she's already taken out the guards at the door. They lie in a heap. The blood gathers around them. I had no idea she was such a good shot. I imagine she had to learn skills or two on the run.

I don't know if more armed guards linger in the house but I'm not eager to find out. Francesca shoots my guard and he goes down, but Ronan aims at us. I expect her to take out the lights again. Instead, her eyes close and her hands press firmly against the floor, her palms flat.

The lights become so blinding, I have to shield my eyes. Movement catches the corner of my eye. I see Francesca running at Ronan full speed. He's also distracted by the lights and can't block her attack. She knocks him to the ground, wrestling his gun out of his hands. She points it to his temple, freezing him in his place.

"I'd like to renegotiate the terms of our surrender," she says in an angry, steely tone.

He has no choice but to comply, unable to move as she cocks the gun. She has him and they both know it. I listen closely for any other signs of movement, but we seem to be the only ones here. I'm surprised, expecting he would have more backup. In his arrogance, he must have thought that we would go down easier. He probably assumed that, as computer experts, we weren't good fighters.

Maybe he was right on my behalf, but Francesca has a fighting spirit. It's gotten her through the last fifteen years. I watch her in amazement, in awe of

her strength. Then I realize what killing Ronan will mean. Sure she may or may not have killed the guards, but that was self-defense, this will be murder. It will weigh on her conscience for the rest of her life. She may think this is what she wants, but I know it will destroy her.

If she had the capacity to kill, Dan Menges would have been dead years ago. He beat me within an inch of my life once. The look on her face afterward was murderous. We were only ten at the time, but she was ready to square up and go after him, even if it meant putting herself in harm's way.

I stopped her, though, not wanting her to make the situation worse. It was probably that very night that we started dreaming of escaping together. At ten years old, we already knew we were meant to spend the rest of our lives together. To save each other.

She wants to save me now. She wants to put an end to this so that we can live happy, carefree lives. If she kills him, she'll never recover from it. She wants to save me again, and I need to save her from herself.

Under the barrel of her gun, I see how old and weak Ronan is. I'd not noticed before. The man who's been such a constant in my nightmares is an old, hollow man with nothing left to live for but his revenge. He won't get it from us. That will probably be enough to kill him alone.

The look in Francesca's eye is murderous. Talking her down from this won't be easy. She may hate me forever if I stop her. All I can do is pray that one day she'll understand and she'll forgive me. Stranger things have happened.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Francesca



Rage within me burns like an inferno, consuming every fiber of my being. Ronan stands before me. He’s a small and pitiful figure in the face of the pain and suffering he’s caused. Hatred courses through my veins. It’s an unyielding desire to make him pay for the destruction he’s wrought upon my life. He took away my family, leaving me alone in this world. Now he’s taken away the only semblance of family I had left.

With my gun aimed squarely at Ronan’s trembling form, I relish the thought of his fear, of the retribution he so rightfully deserves. I spent fifteen years fearing him, but I always had the power. He tried to loom large, a monster in the shadows, never seen but always present. This is where he truly belongs—powerless and at my mercy.

Sammy’s voice breaks through the haze of anger. It pierces the darkness engulfing me. I feel my anger shifting, turning toward him. My fingers tighten around the trigger as I point the gun in his direction. His hands rise in surrender. His voice pleads with me, reminding me of who I truly am.

“You’re not a murderer.” His words cut through the fury that threatens to consume me.

“You’re wrong,” I tell him roughly. I tighten my grip around the gun.

In my periphery, I see Ronan move. He’s trying to scurry away from me. I aim my gun back at him, shooting the ground near his feet. My bullet hit the beautiful marble floor, causing it to crack. He looks up at me, his face pale, and puts his hands up. I keep the barrel of my gun trained carefully on him.

“Chessy, there are other ways to make him pay,” Snake says futilely.

After everything this man has done to me, I won’t be talked down. He’s stolen everything from me that I ever loved. He took Sammy away from me

for fifteen years. He doesn't get to live after everything he's done.

"He deserves this," I tell Sammy with a tremor in my voice. "He doesn't get to walk away after everything he's done to us. To me. He's stolen everything from me. He wants to take everything from you too."

I feel Sammy moving toward me slowly. I hear him carefully put his gun on the floor, trying to show me he means me no harm, I suppose. But he doesn't have the right to stop me. I hate that he's not on my side. After everything we've been through, the least he could do is support me.

"Francesca," he whispers right by my ear. "It's over. He's lost and he knows it. Look at him."

Seeing Ronan so weak and afraid is definitely a satisfying feeling. But it doesn't feed the rage brewing inside me. His death is the only ending to this story that I can possibly accept. Sammy wants me to stop, to show mercy. I don't have that in me anymore.

"I'd rather die than let him win," I whisper back.

I look at Sammy. The familiar feeling of betrayal rears its ugly head. He has to know that stopping me is the last thing in the world I could want. I should pull the trigger now, put an end to this finally. When I look back at Ronan, he's slowly moving away, crawling toward the door. I scream in frustration, ready to take off after him. Sammy seizes me, covering my hands so I can't shoot.

Ronan leaps, taking advantage of our struggle, and runs toward the front door. If he gets away, I'll never forgive Sammy. After everything we've overcome, this will break us for good. I struggle against him, but he's much too strong for me. I can't get away from him, and I scream.

The front doors swing open before Ronan reaches them. I see the man stop. The sight of Pocus and Seer walking through the door is a welcome relief. Those stupid bastards. I didn't think they would manage it, but here they are. Sammy releases me as the two men grab Ronan and force him to the floor. He walks toward them, the three men making a triangle around Ronan that he can't escape.

"Where do you think you're going?" Pocus asks in an intimidating voice.

At this moment, I see how intimidating the man really is. I didn't think he had it in him, but the way he's looking at Ronan is frightening. I see the man shrink under his gaze. From several feet away, I feel the same fear. But Pocus is on our side. I have no reason to shrink away from him. He's come to rescue us.

“How the hell did you know we were here?” Snake asks his friends, bewildered.

Snake’s question hangs heavy in the air. Seer gives me a significant look. I step toward them, slipping off the bracelet he gave me when we were looking for Sammy. I knew something like this would happen. Whether we willingly walked into a trap or Ronan took us again, I knew that Sammy and I would be together in the lion’s den. I wouldn’t risk not being found. So I asked Seer for a tracking device and he willingly handed it over.

Sammy looks between the two of us, an indecipherable look on his face. He’s probably angry at me for involving his friends, but I don’t care. I wasn’t going to walk into my death without a backup plan. The Ruthless Kings are much stronger than Ronan, that was clear to me the second I met them. Sammy’s been so afraid of them getting hurt, but the only way they would lose against him was if they didn’t know what they were up against. I made sure Seer knew exactly what he was getting himself into.

With Ronan now securely held between Pocus, Seer, and Sammy, a newfound sense of power surges within me. I step in front of Ronan. My eyes burn with an intensity that matches the fire raging within my soul. I spit in Ronan’s face, reveling in the satisfaction of asserting my dominance over him. I refuse to be consumed by the same darkness that has plagued his existence.

“I’m not going to kill you,” I hiss. My voice drips with venomous disdain. “No, Ronan. I’m going to make you watch as your world burns. I’m going to ensure that you witness the destruction of everything you hold dear, just like you threatened to do to Sammy.”

The fire within me burns brighter. It’s fueled by a newfound determination to bring Ronan to his knees. I am no longer a victim of his machinations; I am a force to be reckoned with. The tables have turned. The power now lies in my hands.

Pocus and Seer pull him up by his arms and drag him out of the house. In the bright morning light, he looks pathetic. No one else is coming to help him. He’s completely at our mercy. Another two men stand outside the house leaning against a black car.

“We figured you’d need a car,” says one of the men. “Gotta get that asshole to the police station somehow.”

I stop in my tracks, frozen by his words.

“We’re not taking him to the police station,” I say firmly, causing the

other men to stop as well. “That’s way too good for him. Sammy’s told me what you to do to men who cross you. Take him to the basement and deal with him.”

“Francesca,” Sammy whispers, coming to stand in front of me. “This is for the best. Let it go.”

“No!” I scream, feeling ridiculously like a petulant child. “You heard what he said Sammy. You heard what he was going to do to us. We aren’t going to hand him over to the police and hope he doesn’t get out again.”

“This is Snake’s call,” Pocus says. “This is how he wants to deal with it. So this is how we’re going to deal with it.”

“Good boy, Samuel,” Ronan calls. “You’re thinking with your head on this one.”

Enraged, I walk up to Ronan and kick him squarely in the balls. He collapses in pain between his two captors.

“No one asked your opinion, you piece of shit,” I scream at him. “At least put him in the trunk for fuck’s sake.”

The men zip tie his hands and cover his mouth with tape before doing just that. I slam the door shut in his face and see his eyes fill with terror as he realizes what’s happening. It’s a small consolation prize, but it’s something. I’m seething that they’re turn him in, but apparently, I have no say in it.

I get in the car next to Sammy and fume the entire drive to the clubhouse. When we arrive, I get out and stomp upstairs, locking myself in his room. Maybe I am being childish, but all I want to do is cry at this new betrayal. How can they let him go to prison when he’s done so much to hurt so many people? He’s getting off way too easy. But I’m going to make it right.

I finally emerge from the room with a new sense of determination. Sammy eyes me warily, his face full of grief. I think he already senses what’s coming and he desperately wants to stop me. But he can’t stop me now. If it takes the rest of my life, I’ll destroy Ronan’s life. It’s the very least I can do to end this. And I can’t do it with Sammy staring at me like a lost puppy.

“I’m leaving,” I tell him. “Give me until the end of the week to get everything sorted, and I’ll be out of your hair.”

“You know you aren’t in my hair, Francesca,” he says sadly. “I’d really like for you to stay. Please.”

“That can’t happen, Sammy,” I tell him. “Because if I stay, I’ll get sucked into this little fantasy you’ve all built. You think you’re safe here, but there will always be danger while he’s alive. He’ll keep sending people after you

unless he's dead or destroyed. So I'm going to make sure that happens."

"You don't have to do it alone, at least," he offers. "Let me help you. Let me come with you."

"No," I say quickly, not even considering it. "It's like you've been saying all along. You'll slow me down."

Hurt fills his face as I turn and go back to his room, slamming the door once more. I hate myself for hurting him, but it's the easiest way to get him to let me go. And I desperately need him to let me go.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Snake

As I watch Francesca pack her bags, a sense of helplessness washes over me. I understand her anger, her desire for retribution against Ronan, but I can't do or say anything to ease her pain. It's a burden we both bear. The weight presses on our hearts. The words have all run out. My pleas for her to stay fall on deaf ears. This is what she wants, and I won't stop her. I only hope our story will end differently.

"This is your home, Sammy, not mine." She turns to me with sorrow in her eyes. "I see what you've built here and it really is beautiful. It isn't at all what I expected. But I don't belong here."

"You could belong here," I say desperately, hoping if I say the right combination of words, she will decide not to go. "I love you, Chessy." Pain surges through my chest, consuming me. "I always have and I always will."

"I love you too," she admits, not able to meet my gaze. "But as long as Ronan is alive, we have no chance."

Francesca's decision to once again go off the grid, to retreat from the world that has brought us nothing but pain, fills me with a profound sense of longing, almost betrayal. I have to imagine this is at least a fraction of the pain she felt when I left her. The ache of the loss is so all-consuming that it threatens to pull me under. She's my family, the one constant in a world of uncertainty.

In a desperate attempt to persuade her to stay, I utter a final plea as I watch her continue to pack.

"You are my family, Francesca. Please, don't go."

Her eyes meet mine. I see her internal struggle. It's a losing battle. As much as she loves me, she can't choose me over her revenge. Ronan casts a

shadow over us, keeping her in his clutches. She believes until she can make him pay for what he did to her, to us, she can't truly be free. Until she destroys him, she can't let herself stay.

I reach out to her. My hand brushes against her shoulder. She shudders against my touch. I hope for one second that she may give in. Maybe if I could remind her of how good we are together, of how well we fit, she'll choose me. But she retreats from my touch, moving to the other side of my bed as she collects the last of her belongings.

"I know you think this is your burden to carry, Francesca." My voice is filled with sincerity. "But we're stronger together. You know that. Stay and let me help you. You don't have to do this alone."

She takes a step closer. Her eyes shimmer with unshed tears.

"I do love you, you know?" she whispers, her voice heavy with emotion. "And maybe one day, we'll find our way back to each other. As long as he has any power, he can tear us apart again, and I can't let that happen. I have to go."

The weight of her words hang heavy in the air. The gravity of her determination resonates within me. I understand her need for vengeance, her relentless pursuit of justice. But deep down, I also know it comes at a great cost—an unending cycle of pain and suffering.

As I look into her eyes, I see the fire burning within her, the resolute spirit that has guided her through the darkest of times. In this moment, I make a silent vow to stand by her side, to support her in her quest for retribution, even if it means sacrificing my own desires to keep her.

I also silently hope that one day, she'll find her way back to me. I hope that day is sooner than later. Now that I have her, the idea of losing her again is unimaginable. It hurts so much worse knowing she has the choice to stay and is still going.

Once Francesca's bags are packed and she moves toward the door to leave, I know that this is my final moment. This is the last chance I may have to say my piece. I take her hand in mine, holding it tightly as if trying to anchor her to this moment, to my love for her.

"Whatever path you choose, Francesca," I say, my voice filled with emotion and unwavering determination. "I will support you. If you have to kill him to be happy, know that I understand. And I'll be here waiting for you."

Her eyes search mine. A mixture of gratitude and pain is reflected in their

depths. I see her love and I know we can weather any storm, no matter what comes our way. We can survive her leaving.

“But I also hope,” I continue, my voice softening. “I hope you’ll come back to me. And I hope it’s soon. You go do what you have to do and find the closure you need. Then stop running. Come home to me. Please.”

I hold her hand tightly, feeling the gravity of this moment. When she walks out that door, it may be another fifteen years before I see her again. She’ll spend as long as it takes trying to take down Ronan, even if it means keeping me waiting. Maybe it’s what I deserve. Maybe this is my penance for what I did to her so many years ago. I have to suck it up and take it.

I pull her against me in a tight embrace and feel an unimaginable sense of relief when she returns the gesture. She holds me tightly. Her hands grip the back of my shirt. She shakes as the tears fall. I have to stop mine from falling. I don’t know how long we stand there, just that it isn’t enough. No amount of time will be enough.

“I’m going to miss my ride,” she whispers, pulling away from me. “Take care of yourself, Sammy, okay? Promise me that.”

“I promise,” I whisper, giving her hand a tight squeeze.

I walk her out of my room and take the long walk down the stairs to the front door. I never appreciated how large the clubhouse is, but as I watch the love of my life walking away, it feels like an endless maze. If I were a smarter man, I’d take this moment to beg her, to get on my knees and convince her not to go. Her mind is made up. No amount of begging will change it. She needs to do what she thinks is best.

She reaches the front door and turns to me one last time, giving me a tight smile.

“Come back,” I remind her. My voice sounds strangled.

She nods and walks out of the door, getting into the car she ordered. I stand in the doorway, watching her. I can’t move from the spot until the car is out of eyeshot. Even then, I struggle to go back inside and close the door. When I finally do, I collapse against it, my body wracked with sobs.

Seer finds me there nearly an hour later and sinks down next to me. He doesn’t say a word, just sits with me until I’ve cried out all the pain from my system.

“Love sucks,” he says quietly. “But it’s worth it, Snake. You have to know that.”

“Is Tory back?” I ask, wanting to change the subject.

“She will be soon,” he says. “They always come back when it’s real, mon ami. And I think it’s real between you and Francesca.”

“I thought you hated her,” I say, wiping my face.

“I didn’t trust her,” he admits honestly. “But now? She really proved herself. She’s one of us now. She’s part of the family, and family always comes back. Look at Hex and Juliana. They go to Brazil every year, and every year they joke that they’ll just stay there. But they haven’t yet.”

“That’s the part that scares me,” I breathe. “Yet. There’s still the chance, right? And who knows how long it will take her to fulfill her revenge? It could take years. Anything could happen. I may never see her again.”

“Nah,” he says flippantly. “I don’t believe that. That girl can’t stay away too long. She loves you too much. She’ll be back in six months or less. Trust me.”

He gets up and offers me his hand. I take it, but I don’t believe him for a second. I’ll wait for Francesca forever, but a big part of me believes I’ll never see her again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Francesca



As I stand before the familiar door of the house in New Orleans, a mix of anticipation and uncertainty swirls within me. It's been months since I left on my mission to bring down Ronan, to exact my revenge for the pain he caused. While I've succeeded in draining his bank accounts and dismantling his empire, a hollow emptiness lingers within me.

The satisfaction I had hoped to find in destroying Ronan's life isn't there. It's as if each victory only serves as a temporary balm, unable to fill the void residing within my heart. It took me far too long to realize that destroying Ronan would never be the gateway to my happiness. Only one person could fix the emptiness inside, and I left him behind.

When I left New Orleans six months ago, I could only see red. Despite Sammy's begging, I didn't believe that being with him and forgetting about my revenge against Ronan would make me happy. I was sure I could only move on with my life when Ronan had nothing left.

I'd seen what he could do with the resources at his disposal. He terrorized us all, and he still could. He's in a maximum-security prison, serving multiple life sentences for murdering dozens of people. That was my first order of business. I traveled the globe, collecting testimonies from every family he'd destroyed.

A lot of people were hesitant, scared of the retribution that might come from Ronan's hand if they spoke out. But once I told them my story and my plan to take him down for good, they trusted me. I had to go through everything I went through to help other people process their grief and trust me. Once that happened, I had over a hundred people willing to testify anonymously against him.

That wouldn't be enough either. He had an extensive network of people on the outside willing to help him. People who were willing to shut up the survivors or intimidate them out of testifying. I couldn't let that happen. I wouldn't let him scare people out of telling the truth. I had to take them out of the equation.

That alone took me three months. I had to uncover them all and get them pinned down for a variety of different crimes. Ronan's reach spanned from Ireland to Boston and several other places in between. He'd spent his life building his criminal network. I was able to deliver information to local police in every location.

Little by little, I watched his empire fall. I made sure I was there for every arrest, not wanting to leave anything to chance. Once I was sure his friends had been taken down too, I was able to help the survivors come forward and tell their stories. I was constantly in contact with the New Orleans and Boston DAs, ensuring the testimonies were enough. As they kept pouring in, the case was too strong to ignore. Ronan's court date is a few months away, but he's going away forever. He'll never hurt anyone else or destroy another family again.

Then there was the money. Our mistake last time was not making sure we were safe on the outside. With Ronan's network taken down, no one could come after the money. What wasn't seized by the government—and that was a large amount—mysteriously disappeared. Millions of dollars vanished into thin air.

Well, that's what the DA will think, anyway. It will be another strike against him. In reality, the money is spread out among his victims. Every family has received a hefty little settlement. I won't bring their loved ones back. Nothing could do that. But, at the very least, it will help them heal.

To rub salt in the wounds, I've sent Ronan a few postcards. I've included pictures of his men getting arrested, as well as pictures of his emptied bank accounts. I included news clippings of his trial, in case he thinks there's any way he'll get out of this. He'll die as a bitter, old man in prison.

That knowledge didn't help me sleep any better at night. It didn't bring me the pleasure I thought it would. I was in Boston, anonymously sending thousands of incriminating files to the DA as evidence, and I realized Ronan was still winning. I was still alone, with no family.

I kept remembering the look in Sammy's eyes as I left. It destroyed me. It would wake me up in the middle of the night, causing my heart to nearly beat

out of my chest. So many nights I cried until I literally couldn't cry anymore. My face would be swollen and puffy for days afterward. I couldn't get rid of the gnawing pain threatening to destroy me.

Nothing except to come back home.

I never had any home without Sammy. The Menges house was only a home to me once he showed up. Life on the run with him was home for me. Then, when he left, I was homeless for fifteen years. Not literally. I always had somewhere to stay, a roof over my head. But I never had a home without him, truly. I traveled all over the world, saw some of the most beautiful places that exist, and there was only ever emptiness and sadness.

Taking a deep breath, I raise my hand and knock on the large wooden door. The moments that pass feel like an eternity. Each second stretches into infinity. As I wait, I take in the house's exterior. A lot of work has been put into it since the last time I was here. The shot-up wood and broken windows have been replaced. There's a fresh coat of paint on the outside, and the porch looks like it's been power washed recently.

Healing has happened inside and outside this house. The members of the Ruthless Kings seem to be moving on from the extreme violence that occurred a few months ago, and I'm glad. That was one of the most terrifying nights of my life. Now there's no evidence that it ever happened. We all get to move on.

I knock again, the thought occurring that Sammy might have moved on too. He said he would be here waiting, but what if they made him leave? What if they felt like he caused too much trouble after the whole Ronan affair? Guilt swells in my gut as I consider it. It never even occurred to me that Sammy might be gone. Where would he go? This is his home, and he's mine. He has to be here.

My breath hitches. A familiar feeling of panic creeps into my system. I'm about to turn around and go when the door swings open, revealing Sammy standing before me. His presence alone brings a rush of emotions flooding back. I can't help but feel a flicker of hope within me.

"Hi," he says simply, his face unreadable.

"Hi," I whisper back. "Listen, I know I have a lot of explaining to do, but ___"

"It's warm outside," he cuts me off. "You should come inside. Can I get you a drink?"

I'm confused by this chilly reception. I simply nod and step over the

threshold. A surge of relief washes over me as I step inside the house, taking in the sight of its renewed vitality. It's a testament to the resilience and determination of the men who call this place home, their unwavering dedication to rebuilding what was once shattered.

As I walk through the familiar halls, a sense of nostalgia envelops me. I didn't spend much time here, but I sense a feeling of love here. Maybe it's not coming from Sammy at this exact moment, but it comes out of the walls. It surrounds me like an invisible presence. This house feels like love and hope and home. I made the right decision coming back, I'm sure of it.

Sammy guides me to the kitchen. His silent presence fills me with anxiety. I watch as he heads to a cabinet to pull out a glass, then fills it with water and robotically hands it to me. There's no emotion on his face at all. I can't blame him. He'd begged me to stay, he looked shattered the last time I saw him. I don't know why I thought I could come back and pick up where we started. I was naïve to think he would wait and not be hurt by what I did.

"Thank you," I say, taking the glass from him.

As our fingers brush I see a flicker of emotion on his face, and his façade breaks.

"Well, I wouldn't want to be accused of having bad manners," he says, a wide smile covering his face.

"Asshole," I whisper, running into his arms. I feel him wrap his arms around me. He pulls me tightly against him, kissing the top of my head.

"I've been waiting for you," he whispers. "It's about time you came home."

I nod against his chest, holding him to me. Tears spring to my eyes, and I can't stop myself from crying. I feel whole for the first time in months. Maybe for the first time in my whole life. I'm back with the man I love, and no threat looms over us. For the first time in our lives, we just get to be.

"I missed you so much," I admit, reaching up on my tiptoes to plant a kiss on his lips. He returns it eagerly. His tongue slips inside my mouth like it belongs there.

He pushes me against the counter, and his hands move to my waist. He lifts me up so I'm sitting on top of the cold surface. I have to admit that it does give me much better access to him. I slide my fingers through his hair, holding him against me so I can be sure he won't go anywhere. Given our track record, it is his turn to leave.

Instead, he grab my legs, looping them around his waist. He pushes his

body against mine, and I feel his desire. Everything is different between us now, but only in the best possible way. Our love is finally out in the open. We can express it without wondering if this might be the last time we ever do. In this moment, nothing but a bright, wide-open future faces us.

“Not that I don’t love a good reunion,” someone says behind us.

We pull away quickly and see Seer standing there, a smirk on his face. My cheeks immediately flush, though I don’t know if that’s from embarrassment or desire. I already miss Sammy’s touch. I’m desperate for Seer to leave so we can continue.

“I do believe you have your own room, yes?” Seer asks, looking pointedly at Sammy. “This is one of those great opportunities to use it.”

“Fuck you, Seer.” I laugh, hopping off the counter, grabbing Sammy’s hand, and pulling him along toward the stairs.

“Use protection,” he calls after us. “Kids are great, but they’re a lot of work. Make sure you know what you’re getting yourself into!”

I slam the door, blocking out whatever other smartass comment Seer has to say. Sammy stands in front of me, looking like I’m the most precious thing to ever exist. He takes a step toward me, bending down slowly to recapture my lips with his. In that kiss, I feel every second of the fifteen years we lost, mixed with the endless years we have ahead of us.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Three Months Later

Francesca



The atmosphere is electric with anticipation as I sit by Sammy's side. My heart is brimming with joy and excitement. On a day filled with love, celebration, and the promise of new beginning, all I can do is focus on the way his hand feels covering mine. It's warm and big, encasing mine perfectly. We are, and always have been, a perfect fit.

Graveyard and Meredith, two souls who have weathered their fair share of storms, are about to embark on a new chapter of their lives as their own hands join in matrimony. We sit in plastic chairs set out in the game room of the youth center.

The venue is adorned with an array of vibrant flowers. Their colors echo the depth of emotions that fill the air. Laughter and cheerful conversations swirl around us. They intertwine with the soft music playing in the background. The setting feels nothing short of magical, a reflection of the love shared between Graveyard and Meredith. Everyone is here to celebrate their union, each member of the Ruthless Kings and their significant others, and every one of the kids from the center.

Sammy looks dashing in his suit, doing naughty things to my psyche. All I can think about is pulling him into a broom closet and taking his pants off. His eyes meet mine, filled with a tenderness and adoration that make my heart flutter. As if reading my thoughts, a flame fills his eyes. He takes a long, slow look at my body. "Later," he whispers into my ear, sending a shiver down my spine.

As the music swells, signaling the start of the procession, I feel a rush of emotions. The familiar faces of our chosen family walk down the aisle. Each step resonates with the bonds that have been forged through hardships and

triumphs. Tory is the Matron of Honor, with Abigail, Evanesce, and Juliana walking slowly behind. Bringing up the rear is Charlie, a young girl I haven't spent much time with but have heard incredible things about. She and Meredith apparently share a special bond.

I feel a sense of gratitude for the role these people have played in our lives. They have embraced us, supported us, and stood by our side through thick and thin. They have become our family, the ones who understand the scars we carry and the triumphs we've achieved. And today, as we gather to celebrate the love between Graveyard and Meredith, I am reminded once again of the power of these bonds.

As the ceremony continues, I am captivated by the love and tenderness radiating from Graveyard and Meredith. Their vows, spoken with unwavering conviction, echo through the hearts of everyone present. They promise to support each other through life's challenges, to be a source of strength and comfort, and to cherish the love they have found in one another.

Their devotion has been incredibly evident to me in the few months I've gotten to know them. When I came back, Graveyard was taking a break from work to help Meredith get the center back on its feet. He's so clearly devoted to her and this dream she's built. I look behind me and see Data sandwiched between his parents, tears silently falling down his cheeks.

Tears of joy glisten in my eyes as I witness the exchange of rings, a symbol of the eternal bond they share. The officiant pronounces them husband and wife. The air is filled with applause, cheers, and heartfelt congratulations. The love that surrounds Graveyard and Meredith is palpable.

As we move to the reception—held in the center's gymnasium—I'm caught up in the joyous spirit of the occasion. The room is filled with laughter, dancing, and heartfelt toasts to the newlyweds. I catch glimpses of Sammy mingling with our friends. His smile is radiant as he embraces the camaraderie and the sense of belonging that this family provides.

Throughout the evening, I feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the journey that has led me here. As much as I once hated these people, I now can't imagine my life without them. They've embraced me in their community as if I was always here, always part of Sammy's life. But they made him the man he is now, the one who finally was able to admit his love for me. I'll always be grateful to them for helping him to grow.

As the night unfolds, Sammy takes my hand and leads me to the dance floor. We move together. Our bodies sway to the rhythm of the music. We're

lost in our own world of love and connection. I feel a deep sense of contentment, knowing I have found my home within the arms of this man.

I look into Sammy's eyes, the man who has been my rock, my partner, and my confidant. In his gaze, I see a reflection of the love and acceptance that has guided us through our journey. We twirl across the dance floor, and I can't believe we've made it to this place unburdened and unafraid. We spent so much time running and hiding, sometimes from each other. But now we experience the carefree joy of dancing at a wedding reception surrounded by our loved ones. I imagine doing this again in a few months, only with me wearing a white dress.

In the midst of the celebration, I steal moments with Sammy, finding solace in the embrace of his arms. We find a quiet corner of the gym, which has been magically transformed into something of a ballroom. I have to admit, I was concerned when Meredith told me they were going to get married at the youth center, but I totally understand it now. This is a place special to both of them. Abigail and Evansece turned it into a fairytale. In our quiet, dark corner, we kiss slowly, a foretaste of what is to come. As much fun as I'm having, I'm dying for Meredith and Graveyard to announce their departure so I can take my man home and have my wicked way with him.

As the party winds down, I take a moment to gaze around the room filled with love, joy, and the echoes of laughter. This night has been a beautiful celebration of Graveyard and Meredith's extraordinary journey to each other. But in my humble opinion, they had it easy. They didn't have to wait fifteen years to have their true love back in their arms.

I am reminded of the sacrifices Sammy and I both made, the battles we fought together and alone, and the powerhouse we are when we're together. I didn't think it would be possible, but I found home in this place, amongst these strange and wonderful people. I always resented them, but I regret it now. They are my family, a part of me that I'll never be able to shake.

This isn't anything like I expected when I sought out my family so many years ago. I thought my parents' murder meant I would never have anyone. Then when Ronan killed Diego in front of me, I saw it all slipping away again. I can accept that family is what you make for yourself. It's better, in a way, to choose them. My biological father was a bad man and my biological brother was an asshole. He tried to kill these incredible people. That would have been a shame.

As the event officially comes to an end, I take Sammy's hand, our fingers intertwined, and we get into a taxi and make our way back to the clubhouse. I feel as if I'm floating on a cloud, walking hand in hand with him to the place that's become our home. It's much nicer than where we started. It's full of love and respect, something I never thought we would get to experience.

Snake opens our bedroom door. I step inside, the anticipation bubbling up in my stomach. With every brush of skin throughout the night and sidelong glance, I've waited for this moment. He hardly has the door shut behind him when I press my body against his, pinning him to the spot. His arms move to my waist, holding me there as our mouths collide, hungrily searching for each other.

He moves his hands down to the hem of my skirt, carefully moving up the fabric high enough to drive me crazy. His hands run warm circles along the tops of my thighs, and it takes all my self-control not to whimper. One hand continues its exploration of my exposed skin as his other moves to my panties, where the wetness is already growing between my legs.

I whimper then, unable to contain my need for him. His finger slips inside of me, into my wet, hot folds. I feel my knees buckle. He uses his other hand to hold me up by my waist. My hands are wrapped around his neck, tangling into his hair. I'm as close to him as I can possibly get when his fingers thrust inside of me, leaving hot trails of pleasure.

"You're so wet for me," he whispers, as if surprised. He can't be that blind to it, can he?

"I always want you," I whisper back against his lips. "Forever."

He takes his fingers out of me, and I immediately miss the contact. I'm about to protest when he lifts me up and wraps my legs around his waist. I feel his desire pressed against my center and I realize he wants me just as much. He wants to be inside of me as much as I need him to be.

He walks us to the bed, gently laying me down underneath him. His hands slowly move up my body, taking my dress with it. I squirm under him, set on fire by each and every sensation. I want his hands everywhere, all over my body. I lift up slightly to allow him to pull my dress over my head. I lie bare underneath him, my skin breaking out in goosebumps. He meets my gaze. His is filled with tenderness and lust and so, so much love. I'll never get tired of this. Every time we're together like this it's like we're trying to make up for fifteen years in one single moment. It's electrifying.

He moves on top of me, his knees on either side of me. Then he bends down to recapture my mouth with his. My hands quickly move to his jacket, nimbly undoing the buttons until it opens to me and I can throw it off to the floor. While he looked damn good in this suit, it's currently getting in the way of the thorough undressing I want. He helps me by removing his tie and shirt while I move my hands to unbuckle his belt.

Soon, he's on top of me in nothing but his boxers, and I feel him so much better against me. He's huge. His erection is rock hard against me. Each time he kisses me, he inadvertently rubs against me. I can tell by his increasingly labored breathing that he's enjoying it a little too much. If he's going to experience pleasure, he needs to do it with me.

I quickly pull down my underwear and throw it to the floor, no longer liking being teased by him. I want him to know I mean business. I run my fingers against the waistband of his boxers, freeing him from the confines. He pulls back from me slightly, smirking in triumph.

"A little excited, are we?" he breathes.

In response, I widen my legs and guide him inside, immediately arching my back in pleasure as he pushes in deeper. I barely have time to recover as he drills into me, a desperate and frantic pace that races us both to the finish line. Apparently, I'm not the only one who's overly excited. I move my body to match his pace, rising and falling with him with every thrust. His mouth on mine is the only thing that muffles the sound of my pleasure, and not well.

His lips leave mine, starting a trail down my neck and finding my most sensitive skin. I cover my mouth with my hand, not wanting to piss off Bones in the room next door. He's told us multiple times in the past three months to be quieter, but I can't help it. Sammy makes me fall apart every single time, better than my favorite vibrator ever did.

I feel my pleasure gaining on me, threatening to pull me apart. The world is already going black, stars dancing behind my eyes. I no longer care how loud I'm being as Sammy pulses inside of me, bringing me closer to the edge until I fall over completely. I'm unable to hold off my orgasm any longer. Stars are replaced with fireworks as the feeling rips through me, starting at my core and radiating all over my body.

When I open my eyes, Sammy lies next to me, exhausted. He watches me with hooded eyes. I see how thoroughly his own pleasure overtook him. His breathing is ragged as he tries to come down. He runs his hand through my hair, then rubs it down my body until he finds my hand. He brings it to his

lips and kisses it gently, causing butterflies to break out in my stomach.

The man was just inside of me, bringing me the most intense pleasure of my life, but these are the moments that take my breath away. It's the quiet, small gestures and the way he looks at me when he's exceedingly happy. I don't know what to do with these feelings but let them wash over me.

We lie there, staring in each other's eyes and enjoying the quiet afterglow for a long few moments. It's such a stark difference from our first time together. Then, we thought it might be our first and last time. We never imagined that one day we'd have these quiet, luxurious moments to enjoy one another. So much has changed since then. We both feel like different people. But he's still my Sammy, and I'm still his Chessy. Always.

I move closer to him, lightly touching his lips with mine. I breathe him in as he pulls me close. His arms wrap tightly around me. Pressed against him with nothing between us but a thin layer of my lacy bra, I feel more loved and adored than I ever imagined. My body is already alight, ready for another go at him.

EPILOGUE

One Month Later



Snake

The vibrant Spanish sunset casts a warm glow upon us as I watch Francesca kneel before me. Her eyes are filled with love and vulnerability. She takes me into her mouth, and I throw my head back, driven insane by the feeling of her lips around my cock. I lean against the balcony railing, trying to get a grip as she works her magic. She told me it was a fantasy of hers to have sex on a balcony. I was more than happy to fulfill that fantasy.

Her head bobs back and forth as she takes me in as far as I'll go. I breathe out, unable to control the pleasure wreaking havoc on my body. I'm nearly trembling, coming undone with each flick of her tongue. I'm so close to the edge, but I stop her because this wasn't her fantasy. Not by half.

"Lie down," I command, pushing her shoulder lightly to move her away. "Take off your underwear."

"Who said I was wearing any?" She shoots me a wicked wink.

She lies down on the balcony floor. The setting sun casts a warm, yellow glow on her skin. Her hair fans out around her head, and I swear she's the most beautiful creature I've ever seen. I always thought she was, but I never hoped that one day I'd be kneeling in front of her, about to taste her. Truthfully, before I left her, I didn't hope for anything more than a tortured, longing glance.

Now, I bend down, pulling up her skirt to find that, indeed, she's completely naked underneath. And her juices are dripping down her legs. I start there, licking up her desire as she gasps, writhing wildly as I move further and further up her legs. When I'm at her entrance, she nearly screams, her voice mixing with the crashing waves of the ocean.

I swirl my tongue around her clit. She releases a string of curse words so long that I'm not sure I know all of them. She's right where I want her. I flick my tongue against her a few more times, causing her breath to go ragged, before I move away and climb on top of her, positioning myself at her entrance.

She looks up at me with love and anticipation. She simply nods, indicating she wants me. She's desperate for me. I slide easily inside of her, immediately enveloped into her hot center. Her eyes snap shut. Her back arches against me. I move a hand behind her head to hold it as I slide inside her hard and fast, the way I know she likes best. She bites down on her fist, trying to muffle her cries.

The sun sets rapidly. The sky fills with a gorgeous pink and purple scape that gradually grows darker. A work of art hung above us drops as we fall over the edge together, clinging to each other for support.

I kiss her sweetly, staying inside of her for as long as possible. There's something about the warmth of her around me mixing with the cooling night air. It's an addictive feeling. I'll chase it for the rest of my life. I want her all the time, everywhere. I want to know what it's like to be inside of her in every exotic corner of the world.

She spent our time apart traveling, discovering the world. She was my world, though. Without her, I was lost to my own devices, shut up inside a small room with nothing but computer screens as my escape. When she first brought up the idea of a trip the night of Graveyard and Meredith's wedding, I wasn't so sure.

I didn't know how to leave the MC so soon, especially without someone to cover for me. In fifteen years, I hadn't taken a single vacation. I wasn't sure I knew how. But she insisted that I'd given them the last fifteen years of my life and it was time I gave her my time. She wasn't wrong, of course. She usually isn't.

So, I told Seer that I was leaving for a few weeks and he'd have to figure out who could cover for me. He'd complained that I was taking my best replacement with me, but I reminded him that Data was also an option. Though he was young, he was incredibly talented. As long as Seer didn't need anything too violent or illegal, it would be fine.

Francesca was over the moon when I told her that I'd taken the time off. The next step was choosing where we would go. She's so much better traveled than I am. She's seen so much of the world. But she immediately

told me she wanted to go to Majorca. She'd spent a lot of time in Spain when we were apart. It was the place she wanted to show me most. How could I refuse her?

When we landed in Barcelona, we decided to spend a few days exploring. She showed me all of her favorite haunts, including her old apartment. I couldn't help but feel guilty, thinking that I could have been with her for all of it if I hadn't been so stupid. But on the second day of the trip, she banned me from feeling bad about the past. She reminded me that we would never be able to go back to change it. The best gift we could give ourselves would be forgiveness.

Since then, I feel like a different person. Something has almost imperceptibly shifted between us, like we're different people. In a way, we are. At the very least, we're more healed. Resentment and anger don't hang over us anymore. And there's no more Ronan. She isn't in Spain running for her life, so she gets to experience it in a different way.

After Barcelona, we took a small plane to Majorca, soaking up the beach and the sun. She told me that she never let herself really enjoy where she was before. She had her small moments of happiness in life, but she never felt like she had the freedom to let loose and do such simple things as plan a beach getaway.

I know exactly what she means. It's the same reason I shut myself up in the clubhouse. In a way, I was punishing myself, not letting myself enjoy anything on the outside. I let my world become small out of fear and regret. I'd hurt her so much and I didn't think I would ever deserve to enjoy life again. What would I have done if Ronan hadn't gotten out of prison? I probably would have spent the rest of my life in that room, sulking.

Now she's here next to me, breathing deeply as she comes down from the high I've just given her. I want to bury myself inside of her again, to leave my mark on her, but we have dinner reservations.

The next morning, she's up early, dressed in a skimpy bikini that leaves little to the imagination. I'm not sure how I'm supposed to sit next to her on the beach all morning without wanting to take her in front of the rest of the vacationers. She kisses me chastely and tells me that waiting will make it even more worth it later, but she greatly overestimates my willpower.

We find a secluded spot to set up, and she asks me to rub tanning oil on her back. She's trying to kill me, I'm sure of it. She's teasing me when she undoes her bikini string. She claims she's doing it to avoid tan lines, but

when she turns over after fifteen minutes, I catch a glimpse of her nipples. I feel my swim shorts tightening.

I nearly have to run into the water to get away from her. I swear I hear her laughter as I go, but I can't say for certain. The cool water helps me clear my head and I relax into it, as my muscles unwind. I close my eyes and float in the water for a few minutes before I feel her tiny hands covering my eyes. I right myself, realizing I've floated out quite a long way. Nobody can see us from here.

"I'm so not having sex in the ocean," she says firmly, quirking her eyebrow at me. "Just so we're clear about that."

Then she wraps her arms and legs around me, pulling me in for a kiss. I kick my legs to keep us both afloat. With each kick, I feel her grinding her heat against me. She swallows my groans with her kisses, eventually moving her hand down between us to touch me. When her hand wraps around my shaft, I feel like I might come right there. It feels so good and so warm in comparison to the water.

"Do you like that?" she whispers into my ear. All I can do is nod.

She kisses me again. Her tongue dances around mine. I hold her close to me, grinding into her as she pumps her hand around me. I hiss in pleasure before feeling the orgasm overtake me. I can't believe she just did that, but I shouldn't be so surprised. She's always finding ways to amaze me, most of the time making me believe that she doesn't even try. She exists, and it's enough to knock me off my feet.

Her hair catches the sun. I feel like she's glowing, radiating light. If she told me she was an angel, I would believe her. She pulls her sunglasses off of her head to cover my eyes and I catch my reflection in them. I've changed since she's come back, become braver and bolder. I didn't think I would notice it physically, but I barely recognize myself. I look happier than ever.

I kiss her again. Her warm face melts against mine. We fit together perfectly, molded together in harmony. No one will ever be able to tear us apart again, mostly because we've become indistinguishable from one another. Neither of us exists without the other anymore. That's the way it is now.

We swim back to shore, laughing in joy and lust, ready to rip our bathing suits off and have at each other. She makes me wait longer, taking her time walking up the beach, moving her body in tantalizing ways as she goes. I'm mesmerized by the way she walks, unable to take my eyes off her perfect ass.

I can't wait to have it in my hands, squeezing gently as she cries out in pleasure.

I shake my head to avoid an uncomfortable situation. Anyone could see me. But if they see her first, they'll understand. Keeping my hands off her isn't an option. Still, she teases. When we reach the hotel, she covers herself in her oversized towel, blocking any view of her. The second we're in the elevator, she slips off her bikini top and puts it in my pocket.

All morning, she's been winding me up, waiting for the moment that we got back here and she could put me out of my misery. She's a temptress. I have to reassess the image of her in the water. If she's an angel, she's a fallen angel, sent here specifically to tempt me to madness.

By the time we reach our floor, she's also slipped out of her bikini bottoms, also handing them to me. I shake with the effort to not touch her. The second the elevator opens, she takes off running. She reaches our room and enters before I can process what's happened. I approach the door slowly and knock on it, trying to control my breathing. Whatever she has planned will probably wreck me.

She opens the door, a shy look on her face. She bats her eyelashes at me.

"Can I help you sir?" she says in a seductive voice. "I'm afraid my boyfriend isn't here right now. You've caught me at a bad time."

She opens the door to reveal herself in the towel, and I swallow hard.

"I locked myself out of my room," I answer, my throat dry. We've never roleplayed before and I'm terrified of breaking the moment. "I was wondering if I could borrow your phone."

"Sure," she says, her voice dripping with sex. "It's right over there."

As she points toward the phone, she drops her towel, leaving her standing in front of me, newly tanned and completely naked. Her nipples are hard. I see the telltale moisture dripping down her legs. She wants this as badly as I do. I should make her wait. But fuck me, if I don't have an ounce of self-control left.

"Oops," she whispers shyly, pretending to cover herself.

"Don't you dare," I say, throwing her over my shoulder and carrying her to the bed. I put her down and move on top of her, taking one of her nipples into my mouth.

"This is highly inappropriate, sir." She giggles. "What would my boyfriend think if he came back and found me like this?"

"He'd beat the shit out of me," I say quickly, not wanting to drag myself

away from her for too long. “And then he’d show you that he’s the only man you’ll ever need.”

“Why don’t you show me?” she breathes. I do just that, thrusting into her until she screams my name.

For dinner, we walk down to a little restaurant right on the water. The sun is starting to set. I’m reminded of our night on the balcony. She’s as beautiful now, and I can’t take my eyes off her. I notice that others also can’t take their eyes off of her, but I don’t feel threatened. She’s a stunning woman, and she’s looking back at me with the same amount of love. We’re it for each other.

“It’s a shame we ever have to leave,” I say over a delicious paella. “I could live here, I think. I see why you loved it so much.”

“I do miss it,” she admits. “But when I came back after...without you, it felt hollow. It didn’t have the same magic anymore.”

“And now?” I ask.

“The magic is definitely back,” she says with a smirk. “In spades.”

“That’s good to know,” I tell her, pulling the velvet box out of my pocket. “Because I’ve been agonizing over where I should ask this question. I can’t think of a better place.”

I move out of my seat and kneel in front of her. She doesn’t cry or cover her mouth in the way I’ve seen other women do when they get engaged. She looks at me like she’s been waiting for this for a long time and I need to hurry the hell up with it already. I slide the ring to her and wait with bated breath for her to answer.

EPILOGUE

Francesca



The Eiffel Tower glistens behind us as the officiant declares us husband and wife. The warm Parisian air envelops us. It surrounds us in a cozy embrace. When Sammy asked me to marry him, I didn't want to wait long. We'd spent so much time apart, it made no sense to delay it. I was sure I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him, to have him touching me and holding me as often as possible.

Our real, legal ceremony took place in Meredith and Graveyard's living room. We were having dinner together one night, as Meredith and I had gotten closer in the months since we had gotten back. We were drinking too much wine and joking around when Meredith told us we should just get the ceremony over with.

"Seriously, haven't you known each other for like...thirty years?" she asked, at least two glasses of wine past sobriety.

"Meredith," Graveyard had warned, though he also had a smirk etched on his face. "Leave them alone. We didn't like it when people pried into our relationship."

"We were still new, though," she argued.

"Are you calling us old?" I'd screamed in mock offense.

"Obviously not," she'd said sarcastically. "But you two wasted so much time not being together. Years and years! It's time you make it official. And you'll never believe who just got his officiant license online?"

Graveyard shot us a guilty look and shrugged, taking another sip of his beer.

"You do only need one witness to make it official," he told us. "I'll sign the marriage certificate tomorrow."

So, a little tipsy and a lot in love, Sammy and I said our vows to each other in the living room, full on a delicious homecooked meal and surrounded by two of our closest friends. Everyone else was livid, of course. Abigail almost had a conniption that she wasn't there to help me pick out a dress or decorate. Seer and Tory sent us a very passive aggressive note with our wedding gift. But all in all, it was very us.

We eventually agreed to a wedding party, thrown at Abigail and Pocus's house a few weeks ago. Once again, Abigail and Evanescence had shown their incredible, nearly supernatural decorating skills. They'd turned their living room into a five-star ballroom. It was a beautiful and sweet gesture from people who loved us and wanted to celebrate with us.

Here in Paris, on our honeymoon as the moon rises high, I can't help but feel like this is all I wanted all along. A quiet, spur-of-the-moment ceremony in a gorgeous location. After our trip to Spain, I wanted to take Sammy everywhere. There were so many places he'd never been, so many places he needed to experience. I wanted to be there and watch his face as he took in everything.

Our second day in Paris, we saw a couple tying the knot and asked the officiant what it would take for us to do the same. We showed him our wedding rings, and he told us his company had a cancellation the next day if we wanted it. I looked at Sammy, who smiled at me in the way I knew that he was thinking the same thing I was.

I spent the morning at a little boutique by our hotel buying a white dress. It was simple, hanging past the knee with a faux lace pattern from the waist up. I found a salon that took me as a walk-in and had them do a simple up-do and light makeup. When they finished, it was exactly what I'd always imagined. Even better, a few hours later, I got to walk down "the aisle" to a Sammy who was already bawling.

Despite the fact that we'd already been married for three weeks, this felt a lot more like the real thing. This was our moment, more so than the small ceremony in Graveyard and Meredith's apartment or the party at Pocus and Abigail's house. This ceremony, with all of Paris seemingly watching, a sea of strangers cheering us on, is exactly what I always wanted with Sammy.

When the officiant declares us husband and wife, Sammy pulls me against him tightly, kissing me with abandon. There's no sense of appropriateness or concern about PDA. We are in Paris, after all. His tongue slips into my mouth. I can feel his hardness growing between us. It's all we

can do to pull away and accept the cheers of curious onlookers.

Rather than having a celebratory dinner, we order room service to our room. We're more interested in devouring each other than the food. My dress is hung up carefully in the closet, the first order of business when we got back to the room. We've ruined a few too many clothes in the last year, I didn't want him to rip my wedding dress off me.

Sammy moves down my body, leaving a train of hot kisses that set me on fire. When he gets to my breasts, he takes his time, massaging and licking each one until I'm nearly undone. I grip the mattress for support. He moves one hand down my body to rest between my legs. Then he slides his fingers inside, bringing me to my first orgasm of the night.

I've barely come down when he kisses down my stomach, until he's hovering above my center. He looks up, a teasing look in his eye. He knows I need a minute, but he also has the mischievous look of someone who wants to drive me wild all night. I try to catch my breath, but it's no use as he begins kissing my inner thigh. His light stubble grazes against my skin. My head sinks into my pillow and my eyes roll into the back of my head as I enjoy the sensation.

He nips and sucks at my skin. I'll have a light bruise there. Leave it to Sammy to give me a hickey where only he can see. But he loves marking me wherever he can, I think as a sign to himself that this is all real. After everything that happened between us, sometimes I think he's still afraid that I'll disappear forever and this will all have been a dream. Sometimes I have the same fear.

But as I slide my left hand into his hair, I catch the gleam of my wedding band. I know that we're tied together for life. With this small movement, he knows I'm ready, he moves, replacing his fingers with his tongue. He licks and sucks gently, his warm breath against my clit driving me wild. I dig my fingers deeper into his hair, letting him know that I need more, more friction, more of him, just more.

He responds immediately, adding his fingers back into the mix. He pushes them deeply inside of me, curling them around until he finds my most secret inner spot. I nearly vibrate off the bed. The sensation is unlike anything I've ever experienced before. He got me there quickly. It's the most intense pleasure I've ever experienced. In our small hotel room, in the city of love, I don't feel the need to hold back. I scream as loud as I want to, letting him know that he's right on the money.

He pulls away slowly, satisfied, watching me as I ride the waves of my orgasm. When I finally come down to earth, I pull him against me. I want to feel his naked body pressed against mine. He's so hard, straining against his own skin, seemingly. I pull him inside, letting him find his respite there. We move together, finding another sweet release together, our sweat-soaked skin leaving patterns on the sheets.

After Paris, we decide to go to Greece. Neither of us have been, and it's high on our bucket list. We've made no agenda for this trip, set no timeline to return. That's exactly how we want it. Thanks to a little money I've set aside from Ronan, we have all the time in the world. I figured Ronan wouldn't mind since he won't be needing it ever again.

Once all the families were taken care of, I spread the rest of the money out to various charities throughout the country. The idea of being charitable would destroy him. There's nothing in the world Ronan would like less. He's gone for good now, and his money is helping thousands of people. I made sure of that. Of course, a large portion of it was anonymously donated to Meredith's youth center. She doesn't know it was me, and I plan to keep it that way.

I sent exact instructions to set up a trust for the kids. I want to make sure that they all have the opportunity to go to college. I've also instructed that the kids in the foster system have more set aside, as they'll need it to live on their own when they age out of the system. I don't want any other kid to be put in the position that Sammy and I were put in. These kids shouldn't have to use their gifts to steal the money to live. They deserve more dignity than that.

When we arrive in Greece, Sammy and I are both taken aback by the view. Santorini looks like it was pulled out of a movie. It shouldn't be real, shouldn't be as gorgeous as it is. I'm immediately drawn to the water. As soon as we've settled into our hotel, I race him down to the shore. We immediately undress and make love in the Aegean Sea. After our dalliance, we walk hand in hand up the steep mountain to our hotel.

As the sun sets over the horizon, casting a warm golden glow upon the world, I find myself standing on the edge of a new beginning. Beside me stands the man who has captured my heart, my soulmate, and life partner.

I no longer think of our time apart with regret. Instead, I see it as a necessary step we both needed to grow into the people we were supposed to be. I was lucky in a sense, traveling across Europe and discovering myself. I intend to show Sammy every single place I ever visited and thought of him.

Europe is full of cafés and beaches where I longed for him for years and years.

But now we're here, together, in a place that neither of us have experienced. The world is a vast place, large enough to encompass our love and passion for each other. We get to go wherever we want, see whatever we want, and never have to look over our shoulders again, wondering if someone is going to come after us. Ronan is destroyed, and we are free.

Meanwhile, the Ruthless Kings are learning to survive without Sammy there. Sammy had a class to teach everyone the basics, and for anything else. Data is just a phone call away. Meredith wasn't thrilled that we've tasked a thirteen-year-old with running the tech, but he loves it. Plus, Seer agreed to give him community service hours. He'll have thousands of hours by the time he heads to college. He can get into any university he chooses.

That's my one and only regret, but time is still on our side. Sammy and I have the rest of our lives to fulfill any dreams we may have. If I want to get my degree one day, I'll have his support one hundred percent. But until then, I plan to make love to him in as many European countries as possible.

We spend five luxurious days basking in the Greek sun before we decide to pack up and head to Italy. Rome, especially, is filled with places I wanted to show him, but the Italian countryside is also full of vineyards I want to explore with him. We hold hands in the taxi from the airport. His hand eventually ends up settled on my knee, rubbing circles across it and driving me crazy.

When I look at him, he's peering out the window, taking in the view. I'm not sure he's aware of what he's doing, or if he always subconsciously feels the need to touch me. He certainly always seems to find a way. There's often no expectation in his touch, only the assurance that he's here and he always will be. I feel so loved when he touches me like this, so precious to him.

I cover his hand and squeeze, getting his attention. He glances at me, confused, and I give him that look. The one that says he better be prepared to strip down the second we get to the hotel room. I've gotten addicted to the sight of his naked body, I almost wish we never had to wear clothes. He looks back at me with understanding, his hand moving further up my leg with intention.

We try our best to behave ourselves for the rest of the drive and in the time it takes to check into the hotel. The second the elevator door closes and we're alone inside, I pounce on him, wrapping myself around him. His hands

move down to grope my ass. I hold on to him for dear life as he kisses me senseless. When the elevator door opens, I've forgotten where we are. Thankfully, no one is around to witness our semi-pornographic display.

We all but run to the room, fumbling with the key card in our excitement. Once we're inside, we both make good on my wish. I've never gotten undressed so quickly. We can't even make it to the bed. He takes me right there, against the door. The only thing holding me up is his body and the door. It's mesmerizing, the rhythm we create as we come together.

Part of me never wants to go home, wanting to have him like this in every corner of the world. I want to see if the sun sets differently on his skin in different countries. I want to make love outside, seeing the stars over his shoulder as he takes me. I want to hear him say "I love you" in the native language of whatever country we enter.

I want to eat every delicious dish the world has to offer. I want him to be sitting across from me looking slightly worried about the spice level. I want to watch his face as he marvels at the street performers or haggles with shopkeepers when he thinks their prices are too high. I want to see the joy in his eyes one day when I tell him I'm expecting our first child, and the terror on his face when my water breaks. I want to watch him dance with our daughter in the living room, her feet on top of his as he tries to awkwardly remember the steps.

He's mine, forever now. And I won't ever miss a single moment with him.

The End

ALSO BY K.L. SAVAGE

RUTHLESS KINGS MC™ LAS VEGAS

[PREQUEL - REAPER'S RISE](#)

[BOOK ONE - REAPER](#)

[BOOK TWO - BOOMER](#)

[BOOK THREE - TOOL](#)

[BOOK FOUR - POODLE](#)

[BOOK FIVE - SKIRT](#)

[BOOK SIX - PIRATE](#)

[BOOK 6.5 - A RUTHLESS HALLOWEEN](#)

[BOOK SEVEN - DOC](#)

[BOOK EIGHT - TONGUE](#)

[BOOK NINE - A RUTHLESS CHRISTMAS](#)

[BOOK TEN - KNIVES](#)

[BOOK ELEVEN- TONGUE'S TARGET](#)

[BOOK TWELVE- BULLSEYE](#)

[BOOK THIRTEEN- ORBITING MARS](#)

[BOOK FOURTEEN- SLINGSHOT](#)

[BOOK FIFTEEN- TONGUE'S TASTE](#)

[BOOK SIXTEEN- BADGE](#)

[BOOK SEVENTEEN-EVANESE](#)

RUTHLESS KINGS MC™ ATLANTIC CITY

[BOOK ONE- BOOMER'S RISE](#)

[BOOK TWO- KANSAS](#)

[BOOK THREE- ONE EYE](#)

RUTHLESS KINGS MC™ BATON ROUGE

[BOOK ONE- RAINBOW](#)

RUTHLESS KINGS MC™ LA GRANGE, TX

[BOOK ONE- TRIPLETS RISE](#)

[BOOK TWO- SAVAGE](#)

[BOOK THREE- ZEKE](#)

RUTHLESS HELLHOUNDS MC

[BOOK ONE- MERCY](#)

[BOOK TWO- WHISTLER](#)

RUTHLESS ASYLUM

[BOOK ONE- LUNATIC](#)

[BOOK TWO- CHAOTIC](#)

RUTHLESS KINGS MC NEW ORLEANS

[BOOK ONE- POCUS](#)

[BOOK TWO- SEER](#)

[BOOK THREE- HEX](#)

[BOOK FOUR- GRAVEYARD](#)

[BOOK FIVE- SNAKE](#)

MORETTI SYNDICATE

[BOOK ONE- MATEO](#)

ROYAL BASTARDS MC PORTLAND OREGON

BOOK ONE- [THRASHER](#)

[BOOK TWO- RAVEN](#)

RUTHLESS KINGS MC IS NOW ON AUDIBLE. ALREADY AN AUDIBLE SUBSCRIBER [CLICK HERE](#) TO LISTEN NOW. NON AUDIBLE SUBSCRIBERS [CLICK HERE](#) TO ENJOY A FREE MONTH NOW.

JOIN THE MADNESS

VISIT <http://klsavage.com/> TO SIGN UP FOR MY NEWSLETTER OR STALK ME AT THE LINKS BELOW.

[FACEBOOK](#) | [INSTAGRAM](#)

[AMAZON](#) | [TWITTER](#) | [BOOKBUB](#) | [GOODREADS](#) | [PINTEREST](#) | [WEBSITE](#)