



# UNBREAKABLE

# *Bonds*

LOVE & LUST IN 'THE BIG EASY'

ROMA JAMES

# Unbreakable Bonds

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# Chapter One



B<sup>astien</sup>



"THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT we needed, Etienne." I hold out the frosted glass of beer to toast my best friend and brother in arms.

But his glass is still on the counter and his eyes are elsewhere in the boisterous beachside bar in Rio, where we're fortunate enough to be stationed with our Marine unit, bound by duty and adrenaline.

The icy beer is a respite from the oppressive heat that clings to my skin and the brutal schedule of life as an elite sniper.

"I'd say you're wrong, Bastien." Etienne's low voice rumbles like a distant storm. "*That* over there is exactly what we need."

I follow his sharp eyes to the target of his vigilant stare, the prey he has in his sights.

"Leave it to a Marine sniper to instantly seize on the most desirable target in all of Ipanema Beach." Victor, our unit commander, visibly takes a deep breath and laughs. He's not bowled over by much, but this woman has managed to achieve what even grueling military training hasn't: the ability to shut us up.

The plunging red dress blazes like a siren over the woman's flawless curves. Every movement of her body as she holds court in the raucous bar, samba music pulsating through every surface, is like foreplay.

Time seems to slow as the woman saunters past, each step a symphony of confidence and allure. A wave of awe hovers over our command, and Etienne and I look at each other, then at our unit.

This prize is ours alone to capture. The sense of rivalry for her sets a charge into the atmosphere.

"May the best man win." Etienne finally returns the longstanding toast.

Her long, dark tresses cascade down her back, caressing her sun-kissed skin, as she leaves a trail of desire in her wake.

Etienne's lips curl into a knowing smile, the facade of invincibility momentarily faltering to reveal the vulnerable man that lies beneath. It's a rare sight, a glimpse behind the armor that he wears with practiced grace and precision. I don't make those kinds of mistakes.

We're closer than brothers, but we're also each other's oldest and favorite adversaries. Competitiveness has always underscored our bond, from our childhood games, growing up in New Orleans, to shooting competitions in our sniper unit, to the tournament before us: getting the woman everyone wants to end the night with in our bed.

A surge of determination courses through my veins as I meet Etienne's gaze, our silent understanding propelling us forward. "Why don't we go over and we'll introduce ourselves?"

"Not if I get there first," Etienne challenges. "Then it'll just be me introducing myself and taking her to my bed. You think she'll talk to you once she's caught sight of me?" He gives a playful smirk.

"And when you guys fuck it up after getting in each other's way, I'll be there to collect the spoils!" Jim, one of the newest members of our unit, calls over. His goading is met by cheers and whoops as Etienne begins to weave through the throngs of people, seamlessly navigating the crowded bar.

"I'll take bets," Victor volunteers. "I think it'll be Etienne."

"No way," challenges Sheldon, a private in our unit. "Etienne's a peacock. Bastien's a falcon."

As I catch up with Etienne to approach the magnetic woman in red, the voices of my unit fade into the recesses of my mind. The pounding bass of the music reverberates through my bones, invigorating me as we close the distance between us and the sensual target who has captivated us.

The air crackles with anticipation as we lean against the bar, enveloped in a charged atmosphere that seems to thicken with every passing moment. I take a calculated step closer, my voice dropping to a sultry growl as I address the curvy woman, my eyes locking onto hers.

"I have to say, I'm worried about you being here." I inject just the right amount of charm, confidence, and mystery into my words.

"Oh really? And why's that?" Her voice is deep.

"Fire hazard. Too much heat for this small bar. Everything's liable to combust. I know I am." The delivery is what makes it work, not the line itself. I can tell from the electricity in her eyes that it does. "I'm Bastien. This is my dear friend, Etienne. And you?"

She faces us flirtatiously, her dark eyes filled with a sense of insatiability. They appraise us with an intensity that sends a tingle down my spine, as if she knows that she's our prize to win and she's accepting the challenge.

"Lenora," she purrs, her voice humming with allure. "Nice to meet you both."

Her hand extends an invitation that I eagerly accept, bringing it gently to my lips. I feel the electric jolt of connection as my breath brushes against her knuckles, heat radiating from her touch. Etienne mirrors my actions, his movements as smooth and deliberate as his reputation suggests.

Etienne breaks the silence, his voice carrying a blend of confidence and welcoming warmth. "Could we buy you a drink?" he asks, his words laced with subtle provocation.

Her grin lingers like a secret, and she slides onto a barstool. As she moves, her leg brushes against mine, sparking a full-body craving for her. The chemistry is palpable, drawing us closer together.

"Two caipirinhas, please," I request from the bartender, my eyes never leaving the woman's sultry gaze. Etienne, ever in tune with the moment, slips an arm around her waist, drawing her closer, their bodies aligning with fluid ease.

"Make that three," Etienne interjects smoothly, his unwavering attention focused solely on her face. The possessiveness stirs within me, a familiar pang of justified entitlement that I don't try to hide beneath my practiced smile.

"Three it is," I agree, subtly clinking our glasses together upon their arrival. "To new friends and unforgettable nights." The words of my toast resonate with the promise of the unknown, the allure of what lies ahead.

"To unforgettable nights," she echoes in a near-whisper, her gaze locking onto mine before flicking to meet Etienne's. There's an unspoken agreement, a shared understanding in her eyes—an invitation to a world where inhibitions are shed and desires run wild.

"Are you boys here on vacation?" she asks coyly, her voice laced with curiosity as she takes a sip of her drink.

"Something like that," Etienne replies enigmatically, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly. It's a familiar look—one of vigilant assessment—as he instinctively gauges the situation, remaining prepared for any potential threats that may arise.

"Are you alone here?" I inquire, redirecting the conversation, hoping to uncover a safer path for exploration.

"Tonight, I am," she admits, a smirk playing at the corners of her lips. Her eyes dance with mischief, hinting at the limitless possibilities that lie ahead.

"But somehow I think that's a temporary state of being."

"Is that so?" I respond, a mischievous grin curling my lips, ready to meet her challenge head-on. "Well, you've got two estimable contenders right here."

"Two?" she raises her eyebrows, feigning innocence. Yet the flicker of arousal in her eyes betrays her true desires. "What would I do with two?"

"Ah, that depends on how adventurous you're feeling," Etienne interjects, his voice lowering to a low rumble that resonates with a primal heat, a carnivore within mouth's reach of a small defenseless mammal.

"Adventurous?" she laughs, a seductive sound like a thunderbolt through my veins. Her finger traces along the rim of her glass, leaving a tantalizing trail in its wake. "I think I can handle that. At least if history is any indication."

The mental image of her in bed as part of a different trio stokes my desire and raises the stakes. I'm determined to wipe those men from her memory. After I'm done with her, she won't remember anything but the pleasure of my body dominating hers.

"Good," I declare. The decision is made. If Etienne's in, so am I. We are a team, bound by a bond that transcends mere friendship, and tonight will be no exception. But even in sharing, I have no doubt that we'll be the fiercest of rivals, engaged in carnal combat to give this woman ever-cresting pleasure. To be the ones who make her lose control and bring her to her knees.

The rhythm of the music washes over us, seductive and pulsing. Our bodies meld together, three shadows swaying to an intoxicating beat. I press my lips to her neck, savoring the taste of her salt-kissed skin, while Etienne's hand curls around her hip, guiding her movements.

"Let's get out of here, Bastien," she breathes against my ear, her voice a sultry invitation. "You come as well, Etienne."

Good. She knows who's in charge.

"Lead the way," I reply, but it's a concession in words only. I'll be following no one's lead tonight but my own, and neither will she. I catch Etienne's eye, and he nods with a gaze that's dark and hungry.



She takes our hands and leads us away from the bar down the moonlit beach, the sand warm beneath our feet, the waves whispering secrets. We follow her like a moth to flame, desire pulling us closer, anticipation building with every step.

In a secluded cove, hidden from the rest of the world by towering cliffs, the intensity between us ignites. Our mouths crash together, a tangle of tongues and teeth as we fight for dominance. Her laughter rings through the night air, full of life and lust.

"Fuck, you're gorgeous," I growl, my hands finding their way to thin dress straps, deftly pulling down. Her breasts spill free, begging to be touched. My fingers trace circles around her nipples, teasing them into hard peaks. She moans, head thrown back, eyes closed in pleasure.

Etienne slides his hand under the hem of her dress to her satin panties, his fingers slipping past the damp fabric to find the slick heat waiting for him. She gasps, her body arching into his touch, desperate for more.

"Please," she whispers, her eyes locked on mine, then flickering to Etienne's. There's no hesitation, no doubt, just pure, unbridled desire.

"Ask and you shall receive," I say, my voice low and promising. She doesn't need to know the depth of our bond, the lengths we've gone for one another. Tonight, it's just us, slaves to our primal drives, constrained by nothing but the bonds of lust.

"Etienne," she breathes, reaching out to him. He steps closer, his fingers still buried inside her, their eyes locked in a fiery gaze.

"Fuck, Bastien," he murmurs, the tension between us palpable, electric. "This is going to be one for the legends."

And as the moon casts its silvery light upon us, we give ourselves over to the night and all its unspeakable sins.

The symphony of her moans mixes with the seductive rhythm of the ocean waves crashing against the shore. Her body writhes between Etienne and me, her skin glistening in the moonlight as our lips and hands explore every inch of her.

"God, you two are fucking amazing," she gasps, her fingers clawing at the sand as we work in tandem to bring her pleasure.

"Only the best for you," I reply with a smirk, relishing her wanton abandon.

"Enough teasing," Etienne growls, his patience wearing thin. He yanks off his shirt, tossing it aside with reckless disregard. I follow suit, removing

the last barriers between us and the woman we both desire. We roll condoms over our dicks as she studies us with impatience.

"Please," she begs, her eyes wide and full of hunger. "I need you both, now."

"Your wish is our command," I say, guiding her onto all fours. Positioning myself behind her, I grip her hips firmly before plunging into her wet warm pussy, dripping and yielding for me. The penetration elicits a guttural cry that echoes throughout the beach, letting fortunate passersby enjoy a sliver of our pleasure.

Etienne steps in front of her, offering his throbbing cock for her eager mouth. She takes him in without hesitation, sucking and licking with a feverish intensity that has him gripping her hair tightly.

"Fuck," he grunts. "This is... fuck!"

It's a wild dance of lust and desire, our bodies entwined and moving in perfect rhythm, like overlapping harmonies lining up in fugue. The heat between us blurs the lines of reality, leaving only the primal instincts that drive us deeper into the night.

"Come for us," I demand, my thrusts becoming more urgent as I feel the orgasm rising in my body. "Let go and let us take you over the edge."

She continues to move her body in a mission to bring us ecstasy. And with hard, long thrusts, I'm on the brink of bringing her to the same peak of pleasure. I feel my release rising as the slick softness of her pussy engulfs me in faster strokes. My hot cum surges, my body succumbing completely in tandem with hers.

Her body tenses, a shudder racking through her as her climax crashes down like a tidal wave. Etienne and I share a knowing glance, our bond strengthened by the shared experience.

"That was incredible," she whispers, her voice ragged and breathless. Etienne's dick is glazed from her saliva, wetting her lips and chin, glinting in the moonlight. She doesn't wipe it off, seeming to want to keep the remnants of this night as long as possible, a reminder of the delicious rendezvous that none of us expected, but all three of us needed like water or oxygen.

"Unforgettable," I reply with a grin, the night far from over. As we continue to explore and indulge in one another, the world beyond the secluded cove fades away, leaving only the raw connection between three souls exploring the darkness within.

The rhythmic crashing of waves against the shore serenades us as we walk along the moonlit beach, our bodies still bathed in the aftermath. The salty sea breeze caresses our skin, mingling with the intoxicating scent of desire that lingers in the air. The woman, still shrouded in mystery, walks between Etienne and me, our arms draped over her shoulders, forming an intimate bond. Her laughter harmonizes with the soothing sounds of the ocean.

"Tonight was... something else," she breathes, her voice a sultry whisper as mesmerizing as the ocean's persistent beat.

"Something else entirely." My gaze is drawn to the distant lights of the hotel that loom on the horizon, a bittersweet reminder of the finite time we have together. "Something for the ages, something that happens maybe a few times in a lifetime."

"Especially with two incredibly sexy Marines," she adds with a playful squeeze, her touch electrifying.

"Hey, it's not every day we encounter someone who can match our special interests," Etienne interjects, his grin a mix of mischief and tenderness. He moves easily, always fully himself with anyone, even strangers. It's a quality I've always admired in him, as it's one I constantly have to work on.

The sand beneath our feet molds to our steps. Each footprint we leave is eventually swallowed by the relentless tide, erasing any trace of our presence. How easily the memories we create can be washed away.

"Promise me something," Lenora insists, the urgency in her voice rising. She turns to face us, her eyes brimming with determination and vulnerability.

"Anything," Etienne assures, his voice unwavering.

"Remember this night," she says, her voice laden with a sense of longing. A playful wink follows, as if she knows the impact she's had on us.

"I'd be hard pressed to forget it," I vow.

Our lips lock for the last time, the taste of salt and desire intermingling. We all tacitly understand that this is where our paths diverge, at least for now. With a final embrace, we release each other, returning to the shadows that birthed us.

"See you around," she whispers, her voice carried away by the crashing waves, barely audible yet resolute.

"Count on it," I reply, my heart heavy with the knowledge that our paths will likely never cross again. Etienne and I walk away, our strides

synchronized and our bond fortified, stronger than ever.

## Chapter Two



**E**tienne  
*Three years later...*

The first light of dawn filters through the cracks of the curtains, casting a gentle glow that signals the start of a new day. As consciousness slowly reclaims him, Bastien begins to stir, his movements laden with the remnants of sleep. Sensing his reluctance to embrace the morning, I lean in close, my breath brushing against his ear.

"Time to wake up, Sleeping Beauty," I shout, unable to contain my grin as he rouses from his slumber.

Groaning, Bastien swats at me halfheartedly, his eyes still closed. "Five more minutes, Etienne."

Chuckling, I persist, my fingers playfully dancing across his shoulder. "Ah, but you know what they say, cher ami – the early bird catches the worm."

His weary glare cuts through the air, as a single eye cracks open to meet my gaze. "Since when have we been hunting worms?" he retorts, his voice tinged with amusement.

"Since they started shooting back," I reply, a playful edge to my tone.

"Fine, fine." Bastien finally relents, pulling himself upright. He stretches, joints popping in a symphony of protest. "But if I'm doing this, I want coffee afterwards."

"Deal." My hand extends, an offer of assistance. Our fingers intertwine effortlessly, a testament to the unspoken bond between us forged over countless shared experiences.

After his quick shower, we step outside into the dew-kissed morning, our feet falling into a familiar rhythm as we traverse the grassy terrain. The sun hovers on the horizon, painting the sky in hues of orange and gold. Our destination awaits – a makeshift firing range, situated in an old warehouse on the outskirts of our family's territory. As we approach, the banter resumes, a lighthearted exchange woven into the fabric of our friendship.

"Think you can hit the bullseye today, Etienne? Or should I remind you once again how it's done?" Bastien challenges, his words laced with playful competitiveness.

I raise an eyebrow, a smirk forming at the corners of my mouth. "Ha! You couldn't hit the broad side of a barn if it were painted neon pink and dancing the cha-cha."

A mischievous glint sparks in his eyes, his confidence unwavering. "Is that so?" he retorts, readying his weapon with practiced ease. "Because if I recall correctly, it was your shots that were flirting with the outskirts of the target on our last outing, not mine."

My own weapon at the ready, I adopt a predatory stance, my gaze locked on the distant target. "Well, let's see who flirts with the bullseye this time, mon ami."

The scent of gunpowder hangs heavy in the air as bullets whistle through the atmosphere. The sound of gunfire echoes through the morning, shattering the tranquility like shards of broken glass. Laughter dances between us, mingling with the sharp cracks that punctuate our competition.

"See? What did I tell you?" Bastien teases, his shots clustered tightly at the center of the target. "Perhaps next time you won't be so quick to doubt my aim."

I join him in inspecting the target, acknowledging his triumph with a gracious nod. "Ah, but where would be the fun in that?" I retort, patting him on the back.

A genuine smile spreads across my face, for beneath our teasing banter lies a profound truth – there is no one else I would choose to navigate this treacherous world with than Bastien at my side. Together, we face the challenges that lie ahead, our bond fortified by the shared experiences that have woven us together.

The buzzing of our phones breaks the fragile peace that envelopes us, a powerful reminder of the world we can never fully escape. Claude's summons cuts through the air, his commands carrying a weight that settles deep within my gut, igniting a familiar blend of dread and determination.

"New assignment?" Bastien queries, wiping the sweat from his brow, his expression tightening with anticipation.

"Merde," I answer, swiftly dismissing the notification with a flick of my thumb. The urgency in my voice matches the urgency in my heart. "Let's get this over with."

My phone buzzes – a text from my father. I ignore it. He doesn't approve of my work for a New Orleans biker club, but not because of the activities involved. He'd rather me use my distinct set of talents for the LeBoeuf crime family instead. As the leader, he insists I run it one day. All I would have to do is give up every shred of freedom I possess.

I'll take Claude and the bikers any day.

Navigating the labyrinthine streets of New Orleans, we navigate our hogs with purpose, the pulse of the city's underground resonating beneath our wheels. The oppressive presence of the crime family hovers like a storm cloud, casting a shadow over our every step. My father's legacy intertwines with my very being, a constant reminder of the web from which we can never fully break free. Despite our attempts to carve our own paths, the tendrils of this world have a way of ensnaring us when we least expect it.

"Sometimes, I wonder if this is all worth it," I confess, shouting to be heard over the bikes' engines.

"Etienne, you know as well as I do that there's no easy way out," Bastien responds, his voice laden with a weariness that mirrors my own. "We made our choices long ago."

I nod, acknowledging the bitter truth that lingers in his words. These choices have marked us, leaving indelible scars that run deeper than mere surface wounds.

Before we reach Claude's lair, we pause at Lisette's bakery, *How Sweet It Is*—a haven amidst the storms that rage around us. The aroma of freshly made beignets envelops us, offering a brief respite from the acrid scent of blood and betrayal that clings to our lives. The warmth and coziness of the bakery embrace us, even as the outside world threatens to consume us.

"Two beignets, s'il vous plaît," I request, my gaze lingering on Lisette as she deftly tends to her bustling bakery. There is a strength in her movements, a certain grace that belies her resilience—a fire that burns brightly within her.

I come here a lot.

"Make that three," Bastien adds, his voice carrying a lightness that defies the heavy burden we bear.

As Lisette prepares our order, a rude customer barges in, his entitlement tangible in his demanding demeanor. He unleashes his fury upon Lisette, berating her with a venomous stream of words. He shoves the box of eclairs—which have melted in the heat—beneath Lisette's nose as though she is

responsible for the heat of the sun. Anger simmers within me, threatening to boil over, but Lisette stands tall, her defiance unyielding.

"Sir, if you don't like it, you can leave," she retorts, her chin lifted defiantly as she meets his gaze head-on.

"Fine!" the customer spits, finally storming out of the bakery, his anger leaving behind a charged atmosphere.

"Merde, men like that make me sick," I mutter under my breath, my disdain palpable. My admiration for Lisette deepens, her unwavering strength amplifying the warmth that radiates within me when she is near.

"Here are your beignets," she says, her voice holding a touch of pride as she passes us the paper bag filled with sugary goodness. "Enjoy."

"Merci, Lisette," I respond, a smile tugging at the corners of my lips, a mixture of gratitude and something more—a dangerous spark that flickers in the presence of her fire.

"Etienne, Bastien," Lisette sighs, a weariness shadowing her beautiful face as she brushes strands of hair out of her eyes. "You wouldn't believe the trouble I've been having with the dark ones lately, the family. They're like cockroaches that never go away."

"Hey," Bastien protests, his eyebrows raised in mock offense, his mischievous grin attempting to lighten the mood. "We're not all bad, you know. Some of us, maybe, but never me."

Lisette rolls her eyes, though her smile belies her exasperation. "Of course not you, cheri," she retorts, her tone playful. "But the others... they just won't leave me alone. Always asking for protection money or trying to muscle in on my business. It's exhausting."

As Bastien launches into a spirited and humor-filled defense of our less savory colleagues, I find myself captivated by Lisette's presence. Her words are passionate, spoken with conviction, and her gaze holds a fierce determination. The very fire that had drawn me to her earlier now burns brightly, directed at expressing her frustrations. I am entranced, unable to tear my gaze away.

"Listen, Lisette," I interject, my voice soft yet infused with confidence, drawing her attention back to me. "Why don't you let me take you out one night? We can forget about difficult customers and overbearing wise guys, just for a little while."

Her eyes widen, a mixture of surprise and amusement dancing within their depths. "Etienne LeBoeuf," she chides, a playful smile tugging at the



corners of her mouth, "are you flirting with me?" The question hangs in the air, a moment pregnant with possibility. Before I can respond, however, a timer interrupts our connection, and Lisette turns away, bustling into the back room to tend to the delights baking in the oven.

Watching her disappear, a sense of anticipation lingers. The few seconds we shared were charged with an unspoken energy, a mutual recognition of the inevitable bond forming between us.

"Smooth, real smooth," Bastien teases, nudging me gently in the ribs. "You really think she's going to want to go out with one of the very people causing her problems?"

"Maybe," I shrug, unable to suppress the wry grin that spreads across my face. "But there's only one way to find out."

Bastien shakes his head, a mix of amusement and concern in his expression as he takes a bite of his beignet. "Etienne, you're gonna get us both in trouble," he mutters playfully, the glimmer of lightheartedness filling the air.

A delicate dance of powdered sugar flutters through the air, graceful as the first snowfall, settling upon the worn wooden counter. Its sweet residue lingers on my tongue as I savor each bite of the beignet, relishing the blend of fluffy dough and sugary splendor. Yet, as the flakes catch the light, my eyes are drawn to the silhouette of Lisette disappearing into the back room.

Bastien's voice, a soft thunderclap, breaks through my reverie, bringing me back to the present. "Etienne," he warns, his tone laced with concern. "You do remember she's Claude's niece, right? You're playing with fire."

A sly grin forms at the corners of my mouth, a glint of mischief in my eyes. "Since when did you become such a worrywart?" I retort playfully, my words laced with a hint of teasing rebellion. Another bite of the beignet disappears into my mouth, its lightness melting away in a burst of flavor. Though my focus remains on the pastry, my mind drifts back to thoughts of Lisette.

Bastien's voice softens, a mixture of frustration and genuine care evident in his words. "Since you started flirting with the one girl we're supposed to stay away from," he cautions, his concern for our safety palpable. "You know how Claude feels about family."

I pause, my playfulness giving way to a flicker of contemplation. The weight of the truth settles upon me – crossing Claude Badeaux, our

formidable boss, comes at a steep cost. Yet, the allure of Lisette's flame burns bright, irresistible and dangerous all at once.

"Perhaps," I concede, my voice tinged with reluctant acknowledgment. The risk is clear, the consequences looming like a storm on the horizon. But in the depths of my being, I feel drawn to Lisette's fire, unable to extinguish the spark of attraction.

"Promise me you'll be careful, Etienne," Bastien implores, genuine concern etched in the lines of his face.

I sigh, realizing the validity of his plea, the weight of his words sinking in. "Fine," I relent with a mixture of resignation and determination, knowing that I must proceed with caution.

"Good," Bastien nods, a glimmer of relief in his eyes as he seemingly accepts my agreement.

Just as our conversation concludes, Lisette emerges from the back room, her cheeks flushed from the heat of the oven. A magnetic force pulls my gaze to her, her eyes meeting mine with a teasing challenge that sets my heart racing. Freshly baked beignets, steam rising from their golden surfaces, grace the counter in a delectable display.

"Hope to see you again soon, Etienne," she says, her voice carrying a seductive undertone, her words a playful invitation that ignites a flicker of anticipation within me.

"Count on it," I reply, my voice a low rumble, matching her intensity with unwavering determination. As I rise to leave, a mingling of excitement and caution courses through my veins. For a moment, I allow myself to imagine what it would be like if she let me take her out. I'd take her to the French quarter for dancing and drinks, and then...


Bastien's hand connects with the back of my head, a playful yet firm swat, as we step out into the muggy embrace of the New Orleans air.

"Etienne, seriously, man," he scolds, his tone a mix of exasperation and brotherly concern. "Stop being a fuck-up. Everyone knows Lisette doesn't mess with mafia guys."


A knowing smirk plays upon my lips, a reflection of the intoxicated confidence that Lisette's presence has stirred within me.

"Maybe," I muse, my voice tinged with playful defiance, my heart still racing from the energy of our encounter. "But she hasn't met someone quite like me before."

## Chapter Three



L isette



THE GENTLE CLINK OF spoons in coffee cups and the rustle of aprons fill the air, offering a comforting soundtrack to the creation unfolding within the bakery. The first rays of dawn cast a warm glow upon the cozy space, illuminating the display of pastries and bread that beckon customers to indulge in their sweet temptations.

As the day begins, I take a moment to savor the familiar scents swirling around me—the buttery aroma of croissants rising in the oven, the delicate hint of vanilla infusing the air, and the subtle undertones of caramelized sugar that mingle with the fragrance of freshly brewed coffee. Each breath is a reminder of the passion and dedication that infuse every morsel crafted within these walls.

Marie, my trusted assistant, enters the bustling kitchen, her eyes still heavy with remnants of sleep. A soft smile graces her lips as she greets me, acknowledging the routine that has become the cornerstone of our professional partnership. I return her greeting with a nod, our shared understanding unspoken but ever-present.

"Good morning, Lisette," she murmurs, her voice a gentle whisper that blends seamlessly into the rhythm of the kitchen. With a sense of purpose, she readies herself for the tasks ahead—preparing ingredients, organizing the workspace, and ensuring the seamless flow of our operations.

"Morning, Marie," I reply, my voice carrying a lightness tinged with gratitude for her presence. "Could you grab the strawberries from the fridge?"

"Of course," she responds, gliding toward the refrigerator with grace. Her movements are deliberate, a reflection of the years we have spent working side by side, honing our craft and synchronizing our actions.

As I guide the piping bag, smoothly dispensing cream onto a freshly baked éclair, I revel in the sense of accomplishment that fills my heart. This

bakery, this life that I have cultivated, is a testament to my resilience, to my ability to carve out a path separate from the sinister shadow cast by my uncle Claude's criminal empire.

Despite the inescapable connection to my family's past, I have forged my own destiny, infusing this haven of sweetness with authenticity and integrity. Here, within these walls, I have created a sanctuary untouched by the violence and darkness that taints my family name. The love and passion I pour into each creation are a counterbalance to the turbulent world outside.

In the soft morning light, as the kitchen hums with activity, I find solace and purpose. The melody of my own contented hum blends harmoniously with the symphony of sound that accompanies the birth of each delectable treat. Each croissant, each cake, each lovingly crafted piece is a testament to the light I have embraced within myself—a beacon of authenticity amidst the storm.

I glance up from my work for a brief moment to take a break when a flicker of movement beyond the window catches my attention. A chill snakes its way down my spine, sending a tremor through my entire being. My breath catches, and my hands, once steady and dexterous, betray me with a slight quiver. Outside, in the haze of early morning light, stands a figure obscured by shadows. In an instant, recognition dawns, striking me like a bolt of lightning.

*We're in danger.*

A hooded man tilts his head and smiles.

A rush of adrenaline floods my veins, urging me to flee from the danger he represents. My heart pounds in my chest, its rhythm a frantic beat echoing the urgency in my mind. It's as if the predatory gaze that meets mine from beyond the glass threatens to consume me, shrouded in a darkness that seems to seep into my very pores,

I tear my gaze away, my mind racing with thoughts of escape. Turning to Marie, my trusted assistant, I press my lips together tightly, conveying a silent urgency. With a subtle nod toward the back of the bakery, I give her an unspoken command. "You need to call 911," I whisper urgently. "Scratch that, call my uncle first, okay?"

Concern furrows her brow, but she meets my gaze with unwavering support. "Of course, Lisette," she responds, her voice laced with determination. She doesn't question me, trusting my judgment implicitly. In

that moment, I am grateful for her understanding and the unspoken bond that connects us.

I don't know if this is a robbery or mob business, but I don't want Marie caught in the crossfire. I send her running upstairs to my adjoining apartment.

Without another word, I leave my work behind, my heart pounding in my ears, a steady throb that underscores my fear. The urgency pulsating within me propels me toward the back of the bakery, guiding my steps into the sanctuary of the alleyway. If this is mafia business, they'll be after me, not Marie. I need to lead them away. If she calls my uncle fast enough, whoever's stupid enough to target me will wish they were never born.

It's a pretty big 'if.'

The cool air prickles my skin, heightening my senses. My breath comes in shallow gasps, each inhalation a struggle against the knot of apprehension tightening in my gut.

I grab my cell phone, texting my uncle. I can hear a man's footsteps behind me, and I'm grateful Marie is safe.

But now I also know this is no robbery. I'm being targeted. I know whoever it is watching, waiting, his intentions concealed beneath a veil of uncertainty. But I refuse to be a mere pawn in the game he plays. It's time to face the darkness head-on, to confront the lingering shadows that have haunted my life for far too long.

I hold my keys tightly in my fist and turn.

"Show yourself," I call out, my voice steady despite the tremor coursing through my veins. And like a specter materializing from the shadows, he steps forward, his eyes locked on mine.

I struggle, scratching his face, but something sharp pricks my neck and everything fades.



MY EYES FLUTTER OPEN, awakening to an unfamiliar surrounding – a stark reminder of the treacherous territory I find myself in.

Marcel, a shadowy figure cloaked in malevolence, circles me like a predator, his eyes alight with a twisted delight. His voice drips with derision as he revels in the power he holds over me. "Ah, sleeping beauty awakes," he sneers, his words laced with sadistic pleasure. The dim light casts unsettling shadows across his face, accentuating the wickedness that emanates from his

every pore. "You're going to make quite the bargaining chip against your dear Uncle Claude."

The Laurents' hideout, a place steeped in darkness and malice, is where I now awaken, imprisoned and at the mercy of Marcel Laurent, a man whose sadistic grin sends shivers down my spine.

My heart quivers, fluttering within my chest as my senses come alive to the acrid smell of fear that hangs heavy in the air. The weight of my predicament presses against me, amplified by the biting sting of the ropes that bind my wrists. I strain against the cruel restraints, my skin chafing against the unforgiving fibers, but the knots hold steadfast, cruelly digging into my flesh.

My spirit, though shaken, refuses to yield to his torment. My voice trembles, but my defiance remains unyielding.

"Go to hell," I spit, my words a defiant retort that slices through the suffocating atmosphere. In this moment of vulnerability, I summon the strength to face my captor head-on, refusing to let fear consume me.

A flicker of irritation flashes across Marcel's face, his eyes narrowing as he takes a menacing step closer. The dance of power and control continues, our words sharp and cutting, each spoken with a calculated purpose. I brace myself, prepared for whatever twisted game he plans to play, my spirit unyielding, holding onto a sliver of hope that flickers within the darkness.

Marcel's laugh resonates through the air, a chilling sound that seems to freeze everything in its wake. His amusement is devoid of mirth, a cruel melody that slices through the tension-laden atmosphere.

"Oh, sweet Lisette, don't you know? We're already there," he taunts with a sneer. He leans in, invading my personal space, his rancid breath assaulting my senses. "And if your uncle doesn't play ball, well... I'm sure he'll miss one of those pretty fingers of yours."

The rage inside threatens to consume me, a tempest of emotions that surges in my veins. But I steel myself, refusing to let my anger dictate my actions. I know I need to bide my time, to gather my strength and wait for the opportune moment to strike back.

A flicker of defiance dances in my eyes as I meet Marcel's gaze, my voice low and fierce. "Enjoy this while you can," I say, the words heavy with a promise of retribution. "Claude will find me, and when he does... you'll wish you were in hell instead."

Marcel's laughter reverberates off the damp walls of the basement, grating on my nerves like a serrated blade. He gazes at me with a mix of contempt and perverse fascination, his eyes lingering on every contour of my face.

"Bold words for a helpless little thing," he drawls, his tone dripping with condescension. "You think Claude cares about you? You're nothing but a pawn to him."

I refuse to let his words sting, holding onto my unwavering defiance. "Better a pawn than a spineless prick," I retort, my voice quivering with a mixture of fear and resolve.

"Watch your mouth," Marcel snarls, stepping ominously closer, raising his hand as if to deliver a punishing blow. My heart pounds in my chest, every muscle in my body tenses, bracing for the impact. The air grows heavy with anticipation, the room pulsating with a volatile energy.

Defiance burns within me, fueling my unwavering resolve. "Or what? You'll hit me?" I spit, my voice dripping with defiance. I meet Marcel's gaze without flinching, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing my fear. "You'd only be proving me right."

In a frenzy of rage, Marcel unleashes his fury, his backhand landing with brutal force against my cheek. Pain shoots through my face, but I bite down hard on my lip, refusing to give him the satisfaction of hearing my cry. My vision momentarily blurs, the room spinning around me. Steeling myself, I fight to regain my bearings, my eyes locking onto the figure that strides into the room.

Remy Laurent, charismatic yet tempestuous, storms in, his face etched with a mixture of anger and concern. "Damn it, Marcel! What have you done?" His grip tightens around Marcel's collar, yanking him away from me. Marcel struggles against his brother's hold, his anger churning like a tempest.

"You've started a war we can't win!" Remy's voice booms, echoing with a mix of frustration and desperation. His grip on Marcel remains unyielding, a visual testament to his authority within the tangled web of their familial ties.

"Let go of me!" Marcel snarls, attempting to shove his brother off. "You ran away, now you wanna run shit?"

Remy stands firm, his eyes piercing into Marcel's with a cold, calculating gaze.

"Enough," Remy commands, his voice a sharp blade that slashes through the tension-laden air.

The brothers fall silent, locked in a tense standoff. Remy, the embodiment of strategic calculation, releases his grip on Marcel with a forceful shove. They stand there, two sides of the same twisted coin – one wild and unpredictable, the other cold and methodical. Two halves of a fractured family, torn apart by their opposing natures.

"Fix this mess, or I will. The entire family isn't going to pay for the fact you can't keep your fucking mouth off a whiskey bottle," Remy warns, his gaze flicking to me for the briefest of moments. In that fleeting connection, something unspoken passes between us—a shared understanding, a silent plea for help that hangs heavy in the air.

A plea he doesn't answer.

Marcel's eyes glint with defiance, yet a flicker of uncertainty dances behind the facade. A shadow of fear.

He turns to me.

"You're not going to be fixing shit," he spits, his voice laced with venom as he straightens his clothes. "Claude has twenty-four hours to comply with our demands, and he's going to bend for this little peach." He fixes his gaze upon me, a challenge issued without words. I meet his glare head-on, my defiance a mirror to his own.

"If Claude has twenty-four hours, mon frère, you have ten." Marcel turns on his heel, his footsteps receding as he retreats into the shadows of his own making.

The air between us crackles, a current of tension that binds us together in this dark, dank basement. I watch his eyes, cool and calculating, as they lock onto mine for a heartbeat again before skittering away.

"Remember, Remy," Marcel's voice echoes back from the hallway, venomous and biting. "We're family. You're in this whether you want to be or not."

Remy's jaw tightens, the only outward sign of the storm raging within. He turns on his heel, stalking after Marcel with a deadly grace, leaving me bound and alone in silence. The basement door slams shut in their wake, sealing my fate along with it.

I remain in the shadows, my mind racing. Twenty-four hours. It's not much time, but it's all I have. And I'll be damned if I let these monsters win.

With my eyes tightly shut, I gather my dwindling reserves of strength. The harsh fibers of the ropes, constricting and leaving their painful mark on my skin, begin to loosen beneath my determined touch. Methodically, I work



to free myself, my hands trembling from the physical strain and emotional turmoil.

Finally, the ropes around my wrists yield, granting me the freedom I have fought so fiercely for. The relief that washes over me is fleeting, quickly overshadowed by the harsh reality of my situation.

"Help!" I cry out, my voice reverberating off the cold, unforgiving concrete walls. The sound of my own desperate pleas bounces back at me, a cruel reminder of the isolation that engulfs me. "Please, someone help me!"

The darkness remains unyielding, refusing to offer me any solace or response. Silence envelopes me, broken only by the distant drip, drip, drip of water echoing through the darkness, a haunting symphony that amplifies my desperation.

Desperation claws at my chest, threatening to consume me whole. But I refuse to succumb to the darkness. With fierce determination, I rise to my feet, my movements unsteady as I navigate through the abyss, my hands outstretched to find anything, any semblance of salvation.

I claw at the walls, my fingertips tracing their cold surface, searching for a weapon, a glimmer of hope, anything that might aid my escape. But the room remains barren, devoid of any means to secure my freedom, mirroring the emptiness and ruthlessness that resides within the hearts of the men who have brought me here.

Hours pass, and I'm still here. And the only thing more terrifying than my uncle not taking Marcel's bait is if he *does* take it. I don't want to be the cause of a gang war. I've seen firsthand the horror that brings.

"Damn you, Marcel," I whisper, the words a bitter mantra that hangs heavy in the air. The tears that threaten to spill down my cheeks are held back, my resolve refusing to break. "Damn you both."

As if my words have summoned him, the door creaks open, revealing Marcel's sinister silhouette framed by the dim light. His eyes narrow, focusing on my now-free hands, and a twisted grin twists his lips. In a fraction of a second, he lunges forward, his movements swift and precise, re-binding the ropes with a vengeful tightness that digs into my flesh. The pain is excruciating, threatening to consume me, but I refuse to grant him the satisfaction of witnessing my suffering.

"Go ahead," I hiss defiantly through clenched teeth, my voice laced with a determination that borders on reckless. "Do your worst, you snake."

Marcel's eyes gleam with malicious pleasure, his sadistic delight evident in every fiber of his being. He relishes the opportunity to inflict pain, to wield his power over me. "Watch your tongue, whore," he growls, his voice a venomous hiss. "You're not worth the trouble."

"Then why am I here?" I retort, my voice filled with a fiery defiance that rivals the intensity of my pain. I refuse to let him belittle me, to dismiss my significance.

With every ounce of strength I possess, I hold onto my defiance, my resolve unwavering. Though the ropes cut into my flesh, I refuse to let him break my spirit. The countdown has begun, and I am determined to defy the odds, to prove that my life holds value beyond the games of power and control.

Marcel's sinister smile widens, a twisted reflection of his malevolence. "Because you're a means to an end," he snarls, his voice cold and calculated. He steps back, admiring his handiwork with cruel satisfaction. "And by tomorrow, we'll find out just how much your precious uncle values your life."

## Chapter Four



**B**astien



A TEMPEST BREWS IN Claude's eyes, a dangerous storm of fury and concern that threatens to consume the room. His fingers grip the armrests of his imposing chair, almost tearing into the fabric. The air becomes heavy, burdened with the weight of his anger and the humid embrace of a Louisiana summer. "I want Lisette back," he growls, his voice a gravelly rumble reverberating through the room. "Use any means necessary. I don't care what it takes."

Etienne and I exchange a brief glance, our shared history woven into the lines of worry etched across our brows. Together, we have walked through the darkest corridors of hell, forging unbreakable bonds amidst the unforgiving streets of New Orleans and the blood-soaked sands of the Middle East. Now, standing before Claude, we find ourselves bound by loyalty—to him and to each other.

"I received an anonymous tip," Etienne interjects, tossing a crumpled piece of paper with urgency onto the table. It lands softly, a lifeline cutting through the swirling uncertainty. "The Laurents' compound. That's where they're keeping her."

I reach for the paper, smoothing out its wrinkled surface with steady hands. My fingers trace the hastily scrawled address, absorbing its significance, its potential to lead us closer to Lisette. It may not be much, but it's a glimmer of hope spearing through the darkness.

"Let's move," I say resolutely, my hand coming to rest on Etienne's shoulder. He nods in agreement, his gaze filled with determination, mirroring the fire that burns within my own being.

Our preparations begin, as we study the blueprints of the Laurents' compound, dissecting its intricate layout. The hallways and hidden passages

depicted in the plans are a testament to their cunning and paranoia. Memories surge forth, unbidden yet resolute in their presence.

They carry us back in time to another compound, another battleground. It was Syria, a few years prior. We had navigated a similar maze of danger and uncertainty, operating under the cover of darkness, all while facing the ever-present threat of death.

"Remember that shitstorm?" I ask, a smirk tugging at the corners of my lips despite the gravity of the current situation. Etienne grins in response, the memory both bittersweet and empowering.

"Hard to forget," he replies, his gaze lingering on the detailed blueprints spread before us. We had emerged from that night stronger, forged in the crucible of fire and blood. But would our luck favor us once more?

"Let's do this," Etienne declares, his voice resonating with determination. We both understand the risks that lie ahead, and yet our resolve remains unyielding. We pore over the blueprints, searching for weaknesses, for cracks in the Laurents' impenetrable armor.

The seconds tick by, each passing moment a reminder of Lissette's peril and the urgency of our mission. As the shadows outside lengthen, casting a shroud of darkness, we prepare to strike, driven by loyalty, bound by blood, and determined to bring her home.

"Stealth," I insist, my voice a low growl as determination fills every word. "We go in quietly, find Lissette, and get out before they even know we're there."

Etienne scoffs, his eyes narrowed in challenge. "You're always too cautious, Bastien. A direct assault would send a clear message that no one messes with our family."

"True, but it's also more likely to get Lissette killed or start an all-out war," I counter, my pulse racing with the weight of responsibility. "And I don't think Claude wants either of those outcomes."

Claude, silent until now, nods his agreement. "Bastien's right. We can't risk Lissette's life. Infiltrate the compound at night and bring her back safely."

"Fine," Etienne concedes, his gaze still fiery with the desire to strike back. However, he finally recognizes the prudence of our plan.

As midnight approaches, the air thickens with tension and anticipation. We gather our gear, strapping weapons and tools of the trade to our bodies with the precision of well-honed warriors. Each piece serves as a lethal instrument, ready to be unleashed in the name of our family.

"Ready?" Etienne asks, his voice a whisper that carries the weight of our shared purpose.

"Always," I reply with quiet resolve, my heart pulsating in harmony with the night itself.

Together, we descend upon the Laurents' compound, our movements swift and fluid, akin to the ethereal dance of shadows. Darkness becomes our ally, cloaking us in its protective embrace, as we venture into the heart of danger.

"Keep watch," I murmur to Etienne as we approach the locked gate, my fingers deftly probing the lock. His vigilant gaze scans the surroundings, a sentinel amidst the night, his weapon poised for any threat that might arise.

Sweat beads upon my brow as the seconds stretch into an eternity. But finally, with a gentle click, the lock surrenders to my touch. The gates swing open, granting us passage, and we slip into the compound without a trace.

"Nice work," Etienne breathes, his voice a mere whisper that echoes my own satisfaction.

"Let's find her and get out of here," I reply, my heart drumming in my chest. We move in perfect synchrony, our years of training and unspoken camaraderie guiding us through the darkness. Each step is purposeful, as we venture deeper into the lion's den. I feel a surge of confidence. Whatever awaits us tonight, we will face it together, our determination unwavering.

Marcel's drunken laughter reverberates through the compound, a cacophony that guides us inexorably toward his lair. We move silently, like phantom whispers, through the dimly lit halls, our footsteps blending with the darkness beneath our feet.

"Remember," I murmur to Etienne, my voice barely audible, "no family war."

Etienne's eyes meet mine, his gaze filled with a steely determination. He nods a silent understanding. Together, we inch closer to the door that shields Marcel, his voice growing louder and more obnoxious with every passing moment. The anticipation thrums in the air, charged with a volatile mix of adrenaline and the desire to bring Lisette home.

With a calculated surge of energy, Etienne steps back, his foot connecting with the door in a swift and explosive motion. The wood splinters, the door flying open with a resounding crash. As dust fills the air, we make our entrance.

Marcel's face pales at the sight of the cold steel in my hand, his hands rising instinctively in surrender, spilling the amber liquid from the glass he clutches. Fear dances in his eyes, a predator now cornered.

"Please," he stammers, his voice a trembling plea. "I'll tell you where she is."

"Speak," Etienne commands, his voice a low growl, a testament to our unwavering resolve.

Marcel's words spill forth in a desperate rush, his voice laced with panic and desperation. "Upstairs," he gasps, his finger pointing shakily in the direction of the staircase. "Second door on the left."

Etienne smirks at me, a predator baring his teeth, the satisfaction of our direct approach written on his face. "See?" he remarks, a note of satisfaction in his voice. "Sometimes directness gets results."

The question of Marcel's fate hangs heavy in the air, an unspoken tension between us. I meet Etienne's gaze, considering the possibilities. But the weight of our loyalty to Claude and our commitment to avoiding a family war anchors our decision.

"Get out of here, Marcel," I command, my voice dripping with contempt. Disgust taints my every word as I watch him scramble away like the coward he is. The taste of victory on our lips is marred by the restraint we must uphold.

We ascend the worn staircase, each step a discordant symphony of creaking wood and hushed anticipation. The air grows heavy with the weight of our mission as we approach the door that stands as a gateway to some forbidden paradise. Etienne's hand reaches out, his touch confident and purposeful, as he wraps his fingers around the cold metal handle.

"Ready?" he whispers, his voice a tender caress in the enveloping darkness.

"Always," I reply, my voice barely above a breath.

With a soft click, Etienne turns the knob, and together we cross the threshold, stepping into the room that holds the answers we seek. Our eyes scan the space, searching for our prize amidst the shadows that dance like specters on the walls.

And there she is—Lisette, bound and gagged, a captive, yet resilient. Her eyes widen with a mixture of relief and terror as they meet mine, the emotions swirling like a tempest within their depths.

"Shh," I soothe, my voice a tender murmur as I cross the room to kneel before Lisette. Her eyes glisten with a mixture of fear and desperation, a reflection of the torment she has endured. "We're here to take you home."

Etienne, a pillar of strength and resolve, moves with practiced precision to untie Lisette. His touch is gentle yet steadfast, each knot loosening under his skilled fingers. As the last of her bindings fall away, Lisette throws herself into my arms, her body trembling with the release of pent-up emotions. Her sobs reverberate through the night, a poignant reminder of the harrowing ordeal she has endured.


"Let's get out of here," Etienne whispers, his voice a soft exhale that carries the weight of our shared urgency. His eyes dart toward the door, an unspoken warning that danger lingers nearby. I brush my fingers across Lisette's cheek, offering her a comforting smile that belies the chaos that surrounds us.

Together, we weave through the shadows, our steps light and silent, as if we were mere apparitions gliding through the night. We become one with the darkness, moving with a synchronicity borne from years of shared experiences. Each breath we take is a whispered celebration, a testament to our triumph in the face of adversity.


As we emerge from the confines of the compound, the night envelopes us like a protective shroud. The darkness becomes our ally, its embrace shielding us from prying eyes and the remnants of our torment. Hand in hand, we navigate the labyrinthine pathways, guided by an unspoken understanding that our mission is not yet complete. Though our hearts pound like drums within our chests, our resolve remains unyielding.

The night becomes our sanctuary, its silent symphony of shadows bearing witness to our escape. Together, we steal through the inky blackness, our footsteps soft and measured, a triumphant trio bound by blood, loyalty, and the knowledge that, for tonight at least, we have emerged victorious.

# Chapter Five



L isette



THE ROOM REMAINS SHROUDED in a heavy silence, each passing second seemingly laden with unspoken fears and anxious anticipation. I lie in bed, my pulse racing in tandem with the turbulent rhythm of my thoughts. The air carries a distinct metallic scent, a haunting reminder of the bloodshed that has stained the day.

My senses remain heightened, every nerve on edge as I find myself guarded by Claude's men, who stand like loyal sentinels in the shadowy corners of the room. Their presence is meant to bring a sense of security, a shield against the perils that linger outside these walls. Yet, a restlessness gnaws at my insides, rendering their watchful eyes more suffocating than reassuring.

A soft rap echoes through the room as a knock reverberates against the door. My heart skips a beat, and I instinctively sit up, my muscles tensing in anticipation.

"May we come in?" Bastien's voice, though muffled by the door, comes through clearly, slicing through the thick silence like a knife. He stands at the forefront, his figure evoking both strength and vulnerability, while Etienne stands by his side, a steadfast companion sharing in the burden of our collective worries.

"Please," I murmur, my voice barely more than a whisper. My eyes gravitate to the doorway, where Bastien and Etienne have now entered, their faces etched with concern. The weight of their presence offers a modicum of solace amidst the tumultuous storm raging within me.

Bastien steps into the room with a presence that fills the space, his tall and muscular frame exuding an undeniable intensity. I stumble out of bed, my legs weak and trembling, and find myself colliding into his sturdy arms.



As he wraps me in his embrace, I feel a comforting strength enveloping me, radiating warmth that seeps into my bones. The contact ignites a spark deep within, a flame that has been simmering beneath the surface since the moment our paths first crossed.

Tears well in my eyes, and my voice catches in my throat as I manage to utter the words, "Thank you... for saving my life."

Bastien's gaze softens, his dark eyes reflecting a mix of tenderness and fierce determination. His shoulders bear the weight of my trembling fingers, and a surge of gratitude fills my chest as I find solace in his unwavering presence.

"Of course," he whispers, his voice a gentle caress, "we'd do anything for you, Lisette. You mean everything to us."

The sincerity in his words sends a shiver down my spine, and I force myself to step away, torn between the safety of his arms and my desire for independence. The loss of contact leaves an ache behind, a longing for more, but I know there are other matters that demand attention.

Turning my gaze to Etienne, I find his icy blue eyes fixed upon me, their intensity mirroring the storm of emotions swirling within him. His features, usually so composed and enigmatic, now betray a mixture of concern and unwavering resolve.

There is an unspoken understanding between us, a bond forged through shared experiences and the unyielding loyalty that has underpinned our relationship. In his eyes, I see a reflection of the storm that has raged within my own soul, an acknowledgment that we stand united against the challenges that lie ahead.

"Let me take a look at your wrists," Bastien says, his voice a soothing balm that washes over me, infusing a sense of calm in its wake. I offer him my trembling hands, the remnants of my captivity etched into my skin. His touch is gentle, tender even, as he examines the angry marks left behind by my captors. The ointment he applies is cool against my skin, offering relief from the residual pain inflicted upon me.

As his fingers trace the delicate contours of my wrists, a wave of emotions surges through me. It's a stark contrast to the harsh grip that had held me captive, a touch that had sought to inflict fear and break my spirit. Each stroke of his fingertips sends a gentle spark coursing down my spine, igniting a long-dormant fire within me.

A tingle of electricity dances across my skin, a recognition that goes beyond the physical. His touch awakens something deeper, a longing that I had all but forgotten amidst the darkness that had engulfed me. The tenderness with which he treats me feels like a revelation, a glimmer of light that pierces through the shadows of my past.

In his touch, I sense a genuine concern and compassion, a respite from the cruelty that had entrapped me. The familiarity we share, forged through countless trials, sends a layer of trust that cannot be easily replicated. With each delicate brush of his fingers, he not only tends to my wounds but also mends the invisible scars that linger within.

As I gaze into his eyes, gratitude mingles with a newfound curiosity. The connection between us feels palpable, threaded with an unspoken understanding and an awakening desire. In this fragile moment, I am reminded that even amidst the chaos and darkness, there can be moments of tenderness, of healing, and of the possibility for something more.

Memories of simpler, happier times flood my mind, swirling like fragments of a half-forgotten dream. I think back to the days when Bastien and Etienne would grace my bakery with their presence, their laughter filling every corner of the small space with a warmth that seemed to chase away even the darkest of shadows.

They were two halves of a whole, a dynamic duo that radiated a captivating energy, drawing me in despite the danger that clung to them like a second skin. Their presence had always brought a sense of excitement and intrigue, an invitation to a life beyond the confines of my bakery.

In those stolen moments, as we shared stolen glances and fleeting touches, I couldn't help but feel the magnetic pull that bound us together. There was something undeniable between us, an unspoken connection that defied logic and reason. It was as if we were three puzzle pieces, destined to fit together in some grand design, even if the puzzle itself remained a mystery.

Now, as I sit here, vulnerable and exposed, the intensity of my desire threatens to consume me. The longing that courses through my veins feels like a raging inferno, threatening to burn me from the inside out. The way they look at me, their eyes filled with a mixture of admiration, tenderness, and desire, only fuels the flames. I find myself irresistibly drawn to them, lost in the depths of their gaze, unable to deny the overwhelming pull they have on me.

"Promise me," I whisper, my voice barely audible, my vulnerability laid bare. "Promise me you'll be careful. That you won't give Marcel the war he wants."

The weight of my words hangs in the air, simmering with the hopes and fears that bind us together. They exchange a momentary glance, their eyes locked on mine with an intensity that mirrors my own. And then, in perfect unison, their voices intertwine, a harmonious symphony of reassurance and determination.

"We promise," they say, their words a solemn vow that resonates within me. Their voices blend, their individual tones weaving like threads to create a tapestry of unwavering loyalty and devotion. In that fragile moment, I believe them. I believe in us. The road that lies ahead may be uncertain, fraught with danger and challenges, but as I look into their eyes, I find solace in the shared promise and the implicit understanding that we will face whatever comes together.



THE SUN SINKS LOWER in the sky, casting a warm, hazy glow that bathes the room in a golden light. I sit in the midst of this gentle illumination, watching as shadows flicker and dance along the walls, their movements a rhythmic reminder of the passing of time. Weeks have slipped through my fingers, marked by a series of trials and tribulations that have tested my resilience, but amidst it all, there is solace to be found in the presence of two men who have become my protectors—Bastien and Etienne.

"Your wrists are healing nicely," Etienne comments, his gaze drawn to the fading marks that encircle them like cruel bracelets. A tenderness lingers in his eyes, evidence of the care he has bestowed upon me during my recovery.

I offer him a soft smile, a gesture of gratitude and warmth that blooms within my chest. "Thanks to you," I reply, my voice barely above a whisper. The memory of his gentle touch resurfaces, the way he tended to my wounds with delicacy and compassion. It was a salve for both my physical pain and the emotional scars that lingered beneath the surface.

Bastien leans casually against the doorframe, his strong arms crossed over his chest. His dark eyes, framed by the disheveled strands of his tousled hair, fixate on me with an unwavering intensity. Every nuance of his gaze, every

flicker of emotion that dances across his features, sends a thrilling shiver down my spine.

In the silence that envelops us, I become acutely aware of the tantalizing space between us, a void filled with unspoken desires and shared secrets. It's as if our magnetic pull, the undeniable chemistry that crackles between us, hangs in the air like an unspoken promise. The weight of our connection is palpable, an energy that hums in the background, throbbing with a silent longing.

I meet Bastien's gaze, my own eyes mirroring the mixture of curiosity and apprehension that swirl within me. There is something undeniably captivating about him, a magnetism that draws me in, even as I admit to myself the dangers inherent in exploring the depths of our unspoken connection. The chasm between us seems both vast and infinitesimal—a gulf begging to be bridged and a space that holds the promise of both pleasure and peril.

As he continues to study me, his eyes unwavering and filled with an alluring mix of intensity and vulnerability, I feel a rush of heat flood my cheeks. In that moment, I yearn to bridge the void, to delve into the uncharted territory that lies between us. But the weight of unspoken desires and unexplored secrets casts a cloak of uncertainty over our interactions, leaving us teetering on the edge of a precipice, unsure whether to take the leap.

Yet, in the depths of his gaze, I sense a shared acknowledgment—an understanding that what awaits us on the other side of this chasm is both thrilling and potentially transformative. The tension between us feels tangible, an invisible thread that pulls us together, awakening a curiosity that cannot be easily ignored.

Bastien's gaze flickers between us, his eyes filled with a mixture of pride and concern. He understands the significance of these fleeting moments, recognizing the tie that has formed between us. Their unwavering support and dedication have become pillars of strength in my life.

Amidst the chaos that surrounds us, I find solace in the moments shared with them. Their presence, like the sun breaking through storm clouds, offers a sense of warmth and belonging that I had longed for. The connection we share transcends the trials we have faced together, a testament to the profound bond that has formed between us.

As I bask in the tranquil atmosphere of the room, the golden light painting our shared space, I can't help but feel a sense of longing for the familiarity of my bakery. Yet, in the presence of these two men who have

become my protectors, I find myself drawn to a future that is both uncertain and filled with promise.

"Enough about me," I say, forcing a smile that doesn't quite reach my eyes. "Tell me, what's been happening out there? In the world?"

Etienne's brows furrow, a flicker of concern tugging at the corners of his eyes. "Things have been... tense," he admits, his voice carrying a weight that matches the gravity of his words. He takes a step closer, his presence a comforting anchor amidst the storm. "But don't worry, Lisette. We're taking care of it."

Bastien's smirk widens, a glimmer of playful confidence in his eyes. "Besides," he adds, his voice brimming with assurance, "no one would dare touch you now. Not with us watching your back."

A mischievous twinkle dances in my eyes, and a surge of boldness propels me forward. I close the distance between Bastien and me, my heart pounding in my chest as I take a risk I had only dreamt of. His breath catches as I press my lips to his, a kiss that speaks volumes of the unspoken desires and longings that have simmered beneath the surface.

"Ahem," Etienne clears his throat, breaking the spell, and I turn to face him, a mix of guilt and regret washing over me. The pain etched in his features is impossible to ignore as he averts his gaze, his eyes clouded by a veil of jealousy.

"Etienne..." I reach out, my touch gentle as my fingers graze his cheek, feeling the rough stubble beneath my fingertips. "Thank you," I whisper, my voice a tender rasp, heavy with gratitude and sincerity. "Thank you for always being there, for your unwavering loyalty and support."

He meets my gaze, his eyes filled with a swirl of emotions. A silent understanding passes between us, a recognition of the complexities that lie at the intersection of our relationships. The bond we share is not without its challenges.

"I am grateful to both of you," I continue, my voice filled with sincerity. "For everything you've done and continue to do. You've shown me a depth of love and protection that I never thought possible."

Etienne's gaze softens, and a small smile tugs at the corners of his lips. His hand covers mine, a silent reassurance that he understands. "Thank you, Lisette," he says, his voice laced with a mixture of tenderness and acceptance.

His eyes flicker to mine, uncertainty swirling within their stormy depths. But before he can say anything, I pull him into an embrace, letting the

warmth of his body chase away the lingering chill that clings to my bones.

A sudden gust of wind howls outside, rattling the windows and sending a shiver down my spine. The room is enveloped in an eerie stillness, broken only by the sound of our collective breaths and the faint rustling of fabric.

We remain frozen, caught in the suspended moment of tension, until the door bursts open with a force that only Claude could muster. His tall frame looms in the doorway, casting a shadow that seems to darken the very air around us. His eyes blaze with a mixture of anger and concern as he takes in the scene before him.

"Enough!" his voice booms, reverberating off the walls and filling the room with an undeniable authority. Every word he utters carries the weight of his position as our leader, demanding our attention and respect. "Lisette, you need rest. This is no time for... whatever this is."

His gaze flickers between Bastien, Etienne, and me, the disapproval clouding on his face like a storm. I open my mouth to speak, to explain, to defend our shared connection, but he raises a hand, silencing me.

"Rest," he repeats, his tone softer yet still commanding. There is a weariness in his voice, a hint of concern beneath the sternness. Turning on his heel, he exits the room, leaving us in a palpable silence punctuated by the echoes of his departure.

As his footsteps fade into the distance, a heavy silence settles over us, lingering like an unspoken question. The room feels charged with a tension that hangs in the air, stifling any words that threaten to escape our lips. We stand there, caught between the impulse to follow Claude's orders and the desire to explore the depths of our connection.

The weight of his disapproval lingers, casting a shadow over our shared moment, reminding us of the complexities and challenges that lie ahead. The silence stretches on, heavy with unspoken thoughts and unfulfilled desires, until we are left alone, each lost in our own thoughts, trying to make sense of the tangled web we find ourselves in.

"Will you come back tomorrow?" My voice trembles with vulnerability as I look at them both, my heart aching with longing.

Bastien and Etienne share a stunned glance before nodding, their expressions unreadable. As they leave, the door closes with an eerie finality, plunging me into darkness.

The night settles heavily around me, oppressive and suffocating. I toss and turn, unable to find the comfort that eludes me. Thoughts of Bastien and

Etienne consume my mind, their presence lingering like a phantom touch on my skin. Why do I want them both? Is it the trauma of the kidnapping, the desperate need to feel safe?

My body aches with desire, and I can't help but give in to the temptation. My fingers trail down my stomach, finding the sensitive spot between my legs. The crude thoughts of what I want them to do to me flood my mind as I tease myself, imagining their strong hands exploring every inch of my body, fulfilling my darkest fantasies.

"Damn it," I curse under my breath, my fingers working faster, more desperately. The thought of Bastien's lips on mine, the way Etienne looked at me with that hunger in his eyes – it's all too much. I can't help but succumb to the pleasure, drowning in the sensations that threaten to consume me, as the night swallows my moans and gasps.

This dangerous dance we've been playing has taken its toll, blurring the lines between love and lust, loyalty and betrayal. And as I lay there, spent and breathless, I know that in this treacherous world of mafia ties and twisted loyalties, nothing will ever be the same again.

## Chapter Six



**E**tienne  
In the depths of my dreams, Lisette's body melts against mine, her breath hot and whispered in my ear. Her fingers trail down my chest, igniting a fire within me, while her lips taste like sin. The ache for her, it consumes me, swells inside me like a hurricane threatening to break free.

I wake with a start, sweat clinging to my skin, an insistent hardness beneath the sheets. Damnation. I groan, tormented by the forbidden fruit she represents. Claude's niece... But my body doesn't care for the rules of our world; it only hungers for her touch.

I force myself out of bed, muscles tense and throbbing, and step under the ice-cold shower, letting the shock of it numb me back into reality.

But the awareness doesn't last long. I find my mind wandering, no matter where I am, all morning, even in the midst of training.

The sting of Bastien's punch reverberates through my jaw, jolting me back into the present with a sudden burst of pain. The ache pales in comparison to the turmoil that churns within, threatening to consume my focus and cloud my judgment.

"Etienne, are you here today?!" Bastien's voice rings out, tinged with a blend of frustration and concern. His words slice through the haze of my thoughts, a sharp reminder of the urgency that defines our training sessions. The intensity of his gaze tells me he knows something is amiss, that he can sense the turmoil that simmers beneath my calm exterior.

"Didn't see that coming, did ya?" he taunts, raising an eyebrow in challenge. "You're usually better than this. What's got you so distracted?"

I grit my teeth, a futile attempt to wrestle back control over my racing mind. But Bastien's unwavering scrutiny, his piercing gaze digging deep into the recesses of my thoughts, leaves no room to hide. He knows me too well, each subtle shift and flicker of emotion laid bare before him. There is no point in deflecting or denying the truth.

"Come on, Etienne. You can't hide shit from me," he says, his smirk tinged with both familiarity and genuine concern. "Talk to me, brother."



I cast a quick glance around the training area, ensuring no prying eyes or ears are within reach. Satisfied with our privacy, I lean in, my voice a low murmur. "It's Lisette," I confess, my words barely audible, as if afraid of their own weight. "She's been haunting my dreams, man. Taking over my thoughts."

Bastien's eyes narrow, a flicker of understanding lighting up his features. He leans back, folding his arms across his chest, his expression a blend of caution and empathy... and something else.

"Ah, Lisette," he murmurs, his voice laced with both sympathy and caution. "She's a forbidden fruit, my friend. And you know what they say about that."

My frustration swells, mixed with a gnawing desire that threatens to consume me. "Enough," I growl, cutting off his words and pushing away the swirling torrents of longing within me. "Let's finish this training session."

A heavy silence settles between us, the sound of our labored breaths filling the air as we catch our breath. The weight of my confession hangs in the space between us, palpable and raw. I wipe the sweat from my brow, my hand trembling with a mix of exhaustion and turmoil.

"Fine," I relent, my voice heavy with resignation. "It's not just lust, Bastien. I think... I think I'm falling for her."

Bastien's eyes widen, disbelief frozen across his features. He runs a hand through his tousled hair, searching for words in the whirlwind of emotions that churn within him. "Shit," he mutters, his voice laced with a mix of surprise and unease. "Etienne, you've got to be kidding me. Lisette? Claude's niece? Not some other, more available, less likely to make you alligator food in a swamp, Lisette?"

Frustration simmers beneath the surface as I grip a towel tightly in my hands. "Damn it, I know!" I hiss, my frustration spilling over. The realization of my growing feelings for Lisette, the complexity of our connection, threatens to overwhelm me. "But I can't help it. She's... she's different."

Bastien's eyes flicker, a mix of uncertainty and concern clouding his gaze. His voice falters for a moment before he meets my eyes again. "Look, man..." he begins, his voice heavy with hesitation. He turns away briefly, searching for the right words before locking eyes with me once more. "I've been feeling something for her, too."

My breath catches in my throat, shock pulsing through my veins. I stare at Bastien, disbelief etched across my face. We had shared women in the past,

but this feels different. Lisette has burrowed her way into my heart, and now it seems she's done the same to Bastien.

"Fuck! Are you serious?" I ask, my voice tinged with incredulity. The realization of our shared feelings adds a new layer of complexity to an already tense situation. Lisette isn't just some fling; she's entwined in the very fabric of our lives, tied to Claude and our loyalty to him.

Bastien meets my gaze, vulnerability flickering in his eyes. "Dead serious," he replies, his voice laced with a sense of surrender. "But we have to remember our loyalty to Claude. We owe him everything."

His words strike a chord within me, the reminder of the debt we owe to Claude and the unyielding loyalty that has bound us to him. My resolve hardens, a steely determination overtaking the tempest of emotions. "Exactly," I agree, my voice steady and resolute. "We can't pursue her, Bastien. It would be a betrayal."

The weight of our oath to Claude rests heavy on our shoulders, a reminder of the sacrifices we have made and the lengths we would go to protect our family. With that understanding, we lock eyes, sharing a silent agreement to quell our desires and to stay true to our bond with Claude. The road ahead may be challenging, but our loyalty and commitment are unwavering.

A charged silence engulfs us, the weight of our unspoken desires and the complexities of our predicament hanging heavily in the air. Bastien's eyes narrow, a mischievous gleam dancing within them. He seems captivated by a mischievous notion, a flicker of audacity that I can't help but find both enticing and dangerous.

"Unless..." Bastien trails off, a wicked glimmer in his eye. "What if Claude approved it? What if he gave us his blessing?"

I scoff at his suggestion, my voice laced with a mixture of frustration and disbelief. "Are you out of your mind?" I snap, anger flaring within me. "Claude is fiercely protective of her, Bastien. One mafia man is overwhelming enough for him – he would never entertain the idea of his niece being involved with two of us."

A flicker of doubt passes over Bastien's eyes, but it quickly dissipates, replaced by a determination that worries me. "Maybe not," he concedes, his voice tinged with a hint of darkness. "But what's the harm in trying? Love can defy expectations, Etienne. It can move mountains."

"Everything," I retort, clenching my fists in frustration. "Our loyalty, our position, our lives. It's not worth risking everything we have sworn to protect."

Bastien watches me closely, his gaze unwavering. "Isn't it, though?" he challenges softly, his voice filled with a raw intensity. "What about love? What about the possibility of finding something that transcends our loyalty?"

My eyes meet his, a clash of opposing desires and the weight of our shared struggles. "Love doesn't pay the bills, brother," I mutter, my voice tinged with resignation. "And it certainly doesn't protect us from a bullet."

Bastien's features soften, his gaze filled with a mix of understanding and regret. He knows the truth in my words, the harsh realities of our world. We may yearn for something more, but the price we would pay is too high, not only for ourselves but for the family we have sworn to protect.

"Maybe not," he says softly, his voice heavy with unspoken sentiments. We turn away from the tangled web of desires and possibilities, returning to the familiar terrain of our training. The unspoken agreement settles between us, a pact forged in unyielding loyalty and the shared understanding that we will keep our distance from Lisette. It's a sacrifice we make for the sake of our loyalty, our position, and the lives we've built.

The searing heat of the sun lingers on my face as I step out of the gym, my body drenched in sweat from the intense workout. The weight of my thoughts hangs heavily on my mind, a whirlwind of emotions swirling around the complicated entanglement of loyalty and desire that has consumed me. The world around me seems distant and blurred as I grapple with the complexities of my feelings for Lisette and the potential betrayal it entails.

I walk toward my Harley, but a sleek, black car glides silently to a stop beside me, its tinted windows shielding the occupants within. The door opens, revealing Gaspard, his piercing eyes fixed upon me with a steely intensity.

"Get in," he growls, his voice resonating deep with authority and displeasure.

I slide into the back seat, the smoothness of the cool leather a stark contrast to the heat in my veins. Gaspard's gaze pierces through me, his scrutiny unrelenting. My gut swirls with a mix of apprehension and defiance as I brace myself for the conversation that lies ahead.

"Yes, father?" I respond, my voice steady but laced with an underlying current of uncertainty.

His words cut through the stifling air, each one like a blade slicing through the tension. "Etienne, I've received word that you've been... pursuing Lisette," he says, his voice dripping with disdain. "She is Claude's niece, and we have an alliance to maintain."

I swallow hard, the weight of his words settling heavily upon my shoulders. Conflict rages within me as I grapple with the clash between my desires and the loyalty I owe to our alliance. The air inside the car feels thick and suffocating, my mind racing to find the right words, the right justification.

"I understand, Father," I reply, my voice devoid of its usual conviction, the admission heavy with resignation. "Loyalty is paramount, and I will respect our alliance."

Gaspard's stern gaze holds mine, a mixture of disappointment and warning lingering in his eyes. The unspoken message hangs heavy in the air, a reminder of the repercussions that await should I falter in my commitment to our family and their interests.

I might have been able to convince Claude. Maybe. But my father has his own ambitions for me, ambitions that might require a convenient marriage.

As the car glides forward, the weight of my conflicting desires and the burden of loyalty press upon me. In the silence that follows, I find solace in the familiarity of the car's interior, an anchor amidst the tumultuous storm of emotions within.

My heart clenches, the weight of my conflicting desires threatening to consume me. Memories of the bakery weeks ago flood my mind, the warmth of Lisette's laughter and the softness of her touch still lingering in my thoughts. The image of those stolen moments fuels my attempt to downplay the severity of my feelings.

"It was nothing," I insist, my voice strained with the effort of maintaining composure. I swallow hard, my throat tight with a mix of anxiety and desperation. "Just harmless flirtation."

Gaspard's gaze narrows, his eyes sharpening into daggers as they bore into mine. The disappointment in his features cuts deeply, a reflection of the high expectations he holds for me.

"Nothing?" he sneers, his voice dripping with disdain. "Do you think I'm blind, boy? I know you better than anyone. You've always been loyal, disciplined... but now, it seems you're willing to throw it all away for a pretty face."

The words strike a nerve, tearing through my defenses. Anger rises within me, intertwining with the guilt that gnaws at my conscience. I open my mouth to protest, to plead for understanding, but he cuts me off with a cold, dismissive wave of his hand.

"Enough!" Gaspard's voice slices through the air, cutting me off mid-sentence. His tone is sharp, finality in each syllable. "Cease your pursuit of her, Etienne. Now."

His threat hangs heavy in the stifling air, unspoken but palpable. The weight of his words settles upon my shoulders, the reminder of the consequences that await should I defy his command. It is a silent warning, a reminder of the power he wields and the control he expects.

"Understood," I reply, my voice strained and tinged with resignation. Each word is a tightrope walk, a careful dance to maintain the delicate balance of loyalty and desire.

As I step out into the sultry New Orleans heat once more, the weight of Gaspard's words presses heavily upon me. My mind is tumultuous, a whirlwind of conflicting thoughts and internal struggles. Duty has always been the guiding force in my life – it's what I was raised on, what I've fought for, what I've bled for. But now, the pull of love tugs at my heart, threatening to unravel everything I've built.

"Etienne," Gaspard's voice calls from the car, a rare softness seeping into his tone, almost fatherly. "Remember who you are – a LeBoeuf, born and bred for power. Don't let your desires cloud your judgment. Stay true to our family."

His words hang in the air, a bittersweet reminder of the expectations placed upon me. I stare into the distance, absorbing the weight of his counsel, feeling torn between the loyalty I owe and the longing that refuses to be extinguished.

I nod, swallowing past the tightness in my throat, and watch as the car disappears down the street. Loyalty or love – can I truly choose between them? My heart aches with longing, but duty whispers its insistent call.

"Who am I?" I murmur into the empty air, my voice barely a breath. And though no answer comes, I know that I must walk the path laid before me, even if it leads away from desire. For now, at least, loyalty must win out.



THE HUMID AIR CLINGS to my skin like a lover's embrace as I park my bike outside Lisette's home, the weight of Gaspard's orders bearing down on me. My heart pounds in my chest as I contemplate the consequences of my next move. The world around me fades into a blur, but Lisette's allure is a siren song that refuses to be silenced.

"Etienne?" The softness of her voice startles me, and I look up to find Lisette standing before me, her eyes filled with concern. Her presence is a balm to my troubled thoughts, offering a momentary respite from the turmoil within.

"Lisette," I murmur, my voice caught between vulnerability and determination. "I'm... fine."

Her gaze lingers on me, searching for any sign of deception or pain. Seeing through my facade, she reaches out, her touch gentle and soothing against my face. The tenderness of her fingers against my skin sends an electric jolt through me, reigniting the desires that have lain dormant for far too long. In that moment, I am lost to the intoxicating allure of her touch, the hunger that simmers beneath the surface.

Unable to resist the pull, I lean in, capturing her lips in a passionate and desperate kiss. Our mouths collide, the heat between us rising as our tongues dance in a frenzied exploration. It feels both exhilarating and dangerous, a forbidden longing that threatens to consume us.

"Etienne," she gasps against my mouth, her body pressing closer to mine, a shared hunger igniting within us. Our desires intertwine, leaving no room for reason or restraint as we surrender to the heat of the moment.

But just as the flames of desire threaten to devour us, a hand grips my shoulder, yanking me away from Lisette's embrace. Startled, we turn to see Bastien, his eyes ablaze with fury and possessiveness.

"Get off him, Lisette," he snarls, his tone sharp and filled with a degree of jealousy that cuts through the charged atmosphere. The intensity in his gaze is undeniable, his anger at the sight of us together evident.

Anger and defiance surge within me, fueled by Bastien's intrusion. "Who do you think you are, Bastien?" I snap, my voice filled with frustration and determination. "I don't need your permission to be with her."

Caught between desire and loyalty, the tension between us swells, leaving an unspoken challenge hanging in the air. The situation has become a head-on collision of desires and alliances, a test of loyalties that threatens to strain the bonds we once took for granted.

The tension in the air becomes suffocating as the weight of our conflicting desires and loyalties hangs heavily between us. Anguish flickers across Bastien's face, his voice laced with a mixture of accusation and hurt.

"Did you say we had to remain loyal to Claude just to keep me away?" he accuses, his voice trembling with the rawness of his emotions.

A surge of panic rises within me, and I shake my head vehemently, desperate to dispel any doubts he may have. "Of course not!" I protest, my voice filled with sincerity. "You know how important our loyalty is, but it's not just about keeping you away."

Bastien's gaze remains fixed on me, his eyes searching for any cracks in my words. The pain that lingers in his expression is palpable, a reflection of the internal battle he faces. The doubt that shrouds his eyes tells me he wrestles with his own conflicted feelings, the struggle between his desires and our shared bond.

"Then what was it about?" he challenges.

"I wanted him here," Lisette says, voice trembling. "And I want...I want you here, too."

Her admission hangs heavy in the air, a poignant acknowledgement of the impossible choice that lies before her. The weight of our desires and the loyalty we owe to one another and to Claude collide, leaving us in a state of emotional limbo. It becomes clear that a decision made in such turmoil would be a betrayal to one or both of us.

In that moment, the boundaries of our relationships blur, the lines between love, loyalty, and desire intertwining in a tangled web. We stand there, caught between the complexities of our desires, knowing that finding a resolution may fracture the bonds we hold dear.

"Damn it, Lisette!" I curse, my heart aching as I watch her crumble before us. "We've been friends for years, Bastien and I. We've shared women before, but you... you're different because my feelings for you are so much deeper."

The tension in the air becomes suffocating as desires and loyalties hang heavily between us. Anguish flickers across Bastien's face, his voice laced with a mixture of accusation and hurt.

"Enough!" Lisette's voice pierces through the growing tension, her words carrying a firmness that commands attention. She steps between us, her presence a resolute barrier that separates our animosity. "Both of you, stop this. You're tearing each other apart over me, and I won't stand for it."

Her words strike a chord within me, a reminder of the pain we inflict upon one another in the name of loyalty and desire. It's a collision that threatens to unravel the bond we share, stretching our loyalties to the breaking point.

Bastien's voice breaks, the anguish seeping through his words as he confronts the heart-wrenching question that has plagued us all. "Then who do you choose, Lisette?" he demands, the vulnerability palpable in his voice. "Etienne or me?"

Lisette's face contorts with agony, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. She shakes her head, her voice barely above a whisper. "I can't choose between the two of you," she confesses, her words laden with sorrow and helplessness. "Not like this."

I snarl. "Look what you're doing to her!"

"Me?" Bastien scoffs, his face cruel. "You're the one who told me you couldn't be with her because you're too *loyal*. Did any of that change, or did you just want a quick lay?"

The humid New Orleans air hangs heavy as our fists collide, the shocking pain jolting through my knuckles a brutal reminder of our shattered bond. Bastien's eyes blaze with fury, his muscles tense and coiled like a predator ready to strike. It's a dance we've performed countless times before, but never like this – never driven by the bitter sting of betrayal.

"Bastien!" Lisette's voice cuts through the night, slicing into the raw heartache threatening to consume me. Her hands, so tender just moments ago, now grip my arm with fierce determination. "Stop it!"

"Stay out of this, Lisette," I snarl, my chest heaving with rage and desire. The taste of her lips still lingers on mine, intoxicating and maddening in its fleeting sweetness.

"It's too late for that," she retorts, her words clipped and cold. "You brought me into this when you decided to tear each other apart over me."

Her gaze flickers between Bastien and me, the disappointment etched across her face like a knife wound. I feel my stomach clench with shame, the weight of her disapproval crushing me beneath its relentless pressure.

"Was this really worth it?" she asks, her voice trembling with barely suppressed anger. "Destroying your friendship, your loyalty to Claude... all for what? A few stolen kisses?"

"More than just a few," I mutter, my heart aching at the memory of our passion. Bastien looks like he wants to punch me again. But the fire in her



eyes is quickly extinguished, replaced by a cold, empty void that chills me to my core.

"Etienne, I can't do this," she whispers, her hand slipping from my arm as if burned by my touch. "I won't be the cause of your downfall."

"Then what do you suggest?" I ask, my voice harsh and brittle as I struggle to keep myself in check.

"Walk away," she replies hoarsely. "For your sake, and for mine."

The words hang in the air between us like a death sentence, the final nail in the coffin of our doomed affair. And as I stare into the depths of her gaze, I know she's right.


"Very well," I say, my voice devoid of emotion. "I'll walk away."

"Etienne..." Bastien starts, but I cut him off with a wave of my hand.


"Save it, Bastien," I growl, turning on my heel and stalking away from the wreckage of our friendship. The streets of New Orleans stretch out before me, dark and unforgiving, but I don't care. Let them swallow me whole – anything is better than the torment of knowing what I've lost.

As I disappear into the night, one thought echoes through my mind: I am truly alone now.

## Chapter Seven



Lisette



THE SCENT OF FRYING dough and powdered sugar fills the air, a sweet dance that beckons me deeper into the world of beignets. My fingers work in rhythm, folding the dough with practiced ease, but my mind drifts elsewhere. Bastien's strong arms wrapped around me, his whispered promises of protection, echoing through my thoughts like a haunting melody. And yet, Etienne's passionate kiss lingers on my lips, the fire he ignited still smolders within me.

"Damn," I mutter under my breath, shaking my head in an attempt to refocus on the task at hand. The Laurents' anger has cooled, granting me the freedom to return to my bakery – my sanctuary. But even here, I can't escape the tangled web of emotions ensnaring me. Love, lust, and confusion coil together, threatening to suffocate me.

"Stop it, Lisette," I chastise myself, forcing my attention back to the dough. The beignets won't make themselves, after all.

As I carefully slip another batch into the hot oil, the image of Etienne's smoldering eyes burns in my mind. His lips were hungry, demanding, taking what he wanted without apology. The memory sends a shiver down my spine, a thrill of desire coursing through me.

"Merde," I whisper, feeling the heat radiating from more than just the stove. It's not just Etienne who stirs this storm inside me, though. There's also Bastien, his protectiveness a balm to my frayed nerves, his touch as gentle as a lover's caress.

"Two men..." I muse aloud, the notion both thrilling and terrifying. Can one heart truly hold love for two? And if so, is there room enough for all the complications that come with such a thing?

In the midst of my musings, the sizzle of the beignets pulls me back to reality. I flip them in the oil, their golden brown crusts glistening beneath the

kitchen lights. The bakery is my haven, and for now, it keeps the chaos at bay. But for how long?

"There are more important things in life than...than two men," I admonish myself again, watching the beignets puff up like little pillows of heaven.

"Like beignets and bread and pastries."

And so, with flour-dusted hands and a heavy heart, I continue to bake. The beignets pile high on the counter, but my thoughts remain entwined with Bastien and Etienne, their presence as intoxicating as the sugar-sweet air that surrounds me.

My heart races as I imagine a life with both Bastien and Etienne, two men whose love could be as consuming as the flames that dance on the stovetop. Is it possible? Could I truly hold onto them both without breaking?

As if to answer my silent question, the bells above the bakery door chime, their sweet melody snapping me back to reality.

"Bonjour," I call out automatically, turning from the stove to see who's entered my sanctuary.

"Hello, Lisette," comes an unexpected voice, one that carries the weight of years spent apart. My Uncle Jules stands in the doorway, his eyes filled with worry and pain. It's been so long since he left New Orleans, escaping this world of danger to forge a new path.

"U-uncle?" I stammer, my voice barely above a whisper. "What are you doing here?"

"Chère fille, we need to talk," he says, his voice trembling with emotion. He steps inside, and I can see the tension in him, as if he's been carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders for far too long. He is not my father, but he and my aunt raised me after my parents were killed. He looks around at the bakery for a moment, as if lost in memories. My aunt ran it for decades before she willed it to me.

It was the one thing they ever argued about. Uncle Jules wanted to leave New Orleans, to escape somewhere safe. My aunt could never leave the bakery. She left it to me when she died. He begged me to sell.

Something must be wrong if he's come back to town. He never returns, ever.

"About what?" I ask, my heart pounding in my chest. Is he here to take me away from this life, from the men whose love has ensnared my heart?

"Your safety, Lisette," he replies, his gaze never leaving mine. "I've heard things... about your involvement with the mafia, with the Badaux and

LeBoeuf families. I don't want what happened to your best friend to happen to you."

I swallow hard, memories of my lost friend flooding my thoughts. The pain is still raw, still fresh. But I can't abandon my home, my bakery, everything I've worked so hard for.

"New Orleans is my home," I say with determination. "This bakery, it's my life."

"Please, Lisette," he implores, desperation in his eyes. "Leave this place. Come with me. I can protect you."

"Can you?" I ask, tears welling up in my eyes. "Can you protect my heart too?"

"Your heart?" he echoes, confusion etched on his face.

"Oui," I whisper, a tear slipping down my cheek. "I've fallen for two men, and I don't know how to choose between them. But I can't leave them behind. I can't abandon the love they've shown me, no matter how dangerous it may be."

"Chère fille," he murmurs, pulling me into a tight embrace. His warmth surrounds me, but it cannot quell the storm raging within my heart. "No, that is not a problem I can solve. I just want you to be safe."

"Je sais," I reply, my voice muffled by his chest. "But sometimes safety comes at a price. And I'm not willing to pay that price anymore."

As we stand there, wrapped in each other's arms, I know there's no turning back. My heart belongs to Bastien and Etienne, and I must face whatever dangers lie ahead alongside them.

"No," I assert, trembling like the flickering flame of a candle. "I won't leave my home, my bakery...my heart."

"Chérie, the mafia is dangerous," Jules pleads, his eyes filled with fear. "They will destroy everything you hold dear. They've already taken so much from us."

"I know," I admit, my voice strained as I fight back tears. "But I can't run away. I have to stand my ground and protect what's mine."

"Even if it costs you your life?" he asks, pain lacing his words.

"Oui," I whisper, swallowing hard. "I've made my choice, and I won't let them win."

Jules regards me with sadness, his shoulders drooping in resignation. He pulls me into a final embrace before leaving the bakery, the door closing

behind him with a hollow echo. I sink to the floor, my sobs filling the empty space around me, drowning in the confusion that engulfs me.

The chime of the doorbell startles me, and I hastily wipe my tears away. Bastien stands before me, concern etched across his rugged face. He kneels beside me, gathering me into his strong arms, cradling me like a fragile porcelain doll.

"Tell me, Lisette," he urges gently. "What is it?"

"Je ne sais pas quoi faire," I whimper, burying my face in his chest. "I care for you both, Bastien, but I don't know what to do. Everything feels so impossible."

"Listen to me," Bastien commands softly, his fingers brushing tenderly against my cheek. "We'll figure this out together, d'accord?"

"Oui," I sigh, gazing into his eyes, searching for hope within their dark depths. My lips find his, our mouths dancing together in a heated embrace, fueled by fear and longing. As we kiss, I dare to hope for an impossible happy ending - one where love could conquer all, even the dark shadows of the mafia that threaten to destroy us.

"Promise me, Bastien," I whisper against his lips, "that no matter what happens, you'll stand by my side."

"Je te le promets, Lisette," he murmurs, his voice unwavering. "Together, we'll face whatever comes our way."

## Chapter Eight



**B**astien  
The scent of freshly baked bread fills the air as I watch Lisette, her delicate hands skillfully shaping dough with a tenderness that makes my heart race. The afternoon sun casts a golden glow over her, and I can't help but be entranced by the way it dances on her skin.

"Come on, Lisette," I say, leaning against the counter, "you've been working all day. You need a break."

She looks up at me, her eyes defiant yet vulnerable, and for a moment she hesitates. "I... alright, Bastien," she concedes finally, her features softening. "But only for a little while."

"Deal." I flash her a grin, and we work together to close up the shop. As I bring down the shutters, I can't help but notice the warmth of her body standing close to mine, the gentle curve of her hips brushing against me as she locks the door and we stroll to my bike.

I hug Lisette close as the Harley roars between our legs. The heat of her body nestled tightly behind me is distracting. She's wearing my helmet, so I can't tell if it's distracting on purpose, but when I park the bike she gives me a coy look as she takes it off.

The French Quarter comes alive around us as we amble through its vibrant streets. Laughter spills from my lips, mingling with Lisette's melodic giggle as we trade stories and confidences, our connection deepening with each step. The New Orleans air washes over my skin, heavy with humidity and possibility.

"Did I ever tell you about that time Etienne tried to teach me how to shoot?" I ask, my voice lilting with amusement.

"No, what happened?" Lisette's eyes sparkle with curiosity, her laughter carrying a hint of anticipation.

"Let's just say I nearly shot his foot off," I admit sheepishly, and her laughter erupts like a symphony in the night. I can't help but join her, the joy of this simple moment washing over me like a wave.

As we continue our walk, the city's pulse thrums beneath our feet, a wild rhythm that seems to match the beat of my heart. I steal glances at Lisette, her laughter like music to my ears, and I can't help the desire that stirs within me.

"Hey," I say, my voice low and thick with longing, "you remember that jazz club we passed by earlier?"

Her eyes meet mine, dark and full of secrets, and she nods. "Yeah, why?"

"Let's go back there." The words are barely a whisper, but they hang heavy in the air between us, charged with unspoken promises. As Lisette takes my hand, I can feel the heat of her skin against mine, a fire that ignites something deep within me, and I know that tonight, we will dance to the rhythm of our own hearts.

The jazz club's entrance welcomes us with sultry notes, as if the music itself beckons us inside. The air is thick with the scent of cigarettes and whiskey, a mixture that seems to wrap around me like a lover's embrace. I guide her through the dimly lit room, my hand warm on the small of her back, and she shivers at my touch.

"Care for a dance, cheri?" I murmur, breath hot against her ear.

"Lead the way," she replies, unable to hide the desire in her voice.

I pull her close, our bodies melding together as we sway to the rhythm of the saxophone. My heart races, my pulse pounding in time with the beat. She gazes up at me, and I'm captivated by the glazed look of desire in her eyes. My arm tightens around her, pulling her even closer, and I can feel the heat radiating off her body, igniting a fire within that burns with reckless abandon.

"God, Lisette," I whisper, her lips brushing against mine, "you have no idea how much I've wanted this."

"Show me," she challenges, her eyes locked on mine.

My response is immediate – a passionate kiss that sears my soul, leaving me breathless and aching for more. Our tongues tangle, exploring and teasing, and I can taste her hunger, her need, as it mirrors my own.

"Come home with me," she pleads when we finally break apart, our chests heaving with ragged breaths. "Please, Bastien."

"Shit, Lisette, you know I can't resist you." I sweep her into my arms, carrying her through the throng of people, their stares and murmurs insignificant compared to the urgency of our desire.

The ride home is dizzying, a blur. She pushes tightly into me as I steer my bike and I swear under my breath and squeeze her hip as I drive. Our lips are frantic against each other as we stumble inside the door.

Upstairs, above the bakery, the world fades away, consumed by the fire that burns between us. As I set her down, Lisette's legs tremble, weak from the intensity of our connection. Tonight, we will surrender to the passion that has been simmering beneath the surface for far too long. And in each other's arms, we will find solace in the chaos of our lives.

The moment we cross the threshold to her apartment, my hands find her waist, pulling her close as our lips meet again. The urgency in her touch sends shivers down my spine, and I swear I can feel her heart beating wildly against my own.

"Let me see you," I murmur against her lips, my fingers deftly unbuttoning her dress.

"Only if I get to undress you too," she teases, a playful grin spreading across her lips as she tugs at the hem of my shirt.

"Deal," I chuckle, the sound rumbling deep in my chest like the smoothest purr.

We take our time, peeling away each layer until we stand before each other, naked and vulnerable. I let my eyes roam, committing every curve and angle to memory. It feels like a sacred ritual, this unveiling of our true selves, and I tremble beneath her gaze.

"God, you're beautiful," I breathe, my voice thick with desire.

I guide her toward the bed, relishing the sensation of the soft sheets beneath us as I lay her down gently, my body hovering above hers. Anticipation surges through me as I lower my mouth to her skin, leaving a trail of kisses from her collarbone to her breasts. Each touch leaves an indelible mark, igniting a wildfire of sensations.

"Please, Bastien," she whispers, arching into my touch, her need palpable.

I don't need any further encouragement; my tongue dips lower, teasing the sensitive flesh between her thighs. A gasp escapes her lips, her back arching as my mouth engulfs her in heat. Waves of pleasure crash through her, building in intensity until she shatters beneath my skilled tongue, crying out my name.

"Fuck, Lisette," I groan, my own desire evident in the huskiness of my voice. "You're incredible."

Catching my breath, I let her pull me up to meet her lips, knowing she can taste the mingling flavors of us.

"Make love to me, Bastien," she pleads, her voice raw with need. "Please."



"Fuck, Lisette," I growl as I position myself at her entrance, locking eyes with her. "You ready?"

"More than ever," she breathes, her voice trembling with anticipation.

I push inside her slowly, our bodies melding together in perfect synchrony. The sensation is overwhelming – the heat, the pressure, the exquisite friction that sends shivers down my spine. We both moan as I fill her completely, pausing for a moment to savor the connection that goes beyond the physical.

"Move," she whispers, her desperation evident, urging me to claim her fully.

With a primal instinct, I obey, thrusting into her with a force that leaves us both breathless. Our rhythm is instinctive, fueled by our shared passion and the relentless pursuit of pleasure. Her legs wrap around my waist, pulling me deeper, intensifying our connection.

"God, Lisette... so fucking tight," I pant, beads of sweat forming on my brow. "I can't hold on much longer."

"Then don't," she urges, her nails digging into my back as she meets every thrust. "Give in to it, Bastien. Let go with me."

"Fuck..." I swear, my eyes never leaving hers as I piston into her, our coupling reaching a fever pitch.

And just as I sense she's about to unravel, I lean down and capture her lips in a searing kiss, swallowing her cries as we teeter on the edge of ecstasy. Our climax is powerful, a cataclysmic release, a testament to the undeniable chemistry that binds us.

We collapse into each other's arms, our bodies slick with sweat, hearts pounding in unison. As the intensity fades, she traces her fingers over the intricate tattoos adorning my chest, each one holding its own significance.

"Your ink is beautiful," she murmurs, her eyes following the patterns that wind across my skin. "Tell me about them."

"Perhaps another time," I reply, a hint of wistfulness tainting my voice. "For now, let's cherish this moment... for as long as it lasts."

"Agreed," she whispers, nestling in tight, finding solace in the turbulence of our lives.

## Chapter Nine



Lisette  
The bell above the bakery door chimes, announcing Etienne's arrival. I watch him enter, his tall frame filling the doorway, tension radiating from every muscle. The air grows heavy, as if the room itself is aware of the storm brewing between us.

"Etienne," I call out, forcing a smile. "It's been too long."

"Bonjour, Lisette," he replies, his voice a low rumble. His gaze meets mine, and the electric charge between us makes my heart race.

"Come upstairs," I suggest, trying to sound casual. "We can talk privately there."

He nods, turns the 'closed' sign and locks the door as we ascend the narrow staircase. Inside my cluttered office, I close the door behind us, and the silence that follows feels suffocating.

"Look, I know you're angry," I begin, meeting his piercing eyes. "But—"

"Angry?" he interrupts, pacing the small room like a caged animal. "Try furious! You slept with Bastien."

His jealousy surges through his words, and I'm taken aback by the intensity of it. But beneath that fury, I sense something else: longing, need, a hunger only I can satisfy.

"Etienne, listen," I implore, stepping closer. "I have feelings for both of you. I can't help it."

"Feelings?" he scoffs, halting his pacing to face me. "You don't understand, Lisette. I want you for myself."

My breath catches in my throat as his confession hangs in the air, thick and unmistakable. This man, bound by loyalty and duty, has been fighting his own desires for me. Suddenly, the distance between us feels unbearable.

"Etienne," I whisper, reaching out to take his hands. "I want you too."

His eyes search mine, and for a moment, it's as if time stands still. Then, like a dam breaking, he pulls me close, our mouths crashing together in a passionate kiss that ignites a fire between us. The world falls away, leaving only the heat of his body against mine and the fierce dance of our tongues.

"Fuck," he groans, breaking away from the kiss just long enough to catch his breath. "Lisette, I need you."

"Take me," I gasp, my pulse racing with anticipation. "Show me how much you want me, Etienne."

In this small room, surrounded by the scent of fresh pastries and the echoes of whispered secrets, we unleash the passion that has been building between us, finally giving in to what we can no longer ignore.

"Etienne," I murmur, taking his hands in mine. They're warm and rough, a testament to the life he's led. "I have feelings for both you and Bastien. I need you both."

His eyes widen, but he doesn't pull away. Instead, he cups my face tenderly, his calloused thumb brushing across my cheekbone. "Lisette," he breathes, raw emotion lacing his voice. "I love you. I've wanted you for three years, and that's the only reason I keep coming for beignets."

My heart swells with the weight of his words, and an urgency seizes me. I reach up and crush my lips against his, passion surging between us like a tidal wave. We kiss roughly, hungrily, as if we're trying to devour each other.

"Fuck," Etienne growls, pulling back from the kiss just enough to catch his breath. He sweeps everything off my desk with a single, violent motion – papers fly and pencils scatter – creating a chaotic backdrop for our burgeoning desire.

As we stand among the disarray, I look into his eyes, dark with need, and know that I want this. I want him. And I don't care about the consequences.

Etienne's lips trail down my neck, his hot breath sending shivers through me as I lay back on the cold surface of the desk. My heart races, and I gasp when he lifts my skirt, his fingers teasingly stroking me through the lace of my underwear. I arch my back, needing more.

"Etienne, more. Please!" I whimper, desperate for his touch.

With a wicked grin, he pulls my underwear aside and lowers his mouth to me. The sensation is electric, and I cry out, tangling my hands in his thick hair. He doesn't hold back, devouring me with an intensity that leaves me breathless and teetering on the edge of pleasure.

"Fuck, Etienne," I moan, overcome by the skill of his tongue.

Just when I think I can't take any more, he stands, and I wrap my legs around him, locking my ankles together behind his back. His eyes meet mine with a fierce hunger as he takes me, filling me completely. The thrill of our connection sends waves of ecstasy coursing through me.

"Jesus, Lisette," he pants, the raw lust in his voice driving me wild.

"Etienne!" I'm overcome with passion. But before we can lose ourselves completely in each other, the door swings open.

"Christ," Bastien curses, his eyes widening at the sight of us. At first he looks angry, but there's a hunger there that makes my breath catch.

"Stay, Bastien," I tell him, breathless but unwavering. "I want you here too."

His features soften as he takes in the scene before him – Etienne gripping my hips, our bodies entwined, my legs wrapped around him. He hesitates for a moment, but then steps inside and closes the door behind him.

"Are you sure?" he asks, his voice rough with desire.

"Please," I beg, knowing that I need him just as much as I need Etienne.

Bastien approaches us, his eyes locked on mine. He presses a trembling hand to my cheek, and I lean into his touch, feeling the heat radiating from his body. My heart pounds in my chest as he leans down to kiss me.

"Alright," he murmurs against my lips, his breath hot on my skin. "I'm here."

As we continue, Bastien's presence adds another layer of intensity to our experience. The room is filled with the sounds of our passion – gasps, moans, and whispered words – as we navigate this uncharted territory together. And in that moment, I know that I don't want to lose either of these men who have come to mean so much to me.

Bastien's lips find my neck, his warm breath sending shivers down my spine as Etienne's relentless thrusts drive me wild. I can't help but cry out, feeling as if I'm coming undone at the seams.

"Fuck," Bastien whispers into my ear, his hands gripping my waist tightly. The sensation of both men taking control of my body has me teetering on the edge of ecstasy.

"Harder," I gasp, desperate for more. Etienne obliges, his pace quickening with each stroke, and I feel myself spiraling towards a climax that threatens to consume me.

My world narrows, focused solely on the pleasure coursing through me, until suddenly, Etienne pulls out, and Bastien takes his place, entering me from behind. The sudden change in position sends a fresh wave of sensation through my body, pushing me even closer to the brink.

"Jesus, Lisette," Bastien groans, his grip tightening around me as he begins to move with a fierce intensity. "You feel so fucking amazing."

"Keep going," I plead, my voice trembling with need. "Please, don't stop."

Time loses meaning as we move together, our bodies locked in a primal dance of desire. My mind is a swirl of emotions – love, lust, and something deeper that I can't quite name.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, my release crashes over me, leaving me breathless and spent. Bastien follows soon after, his body shuddering against mine as he finds his own satisfaction.

In the aftermath, we collapse onto the floor, a tangle of limbs and labored breathing. The room is silent save for the echoes of our passion still hanging heavy in the air.

"Can we..." I begin, hesitating as I try to put my thoughts into words. "Can we make this work? Between the three of us?"

"Are you sure that's what you want?" Etienne asks, his voice tight with uncertainty.

"I don't want to lose either of you," I confess, my heart aching at the thought. "I know it won't be easy, but I think... I think we can make it work."

Bastien and Etienne exchange glances, weighing my words carefully before offering their own thoughts.

"Life is rarely simple," Bastien says softly, brushing a stray lock of hair from my face. "But if this is what you truly want, Lisette, then I'll do whatever it takes to make it work."

"Me too," Etienne agrees, his eyes locked on mine. "If you're willing to take this chance, so am I."

"Then let's try," I say, determination coursing through me. As we lie there, our bodies still slick with sweat and mingled desire, I know that no matter how difficult the road ahead may be, it's one I'm willing to walk hand in hand with these two men who have come to mean so much to me.

# Chapter Ten



Lisette  
Morning light seeps through the curtains, casting a warm glow on my face as I wake. Outside, the city of New Orleans hums with life – people going about their day, oblivious to the dark underbelly that runs beneath. With a deep breath, I rise and start my morning routine.

The mailbox greets me with its usual rusted grin, hiding what lies inside. As I pull out a crumpled envelope, I don't recognize the jagged handwriting. My heart hammers in my chest, and I unfold the note. "Marcel is still after you. You need to leave now," it reads. The words are poison, seeping into my soul.

My uncle steps into the bakery while I'm still fumbling with the note. His face grows grim.

"Chérie, please listen to me." Jules' voice breaks through the haze of anger and fear. He stands before me, his eyes filled with concern. "I know what you said, but I can't accept it. Come away with me. You can leave all this behind."

"Uncle, I..." My voice trembles, torn between loyalty and love. This is my home, my history – how can I just abandon it all?

"Your safety is more important than any of this," he insists, gripping my shoulders tightly. "Marcel won't stop until he gets his revenge. Do you understand?"

I nod, but my heart aches at the thought of leaving those I love behind. Etienne, always so strong and steady, yet struggling with the weight of his family legacy. And Bastien, my fierce protector, who would do anything to keep me safe.

"Think of what your mother would want for you," Jules implores, his voice gentle. The memory of her laughter, her love, is bittersweet – but it strengthens my resolve. His voice turns bitter. "Your aunt would want you to stay, and look where that got her."

I shut my eyes. My aunt had been stubborn too, refusing to leave when a war got hot. The same gang war that killed Marcel Laurent's parents killed

her, leaving my dear cousin Simone without a mother and me with no one but the uncle standing before me pleading for me to leave. I thought that keeping this bakery open was a testament to her memory, but what if I'm wrong?

"Fine," I whisper, my voice barely audible. "I will go."

Jules pulls me close, his embrace filled with relief and sorrow. "It won't be forever, Lisette. I promise."

As we break apart, my gaze drifts to the city beyond my doorstep. The vibrant colors, the intoxicating scents and sounds of New Orleans – they're a part of me. But life has thrown me into a world of darkness, and I must choose between love and survival.

"Let's go, then," I say, turning to face Jules. "Before it's too late."

The shop door swings open, a chorus of bells announcing the arrival of Bastien and Etienne. Their eyes dart between Jules and me, honing in on the tension that hangs heavy in the air.

"Is everything alright?" Bastien's voice is strung with concern as he takes a step toward me.

"Marcel sent a note," I murmur, clutching it tightly in my hand. "He's after me."

"Mon Dieu," Etienne breathes, his gaze hardening. "This ends now."

"Over my dead body will that man lay a finger on you, Lisette," Bastien swears, his fists clenched at his sides. "You have my word."

"Perhaps leaving would be your best chance at safety," Etienne suggests, his voice measured but insistent. "There's too much risk staying here."

"Are you serious, Etienne?" Bastien's voice rises, anger simmering beneath the surface. "You want her gone?"

"Of course not!" Etienne snaps, his eyes flashing. "But I want her safe more than anything. Can't you see that?"

"Enough!" My words cut through the tense exchange like a knife, silencing both men. My heart races, caught in the crossfire of their heated words.

"Listen to me," I say, my voice quivering with emotion. "This... this is my choice. And right now, I don't know what I want."

Bastien and Etienne exchange wary glances, neither willing to back down. I can feel the weight of their loyalty, their love for me, pressing down upon my chest until it's hard to breathe.

"Let me think," I plead, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. "Please, just give me time."

They nod silently – Bastien's face etched with worry, Etienne's with grim determination – and turn to leave the shop. As the door closes behind them, I'm left standing in a whirlwind of emotions, my heart torn between two men who would risk it all for me.

I look down at the note again, Marcel's taunts leering up at me from the page. Darkness threatens to consume me, but I refuse to let it win. Whatever choice I make, I'll face it head-on, with every ounce of strength I possess.

The door clicks shut behind Bastien and Etienne, leaving me in the dim light of my shop, alone but for the ghostly presence of my own thoughts. Jules steps out from the shadows, his eyes soft with concern as they search my face.

"Your mother," he begins gently, "would want you safe and happy, Lisette."

His words wrap around my heart like a vine, tender and persistent. I know he speaks the truth – my mother would wish nothing more than for me to be free from danger, from the treacherous grasp of the mafia that surrounds us. But is that life attainable? Can happiness ever truly bloom in the blood-soaked soil of New Orleans?

"Perhaps," I whisper, staring down at the cold floor, "but I need guidance. I must speak with her."

Jules nods solemnly, understanding the depth of my need. "Go then, chérie. Find your answers."

I leave the shop, the heavy door creaking behind me, and step into the damp embrace of the city. Shadows stretch across the cobblestone streets as I make my way to the cemetery—hallowed ground where my mother rests beneath a veil of ivy.

"Maman," I plead, kneeling before her grave, fingers digging into the soft earth. "What should I do? I know I should leave but I..."

The wind whispers through the trees, carrying with it the scent of rain and the distant murmur of thunder. In that quiet moment, I find solace in the knowledge that my mother's spirit watches over me, guiding my heart even now.

As I rise to my feet, a feeling of unease slithers up my spine like an icy serpent. I glance around, searching for its source. There, hidden in the shadows just beyond the cemetery gates, I catch a fleeting glimpse of movement. A figure, lurking in the darkness.



"Who's there?" I call out, my voice wavering with apprehension. A car door slams across the street, and the figure melts away like a phantom, swallowed by the night.

My heart pounds against my ribcage as I hurry home, every whisper of wind and rustle of leaves sending a shiver down my spine. Is it Marcel, seeking revenge? Or one of his minions, dispatched to watch me? The thought quickens my pace, urging me forward.

I reach my doorstep, pulse racing, and slip inside, locking the door behind me. No matter who—or what—lurks in those shadows, I do not want to give up my city, my home, by fear. My mother's spirit watches over me, her love and guidance granting me the strength to stand tall in the face of darkness. And with that strength, I will forge my own path—one step at a time.

It's like Uncle Jules said—it's not forever. Leaving may be what's best.

In the dim glow of my bedroom, moonlight spills across the floor like a pool of liquid silver. My fingers tremble as they clutch the handle of my suitcase, the weight of my decision bearing down on me. I cannot let fear command my life. I must take control, even if it means leaving behind everything I've ever known.

"Uncle Jules was right," I whisper to myself, the words tasting bitter on my tongue. "Mother would want me safe."

With each folded dress, each neatly rolled pair of stockings, I can feel the ties that bind me to this city unraveling. A symphony of memories plays in my mind: the laughter shared with Etienne and Bastien, the warmth of Uncle Claude's embrace, the love that bloomed within these very walls.

"Damn you, Marcel," I hiss through gritted teeth, anger flaring in my chest like a wildfire. "You won't win."

I pause, staring at a worn photograph of my mother. Her eyes, so like mine, seem to bore into my soul, offering comfort and guidance. "Please, maman," I pray silently, "give me the strength to do what is necessary."

"Going somewhere?"

The sudden sound of Bastien's voice startles me. He leans against the doorframe, dark eyes searching mine for answers. His presence brings a wave of conflicting emotions crashing down upon me. I swallow hard, struggling to find my voice.

"Marcel isn't going to stop, Bastien," I say, my heart aching at the thought of leaving him behind. "I can't stay here and wait for him to strike."

A storm brews behind Bastien's eyes, his jaw clenched tight. "You don't have to run, Lisette." He moves closer, reaching for my hand. "I'll protect you, no matter what it takes."

My heart swells with love for this man, who would face the world for me. But how can I ask him to shoulder such a burden? "Bastien, I can't let you risk your life for me." The words catch in my throat, choked out by the tears that threaten to fall.

"Then let me go with you," he pleads, desperation lacing his voice. "We can find a new life together, far from all of this."

The temptation pulls at me, nearly breaking my resolve. But I cannot ask him to abandon his own family, his own legacy. And if Marcel still hunted me, Bastien's presence would only put him further in harm's way.

"No," I say firmly, my fingers tightening around the suitcase handle. "This is something I must face alone."

His face crumbles, but he nods in understanding. "I won't stop loving you, Lisette," he murmurs, pulling me into a fierce embrace. "No matter where you go, or what may come."

My heart echoes his sentiment, crying out with every fiber of its being. But I know I must be strong—for my mother, for myself, and for the life I have yet to build.

"Je t'aime, Bastien," I whisper into his shoulder, letting myself sink into him one last time. "But this is the path I must choose."

# Chapter Eleven



**B**astien  
Blood roars in my ears as I storm away from Marcel, his venomous words lingering like smoke. Why didn't I pull the trigger when the chance was mine? Thirst for revenge chokes me, gnawing at my insides like a ravenous beast.

"Keep your friends close," I mutter under my breath, "and your enemies closer." It's an old saying, but one that's never failed me. And now, it's Giroux who demands my attention.

I follow him through the city, a shadow unseen, unnoticed. The streets of New Orleans pulse with life, but I see only him – Giroux, the man who holds the key to Marcel's twisted machinations. If Marcel is making a move on Lisette, Giroux will know.

"Hey, Bastien!" A familiar voice calls out, causing me to startle. It's a fellow soldier from my days in the Marines, a lifetime ago. But I cannot afford distractions now; I brush him off with a terse nod and continue my pursuit.

Giroux ducks into an alley, and I press myself against the wall, eyes narrowed as I watch him whisper into his phone. The muscles in my jaw tighten as I strain to catch every word.

"Marcel wants it done tonight," he says, his voice low and conspiratorial. "The bakery – you know the one. Make it look like a rival gang hit."

My fists clench, and my stomach turns violently at the thought of Lisette caught in the crossfire. No – not on my watch. My focus narrows to a razor-sharp point, and I know what I must do: take down Giroux, then Marcel, and make it safe for Lisette to stay in New Orleans.

As Giroux ends his call and begins to walk away, I stalk him like a predator. Each step is calculated, smooth, silent. We weave through the city, our deadly dance taking us deeper into the underbelly of New Orleans.

At last, in the darkness of a deserted street, I make my move. I spring forward, my hand clamping down on Giroux's shoulder like a vise. He spins

around in surprise, and I seize the opportunity to land a brutal punch to his gut, the force of it knocking the wind out of him.

"Wh-what do you want?" he stammers, fear widening his eyes.

"Information," I snarl, my voice dripping with venom. "Everything you know about Marcel's plans."

Giroux hesitates, but another blow to the face wipes away any doubts. He spills the details, each word tightening the noose around Marcel's neck.

"Please," he pleads when he's finished, blood staining his teeth. "I've told you everything."

"Cut the shit, Giroux," I snarl, tightening my grip on his throat. "I know about your plans with Marcel. What's next? When are you attacking Lisette?"

His eyes widen with fear, but the smirk never leaves his face. "You think I'll talk that easily?" he taunts, gasping for breath.

"Fine." My fist connects with his jaw, sending him reeling. "Have it your way."

As I beat him mercilessly, each punch fueled by the rage boiling inside me, Giroux finally breaks. "Alright! Alright, stop!" he pleads, coughing up blood. "Marcel plans to attack the bakery tonight, make it look like a rival gang."

"Is that all?" I demand, my rage still unsatisfied.

"Y-yes," he stammers, tears streaming down his bruised and bloody face. "I swear."

"Rot in hell," I say coldly, and with a final surge of rage, I raise my gun and fire. The gunshot echoes through the night, and Giroux crumples to the ground, lifeless.

"Forgive me, Lisette," I whisper into the darkness. "But I won't let them take you from me."

The night air is thick with the scent of impending rain as I make my way to Etienne's place, my heart pounding like a caged animal in my chest. The streetlights cast long shadows on the pavement, and with each step, memories of Lisette swirl through my mind - her laughter, her touch, the taste of her lips.

As I leave behind the haunting silence of the swamp, I can't help but think of Lisette, and the lengths I'll go to keep her safe. Marcel will soon learn not to underestimate the fury of a man who has everything to lose.



"ETIENNE," I CALL OUT, rapping my knuckles against the heavy door of his apartment. The door swings open, revealing his furrowed brow and piercing blue eyes that seem to see straight through me.

"Mon ami, what brings you here so late?" he asks, curiosity tightening his voice.

"Marcel and Giroux," I spit the words like venom, my fists clenching at my sides. "I've been tailing Giroux. I know their plans."

"Slow down, Bastien," Etienne says, placing a hand on my shoulder and guiding me inside. "You're letting your anger control you. That's not like you."

"Like me or not," I say through gritted teeth, "I won't stand by while they try to take Lisette away from me."

"Of course not," he replies, pouring us each a glass of whiskey. "But we need to be smart about this. How can we use what you've learned?"

"I've already taken out Giroux," I say, downing my drink in one swift motion. "He's Marcel's right-hand man. Without him, Marcel is vulnerable."

"Perhaps," Etienne muses, tapping his fingers on the table. "But there's more to it than just killing Giroux. We need a plan. A strategy."

"Then help me come up with one," I implore him, my voice raw with desperation. "I can't do this alone."

"Alright," he finally agrees, his expression softening. "We'll find a way to take out Marcel and protect Lisette. But we must be cautious, Bastien. Remember, we're playing with fire here."

"Let it burn," I reply, fury burning within me like the very flames of hell. "For Lisette, I'll walk through fire and come out the other side unscathed."

Together, Etienne and I pore over maps and information, weaving together a plan that will expose Marcel's treachery. The night stretches on, but our resolve only grows stronger, fueled by the love I hold for Lisette and the knowledge that, with Etienne's help, I won't lose her without a fight.

The scent of freshly baked bread hangs heavy in the air as I approach Lisette's bakery, a sanctuary amidst the chaos of our lives. The doorbell chimes gently and she appears from behind the counter, her eyes widening in surprise at my presence. Today there is no bread baking — she and her cousin Simone are packing the bakery up. Empty boxes litter the small bakery, and Lisette sets one down to greet me.

"Bonjour, Bastien," she greets me cautiously but warmly.

"Bonjour, Lisette," I reply, my heart pounding. "We need to talk."

"Of course," she ushers me into the back room, away from prying eyes.

Simone narrows her eyes at me as I follow Lisette to the backroom. I haven't seen her around much – if Lisette was skeptical about gangsters, Simone is even more so. Last I heard, Claude said she was going to college somewhere out of state.

"Marcel is planning to attack the bakery," I begin without preamble, my voice tense. "It's time for you to fight back."

"Why do you think I am packing?" Lisette's eyes flash with defiance. "How do you propose we do that?"

"Stay here and fight," I urge, my hands clasping hers, the intensity of my feelings for her barely contained. "You don't have to run away. We can face Marcel together."

"Are you sure?" she asks, her voice wavering, uncertainty biting at her every word.

"More than anything," I whisper, pulling her close, desperate to protect her from the darkness that threatens to consume us both. "I won't let him take you away from me."

"Your love..." she hesitates, her eyes searching mine for the truth. "Is it enough to keep us safe?"

"Oui," I breathe, my heart swelling with conviction. "Together, we are unstoppable."

"Then I will stay," she agrees, her lips meeting mine in a passionate kiss that sets my soul ablaze.

"Finally," I think, feeling the weight of the world lifting from my shoulders as our bodies meld together, united against the forces that seek to tear us apart.

But, like a cruel joke, the moment is shattered by the sound of Claude's men bursting through the door.

"Enough!" barks one of them, his gun trained on us. "Claude wants to speak with you both."

"Let her go," I growl, my hands balling into fists at my sides.

"Easy now," the man smirks, enjoying the power he wields over us. "It's not for you to decide."

"Please, Bastien," Lisette implores, her eyes pleading with me to stand down. "Let's just hear what Claude has to say."

"Fine," I relent, my jaw clenched, fury boiling just beneath the surface. "But if he lays a hand on you, I'll kill him."

"Understood," she whispers, and together, we face the uncertain fate that awaits us.

The room smells of power and fear, the dimly lit chamber where Claude Badeaux conducts his business. My heart beats in my chest like a caged animal as Bastien and I are led inside, our hands entwined. The air is thick with tension, each breath I take suffocating me further.

"Ah, the star-crossed lovers," Claude sneers, his calculating eyes scrutinizing us from behind his large mahogany desk. "Please, sit."

I glance at Lisette, her eyes filled with fear, and my grip on her hand tightens, a silent reassurance passing between us. We take our seats, facing the formidable figure of Claude, the man who holds our lives in his hands.

"Uncle," I begin, my voice scratchy with an underlying tension. "Please, let us—"

"Silence!" Claude interrupts, dismissing my pleas with a dismissive wave. "I brought you here because I've reached a decision. Lisette, you will leave town immediately. It's in everyone's best interest."

"Non," I protest, my jaw clenched, muscles coiled with defiance. "She stays with me."

"Listen, boy," Claude growls, leaning forward, his gaze piercing mine. "I can't afford to have two of my best hitmen distracted because of one woman. Marcel won't back down just because she humiliated him. You both know that."

"Then we'll eliminate him," I suggest, my voice icy and resolute. "Should have done it the first time."

"Enough!" Claude's fist lands on the desk with a resounding thud, his voice reverberating through the room. "This isn't up for negotiation. It's an order. Bastien, you will step down."

"Or what?" I challenge, meeting his steely gaze with resolve.

"Or you'll face the same fate as Giroux," Claude threatens, venom oozing from his words.

"Is that a threat?" I stand, chin raised, and Claude raises an imperious eyebrow. "I'm the one who dealt with Giroux."

"It's a fact. And if you're reckless, you're putting Lisette in danger, too."

I can't bear the thought of Lisette suffering the same fate as Giroux. I feel her hand trembling in mine, and I gather every ounce of courage to speak my heart.

"Let me go, Bastien," she whispers, her voice filled with pain. "Please."

"Non," I repeat, my voice firm, my gaze unwavering. "I won't lose you."

"Enough!" Claude's roar echoes through the room, his patience wearing thin. He rises, a towering presence filled with authority. "Bastien, if you truly love her, you will let her go. Consider this your final warning."

"Je t'aime, Lisette," I murmur, my eyes locked with hers, pouring my love into those words. "Remember that."

"Je t'aime aussi," she chokes out, tears streaming down her cheeks as she rises from her chair. "Goodbye, Bastien."

"Goodbye, mon amour," I whisper back, my voice cracking with the weight of my emotions.

As Lisette turns to leave, I watch her, a profound ache in my heart, knowing that for the moment, our paths diverge. I yearn for a different reality, one where we can be together without the shadow of danger and chaos looming over us. But in this dark world we inhabit, our fates are entangled in a war we desperately wish to escape.



## Chapter Twelve



**E**tienne  
The air hangs thick with the haze of cigar smoke, a foggy veil in this den of calculated sin. Claude Badeaux sits behind his lacquered mahogany desk, fingers drumming an impatient rhythm. I stand before him, fists clenched at my side, sweat beading my brow.

My father, as a mafia man, has always looked down on Claude's biker gang. But I know that Claude is a very dangerous, unforgiving man. If I cross him, I'll mark myself for death, or at least one hell of a fight.

But I can't let Lisette go.

"Please, Claude," I implore, words tumbling out of my parched mouth like uneven marbles, "reconsider your decision. Lisette belongs here."

His obsidian eyes narrow, scrutinizing me with the ruthless precision that has made him the most feared man in New Orleans. He leans back in his chair, the fine fabric of his suit creasing like the lines that come and go on his forehead.

"Etienne," he says, his voice a gravelly purr, "you know as well as I do that distractions are dangerous in our line of work. The girl is a liability we cannot afford."

I swallow the bile rising in my throat, my heart pounding against the cage of my ribs. "But she's your niece—" I protest, my voice breaking under the weight of my emotions.

"Enough!" He barks, slamming his fist down on the polished wood, sending shudders through the room. "This conversation is over."

My chest constricts with rage, but I force myself to keep my composure. It feels like a thousand tiny needles piercing my skin, yet I refuse to let them break my spirit.

"Understood," I murmur, bowing my head in submission. The word tastes like ash in my mouth, bitter and dry.

Claude watches me, his gaze unyielding as steel. "See that you remember where your loyalties lie, Etienne."

The threat hangs heavy in the air, and I nod, my resolve hardening like granite. I will find a way to protect Lisette, even if it means defying the man I looked up to like a father.

"Of course, Claude," I say, masking my turmoil with a stoic facade. "I won't forget."

"Good." He waves a dismissive hand, and I turn on my heel, leaving the room with a heart full of sorrow and a mind sharpened by anger.

Heart pounding, I find myself outside Lisette's door, my knuckles white as they hover over the worn wood. The air is heavy with impending loss, and I inhale deeply, savoring the lingering scent of honeysuckle that clings to her porch.

"Etienne?" Her voice, soft and vulnerable, reaches through the barrier between us. She knows why I'm here, and yet she bravely opens the door, eyes shining with unshed tears.

I swallow hard, my throat tight like a vise. "Lisette, I—" But words fail me, emotions choking out any semblance of speech.

Her composure crumbles, and she falls into my arms, sobbing. "I don't want to leave you," she whispers against my chest, her warm breath seeping through the fabric of my shirt.

"Shh," I murmur, stroking her hair with trembling fingers. "Claude will ensure your safety out of town. You'll be away from this life, away from the danger."

The thought of Lisette beyond my reach shatters something inside me, but I cling to the hope that distance will keep her safe from the darkness that threatens to engulf us both.

"Promise me you'll find me," she pleads, tear-streaked face tilted up to meet mine. "Promise, Etienne."

"Je te promets," I vow, my voice barely audible. I promise, though I know the weight of such a promise could very well crush me.

In that moment, desperation and longing collide like tides crashing upon a storm-tossed shore. Lisette's lips find mine, her kiss fierce and tender all at once. It's a tether connecting us, a lifeline I can't bear to sever.

"Etienne... please," she gasps between kisses, her hands fisting in my shirt, as if to anchor me to her side. And for a moment, I waver, the thought of defying Claude's orders rippling through my mind like a defiant flame.

"Stay with me," she whispers against my mouth, and the temptation is as sweet as honey, as intoxicating as the finest bourbon.

But I can't – not now, when our world teeters on the brink of chaos. To betray the mob is to risk everything, and I cannot drag Lisette into the maelstrom that awaits.

A sudden pounding on the door shatters our fragile connection, and Lisette's arms drop from around me. The door flings open, and Claude's man, Henri, looms in the entrance, his eyes narrowed as they survey the scene before him.

"Etienne," he growls, voice like gravel. "Claude's orders. Time to let go."

"Un instant," I plead, swallowing the bitterness that claws at my throat. But Henri's patience is a fleeting thing, and he steps forward, wrenching me away from Lisette by the collar of my shirt.

"Non!" Lisette cries out, reaching for me as her sobs stretch into the air, filling the space between us like a chasm. But Henri's grip is iron, and I'm torn from her side, thrust into the dim hallway.

"Find Bastien," Henri commands, releasing me with a shove. "You both got work to do." His gaze flicks to Lisette, who trembles like a wounded bird within the confines of her room. "She'll be taken care of, but you... you need to focus."

The door slams shut behind me, leaving me with a world gone cold and silent. My heart screams in protest, but I know there's no turning back now. With a heavy sigh, I set off to find comfort in the only other person who understands what it means to love and lose Lisette: Bastien.

I find him hunched over a table in a dimly lit corner of a tavern, a half-empty bottle of whiskey at his side. He raises bleary eyes to meet mine, and it's all too clear that he's been drowning his sorrows in alcohol for hours.

"Mon frère," I murmur, sliding onto the bench across from him. "How are you holding up?"

"About as well as you'd expect," he mutters, voice thick with drink and despair. He takes another swig of whiskey before slamming the bottle down on the table, its contents sloshing over the sides. "I can't believe she's really gone."

"Neither can I," I confess, my gaze dropping to the smeared rings of spilled liquor staining the wood. "But we have to trust that Claude will keep her safe. She's his niece, after all."

"Safe from everything but a broken heart," Bastien scoffs bitterly, his fingers tightening around the neck of the bottle.

"Ours or hers?" I ask, and for a moment, there's silence between us. The answer hangs heavy in the air, unspoken but understood: both.

"Merde," Bastien curses, shaking his head. "How the hell did we let things get so tangled up?"

"Love's a damn treacherous thing, mon ami," I reply, my hand resting on his shoulder in a gesture of solidarity. "It lures you in with promises of warmth and light, only to plunge you into darkness when it slips away."

"Damn straight," he grumbles, raising the bottle to his lips once more. "But at least we still have each other, right? Brothers in arms, till the bitter end."

"Always," I affirm, the weight of our shared history settling on my shoulders like a cloak of comfort and camaraderie. And as we sit there, bound together by loss and loyalty, I know that we'll face whatever storms may come – side by side, ready to brave the tempests of fate.

The bar's door crashes open, splintering my thoughts like shattered glass. Claude's man, René, strides in, his eyes cutting through the haze of smoke and half-drunk men. The air crackles with tension as he approaches, a storm cloud rolling in to crash against our shared sorrow.

"Patron wants you both," René growls, his gaze flicking between Bastien and me. "Now."

I exchange a glance with Bastien, determination igniting in the depths of his eyes. We both stand, leaving behind the empty bottles that litter our table like fallen soldiers.

"Lead the way," I say, my voice strong despite the tempest churning within. I wonder if this new assignment might be an opportunity to save Lisette – or at least keep her close enough to protect.

René escorts us through the winding streets of New Orleans, moonlight casting shadows over cobblestone and wet pavement. As we walk, I can't shake the image of Lisette's tear-streaked face from my mind, her desperate pleas echoing in my ears like a siren's song.

"Etienne," Bastien murmurs, catching my attention. "You're not seriously considering defying Claude, are you?"

"Maybe," I admit, the weight of my decision heavy on my heart.

"Merde, mon ami," he sighs, shaking his head. "That's a dangerous game you're playing. You know what happens to those who betray the mob. We'd lose everything."

"Perhaps," I reply, my jaw clenched, "but isn't she worth it? Isn't love worth fighting for?"

"Love won't save us from a bullet to the head, Etienne," Bastien warns, his eyes dark with concern. "Just...think carefully, alright?"

"Always," I promise, though I feel as though I'm teetering on the edge of a precipice, caught between loyalty and love. The taste of Lisette's desperate kiss lingers on my lips, a reminder of what could be lost – or gained.

We arrive at Claude's opulent mansion, our footsteps echoing through the lavish halls as we're led into his study. He sits behind his mahogany desk, a glass of amber liquid clutched in his hand.


"Ah, mes enfants," Claude says, his voice dripping with false warmth. "I have a new assignment for you two."

He slides a manila envelope across the polished surface, its contents unknown but undoubtedly dangerous. As my fingers brush against the cool paper, I feel the full weight of my choice bearing down upon me.


"Go on," he urges, a sly smile playing on his lips. "Take a look, then tell me – are you both still willing to serve the cause?"

I exchange one final glance with Bastien, knowing that whatever path we choose, there's no turning back.

## Chapter Thirteen



L isette



TEARS BLUR MY VISION as I stand in the now barren bakery, the walls stripped of their warmth and joy. I close my eyes, the scent of fresh bread and laughter still lingering in the air. Memories bloom like flowers in a meadow, each one a precious moment shared with family and friends within these walls.

"Chérie, it's time to go," Simone murmurs, her voice thick with emotion. She cradles a box of my belongings in her arms, careful not to jostle the fragile mementos inside.

I nod weakly, my heart heavy with the weight of the decision before me. To leave Bastien and Etienne behind, to sever the tendrils of love that have wrapped themselves so tightly around my heart, is a pain I never thought I'd endure.

"Have you spoken to them?" Simone asks, her brown eyes searching mine for a hint of wavering resolve.

"No," I admit, wiping away the tears that threaten to spill over once more. "I can't bear to see the hurt in their eyes."

"Then don't say goodbye," she urges, setting the box down on the counter and taking my hands in hers. "Go now, before you change your mind. It'll only make it harder if you try and leave things on a good note. There's no good way to leave the ones you love."

My breath catches in my throat, the weight of her words settling upon me like a blanket of truth. As much as I long to escape this life, to break free from the shackles of gangland ties and blood-soaked secrets, I cannot deny the yearning for the love that has blossomed between us.

"Simone, I..."

"Stop, I have eyes," she interrupts, a hint of pleading in her voice. "I know I don't...I don't approve of what they do. I hate all of this business,

but...I can see that you're in love. Anyone can."

Her words strike me like a bolt of lightning, illuminating the shadows of doubt that have consumed me for so long. I swallow hard, my purpose strengthening with each heartbeat.

"But that doesn't make you safe. It makes you more of a target. Please." Simone's chin crumples. "I cannot stand the thought of you ending up like my mama. Please stay safe."

"Alright," I whisper, my voice barely audible above the sound of my own thundering thoughts. "I'll go."

Simone's eyes shine with unshed tears as she pulls me into a fierce embrace. Together, we stand in the empty bakery, ready to face whatever storms may come our way – united by love and bound by blood.

The bus station looms before me, a cold edifice of steel and concrete. Buses groan and hiss as they spew passengers onto the asphalt like so many broken dreams. I clutch my ticket tightly in my trembling hand, feeling the weight of the decision that lies before me: to board the bus and leave this life behind, or to stay and face the darkness head on.

"Running away won't save you," Marcel's mocking voice echoes in my memory, his venomous words wrapping around my heart like a snake. "You'll always be weak, just like your father."

My pulse quickens, anger and defiance surging through me like wildfire. No, I will not let him win. I will not let fear dictate my life any longer. With one swift motion, I tear the ticket into pieces, watching as they flutter to the ground like the ashes of my former life.

"Fuck you, Marcel," I whisper, my voice barely heard above the cacophony of the bus station. "I'm not running away."

Determination fuels my steps as I march away from the bus station, a newfound plan coursing through my veins. My destination is clear: Marcel's church. In the heart of his territory, surrounded by his devout followers, he won't dare lay a finger on me. It's time to confront the man who has caused so much pain, both to the city I love and to the people I hold dear.

As I approach the towering cathedral, the scent of incense and the faint sound of hymns drift through the heavy wooden doors. The irony of Marcel's sanctuary being a house of God does not escape me; for all his posturing as a pious man, his soul is as black as tar.

"Ah, Lisette," Marcel drawls, emerging from the shadows at the top of the church steps, his dark eyes gleaming with malice. "I must say, I'm surprised

to see you here. Have you come to seek absolution for your sins?"

"Hardly," I retort, refusing to let his smug tone rattle me. "I've come to tell you that I'm not afraid of you anymore. I won't let you chase me out of my own city."

"Is that so?" he chuckles, a wicked grin spreading across his face. "You're even more foolish than I thought."

"Maybe," I admit, steeling myself against his derision. "But I'd rather be a fool who stands up to you than a coward who runs away."

Marcel's laughter dies away, his expression darkening as the full weight of my words sinks in. We stand there, locked in a silent battle of wills, the air between us thick with tension.

"Very well, Lisette," he says finally, his voice dripping with menace. "You've made your choice. But know this: I will destroy everything and everyone you hold dear. And when you're left with nothing but ashes, remember that it was your own stubbornness that sealed their fate."

"Bring it on," I reply, my voice steady despite the ice-cold fear that threatens to swallow me whole. "I won't back down."

As I turn to leave, the cathedral bells begin to toll, their somber melody echoing through the crisp autumn air like a funeral dirge. It's a chilling reminder of the war that lies ahead, a war from which there may be no return. But for love, for family, and for the city that has been both my sanctuary and my prison, I will fight until my dying breath.

The sun hangs low in the sky, casting a golden glow over the city as I make my way to Claude's office, the weight of Marcel's threats still heavy on my heart. Yet with each step, a newfound determination surges through me, fueling my desire to stand and fight for what is mine.

"Uncle," I say, pushing open the door to his office without knocking, my voice resolute. Claude looks up from the papers strewn across his desk, surprise etched on his face at my sudden entrance.

"Running away was never an option," I declare, meeting his gaze head-on. "I've faced Marcel, and I know now that I cannot leave this city, these people, behind."

Claude studies me for a moment, his eyes narrowing as he searches for any hint of fear or hesitation. Finding none, he leans back in his chair, considering my words.

"Your parents, they never would have run from a fight either," I remind him, a bittersweet smile tugging at the corners of my lips. "They stood their



ground, and so will I."

A ghost of a smile flickers across Claude's face, and I can see the pride welling up in his eyes. He knows, as I do, that our family has always been fighters – stubbornly loyal to the bitter end.

"Very well, Lisette," he says finally, his voice firm with conviction. "We'll stand together against Marcel and whatever forces he throws at us."

"Thank you, Uncle," I whisper, relief flooding through me. No longer am I alone in this war; I have an ally, someone who understands the stakes and the cost of our defiance.

"Remember, though," Claude cautions, his tone turning serious once more, "this won't be easy. Marcel may seem the fool at times, but he is powerful, and he's not above playing dirty."

"I know," I reply, nodding solemnly. "But we have something he'll never understand – the power of family, and the strength that comes from standing together."

"Indeed," Claude agrees, a fierce determination sparking in his eyes. "Let's show Marcel that our family is not one to be trifled with, and that we won't back down without a fight."

As I leave Claude's office, I can feel the weight of my decision settling over me like armor. It's a heavy burden, but one I bear willingly for the sake of those I love.

## Chapter Fourteen



**B**astien  
Under a bruised sky, our convoy rumbles forward, a serpent of steel and vengeance. Etienne and I share a look, our eyes reflecting the fire within us. The weight of history hangs between us, but we're bound by more than blood and loyalty.

"Remember the plan," he says, his voice steady as the rhythm of our hearts. I nod, my fingers tapping against the wheel like soldiers on parade.

"Semper Fi, brother," I reply, and his lips curl into a wry smile.

As Marcel's compound looms before us, the air thickens with tension and anticipation. Our training takes over, instincts forged in the crucible of war guiding our every move. We split off, Etienne leading the ground assault while I ascend to the heavens – a rooftop perch perfect for the reaper's touch.

Crouching, I assemble my sniper rifle with practiced ease, its pieces sliding together like lovers entwined. My hands know this dance well, the weapon an extension of my arm.

"Godspeed, Bastien," Etienne murmurs through the comm, and I sense his presence even from afar. The connection between us is unbreakable, two halves of a single coin.

"Same to you, Etienne," I whisper back, settling behind the scope, a window into destiny.

The world narrows, my focus razor-sharp as I scan the compound. Each breath slows, each beat of my heart a metronome ticking towards fate. Below, Etienne and his men advance, shadows creeping through the chaos.

"First target, west wing," I report, my finger caressing the trigger like a lover's touch. A sharp crack splits the air, the bullet singing its deadly song as it finds its mark. One of Marcel's goons crumples to the floor, never knowing what hit him.

"Good shot," Etienne praises, and the words are a balm, even amidst the bloodshed.

"Next target, east window," I warn as another of Marcel's men takes aim at Etienne's crew. My finger tightens, and the rifle bucks against my shoulder,

its recoil a fierce embrace. The man drops, his weapon clattering to the ground.

"Keep them coming," Etienne growls, fury etched in every syllable.

And so, we dance our deadly ballet; Etienne, the storm on the ground, and I, the silent reaper above. Together, we carve a path through Marcel's ranks, determination driving us onwards, our bond unyielding.

"Almost there, brother," Etienne says, his voice strained but steady. "This ends today."

"Right beside you," I promise, my sights trained on the final enemy before us. And as the bullet finds its mark, I know that nothing can stand against us – not when we're united in purpose, bound together by more than just our shared past.

As the shadows stretch and fade, swallowed by the approaching night, I watch Etienne command our motley crew of Claude's men with an iron grip. They swarm around him like a pack of wolves, hungry for the kill, but held in check by the force of his presence. "Remember," he barks, "we end this tonight. No mercy."

I keep my rifle nestled against my shoulder like an extension of myself. The rooftop provides me a vantage point from which to witness the symphony of violence about to unfold. With each breath, I steady my aim and focus on the task at hand.

"Go!" Etienne roars, and the tide surges forward. Doors are kicked open, windows shattered as they breach Marcel's compound. Gunfire erupts, painting the night with crimson streaks of death. I track their progress, eyes flickering between Etienne and the enemies that threaten to overwhelm him.

"Two by the stairs, Etienne!" I call out, pressing the trigger as my sights lock onto one of Marcel's henchmen. The man falls, his weapon clattering down the steps.

"Got it!" Etienne acknowledges, moving with lethal precision as he dispatches the second assailant. He charges up the stairs, leading the raid with unyielding determination. My heart swells with pride; if ever there was a man born to lead, it is he.

"Two more – left corridor," I warn, sending another shot ringing through the air. Etienne nods, pivoting to face the new threat.

"Cover me!" he commands, and I comply without hesitation, picking off those who dare raise a weapon against him. As the last of Marcel's men

crumples to the ground, Etienne breaches the final door, disappearing into the darkness.

"Stay sharp," I remind myself, scanning the windows for any sign of movement. My finger rests lightly on the trigger, poised to deliver death with each squeeze. I will not fail him; not now, not ever.

"Three more by the west window!" Etienne's voice crackles in my ear, and I snap my sights onto the targets. One falls, then another, their bodies crumpling like marionettes severed from their strings.

"Last one!" I shout, taking aim as Etienne grapples with the final enemy. They struggle, locked in a vicious dance that threatens to consume them both. But then Etienne gains the upper hand, driving his knife deep into the man's throat with a guttural snarl. Blood sprays, slick and hot, as the life drains from Marcel's last defender.

"Semper Fi," I murmur again, my breath fogging the cold glass of the scope as I watch Etienne stand triumphant amidst the carnage. Together, we have risen above the chaos, bound by blood and loyalty, our purpose unwavering. And though the night is dark, and our path uncertain, I know that together, we are unstoppable.

The world trembles beneath me as an explosion echoes through the air, its fiery kiss devouring Marcel's stronghold. Grinning, I rise from my perch, feeling the weight of triumph settle upon my shoulders. Smoke curls like a lover's caress, wrapping around the remnants of the compound, and through it all, Etienne emerges – victorious, bloodied, but unbroken.

"Mon frère," I whisper, watching him stride across the battlefield, a king surveying his conquered kingdom. The flames dance in his eyes, reflecting the fire that burns within us both. Our connection transcends blood and loyalty; together, we have vanquished our enemies, forged a new path through the darkness.

Back at Claude's compound, the shadows part to reveal Lisette, her eyes alight with relief as she takes in the sight of us – bruised, battered, but alive. She rushes towards us, her arms outstretched like the wings of an angel offering sanctuary.

"Etienne! Bastien!" she cries, throwing herself into our embrace, her warmth enveloping us in its cocoon. The scent of her hair, the curve of her body against ours, is a reminder of what we fight for – love, family, a future free from the chains of our past.

"Uncle Claude!" Lisette calls out, pulling away to look at the man who stands before us. His gaze sweeps over us, appraising, calculating, his eyes narrowed like a predator assessing his prey. But then something shifts, a subtle softening in the lines of his face, and he nods once, curtly.

"Take care of her," Claude says, his voice rough with emotion, words heavy with the weight of a blessing long withheld. "She deserves the world."

"We will," Etienne and I vow in unison, our voices mingling with the night's chorus.



THE SCENT OF FRESH bread mingles with the perfume of victory, an intoxicating blend that fills our lungs and hearts.

"Here's to a new beginning!" Etienne proclaims, raising his glass in a toast. Lisette echoes his sentiment, her eyes shining with hope as she lifts her own drink.

"New beginnings," I echo, clinking my glass against theirs. We drink, and the warmth of the alcohol spreads through us like the promise of better days ahead.

The celebration continues, a symphony of voices, the notes of camaraderie filling the air. Lisette flits about, her laughter like a songbird's melody, drawing smiles from even the most hardened among us. And as I watch her, I feel the weight of our past begin to lift, replaced by something lighter, more buoyant – hope.

"Promise me something," Lisette whispers later, her voice soft above the din. She stands between Etienne and me, her hands resting on our chests, her gaze searching. "Promise me you'll always be there, that no matter how dark the night, we'll have each other."

"We promise," Etienne and I say in unison, our words woven together with the threads of destiny, binding us to her and to each other until the end of time.

"Good," she murmurs, a smile curving her lips, transforming her face into a vision of pure beauty. "Now let's go home."

And so we do, leaving behind the celebration, the cheers, and the laughter, retreating to the sanctuary of Lisette's apartment where the world falls away like the shedding of a snakeskin, revealing something raw and tender beneath. We stand before each other, bared to the very core of our

being, stripped of pretense and armor, vulnerable in a way we have never been.

"Show me," Lisette whispers, her voice thick with desire. "Show me what it means to be loved by both of you."

And we do. We explore the valleys and peaks of her body, our hands and mouths leaving trails of fire across her skin, stoking the flames of need that burn within us all. Etienne takes her from behind, his hips snapping forward with each powerful thrust, driving himself deeper into her heat while I claim her mouth, my tongue tangling with hers in a dance as old as time.

"More," she gasps, her nails digging into my shoulders as Etienne's grip on her hips tightens. "I need more."

"Ask and you shall receive," I growl, positioning myself at her entrance. And as I push in, joining Etienne in filling her completely, I know that we are no longer three separate souls but one, bound together by love and desire, forged in the fires of passion.

"Please," she begs, her voice raw and broken, her body trembling beneath the onslaught of pleasure that threatens to shatter her. "Don't stop."

And we don't. We move together, a seamless blend of strength and grace, our bodies locked in an endless waltz as we race toward the edge of oblivion. Etienne's groans fill the air, mingling with Lisette's cries and my own guttural sounds, creating a symphony of lust and love that swells around us, carrying us higher and higher until finally, it crashes down upon us, shattering our world into a million glittering shards.

In the aftermath, we lay entwined, our hearts pounding, our breaths mingling in the stillness of the night. And as Lisette's fingers trace lazy patterns on our skin, I know that we have found something rare and precious – a love that transcends time and space, binding us together with chains forged of passion and devotion.

"Always," I whisper into the darkness, feeling Etienne's finger press against my shoulder in silent agreement. "We will always be here for you, Lisette."

"Always," she echoes, her voice a sigh on the wind, a promise etched into the stars above. And as sleep claims us, I know that this is only the beginning, the first page in a story that has no end.

# Chapter Fifteen



**R**emy I stand near the window, my eyes fixed on the world outside. The relentless rain has finally subsided, allowing a sliver of sunlight to break through the heavy clouds. Its warm rays slice across the compound, casting long shadows that dance eerily on the ground, as if concealing secrets. The atmosphere is heavy with tension, like a thick shroud that wraps around everything it touches.

In the distance, I see a group of men being led away by armed guards. Their faces are etched with defeat and fear, their spirits broken by the recent upheaval. These men were once loyal to Marcel, a powerful figure who ruled over us with an iron fist. But now, as the winds of change blow through our world, they are being rounded up, their fate uncertain. I watch them intently, unable to tear my eyes away, even as my heart thunders in my chest.

Beside me, Stefan, my best friend and newly appointed second-in-command, leans against the wall. His arms are folded across his broad chest, a steady pillar of support amidst the chaos. His eyes never leave mine, as if he can sense the turmoil raging within me. We have been through so much together, and he is the only one who truly understands the weight I carry.

"Remy," he says, his voice low and soothing. The sound reaches me like a lifeline, anchoring me to the present moment. "You know this is necessary."

I nod, though my mind is clouded with doubt and unease. The responsibility that rests upon my shoulders feels unbearable at times, threatening to consume me.

The guilt.

I was the one who tipped Claude off that Marcel had kidnapped Lisette. In return, he promised me Marcel's life. I thought that I had saved us all from a war.

Marcel always has been a fool. He had to push his luck. If only he had waited for me, let my plans come to fruition, he would have lived to see Claude's family fall.

*Soon.*

I rub the back of my neck, hoping to relieve some of the tension that has built up. "Oui," I mutter, my voice nearly silent, even to my own ears. "I know that, but it doesn't make it any easier."

Stefan's gaze softens, a flicker of understanding passing through his eyes. He knows the internal struggle I face, torn between duty and compassion. "Nothing in our world ever is," he replies, his voice tinged with a mix of resignation and determination. It's a bittersweet reminder of the harsh realities we confront daily.

I turn to face him fully, seeking solace in the presence of an old friend and trusted comrade. Together, we have weathered countless storms, our bond forged in the fires of hardship. I take a deep breath, finding strength in our shared plan, knowing that I am not alone in this daunting journey.

The weight of Marcel's betrayal lingers heavy in the air, my heart aching with the knowledge that he was once my brother. He was meant to be our protector, our guiding light, but he had succumbed to the allure of power and control, leading us astray. Now, as I stand here, watching the consequences of his actions unfold, I know that it falls upon me to rebuild what he has shattered.

"Marcel..." I trail off, my voice choked with a mixture of anger, sadness, and disappointment. Finding the right words to encapsulate the storm brewing within me feels impossible. "He was my brother, but he failed us all. Now it falls to me to pick up the pieces."

Just as the weight of my responsibility threatens to overwhelm me, Louis, my uncle, enters the room. His presence commands attention, his dark eyes reflecting both sympathy and an unwavering determination. He understands the immense burden I carry, but he also knows that dwelling on the past will only hinder our progress.

"Remy," he says, his voice strong and steady. "You cannot dwell on the past. The future of the family rests in your hands now."

I nod, acknowledging the truth in his words. Marcel's betrayal has set our family adrift, and it is my duty, as his brother, to guide us back to solid ground. The fire within me, fueled by a mixture of righteous anger and steely determination, ignites once more.

"Uncle Louis," I say, gratitude lacing my tone. "I understand. As Marcel's brother, it is my duty to lead. And I have plans." My gaze drifts to the compound, where the last remnants of Marcel's loyal men are being swiftly removed. The power courses through my veins, a surge of electricity that



propels me forward, reminding me of the purpose that has taken root within me.

Stefan, always a pillar of support, steps away from the wall, his unwavering loyalty evident in his every move. He stands tall, a silent vow to stand by my side, no matter the challenges that lie ahead.

"Remy," he says, his voice filled with unwavering commitment. "I'll be with you every step of the way. Whatever you need, just say the word."

A wave of gratitude washes over me as I clasp his hand in a firm grip. His friendship, forged through countless trials and tribulations, carries immense weight. I can rely on him, lean on him, and together, we will face whatever hurdles come our way.

"Merci, mon ami," I reply, a genuine smile tugging at the corners of my lips. "We'll need to gather the family, discuss our next moves. There's much to be done."

Louis joins us, his voice resonating with determination. "Agreed," he asserts. "You have my full support as well. We will not let Marcel's betrayal define us."

The combined strength of their loyalty and support fills me with renewed determination. The path ahead may be treacherous, fraught with dangers we cannot yet fully comprehend, but with Stefan and my uncle Louis by my side, we will rise above it all. Together, we will rebuild our family, reclaim our honor, and forge a new legacy that will endure the test of time.

As the tumultuous winds of change sweep away the remnants of Marcel's toxic reign, a hush settles over the compound, as if even the air itself holds its breath in anticipation. The weight of the past presses upon us, threatening to bury us alive, but I refuse to be suffocated by its heavy grip. Instead, a spark of resilience ignites, a fierce determination to forge a brighter future out of the ashes of our past.

The sunlight streaming through the window paints vibrant patterns on the worn floorboards, casting a golden glow upon our gathering. The room is filled with the presence of our most trusted allies, family members who have weathered the storm alongside us, their unwavering loyalty etched into the lines of their faces. Their eyes reflect a mixture of hope, apprehension, and a shared resolve to rebuild what has been shattered.

"Let's begin," I declare, the words carrying a weight that resounds in the depths of my being. My voice, usually calm and measured, takes on a commanding tone that resonates throughout the compound, reaching far

beyond its walls. It's a clarion call that pierces the veil of uncertainty and sets the wheels of change into motion.

Louis, Stefan, and the others look to me, their gazes filled with a blend of anticipation and trust. We gather around a worn wooden table, its surface weathered by time and reminiscent of the challenges we have faced. It is here, in this room laden with history and shared memories, that we will chart our course toward a new beginning.

I take a moment to steady myself, feeling the weight of responsibility settle upon my shoulders. The path ahead is treacherous, riddled with countless unknowns and obstacles that could easily derail us. But I refuse to let doubt consume me. I draw strength from the collective determination that fills the room, knowing that we are united in our purpose.

"The first task," I begin, my voice measured and steady, "is to build bridges with those who have been affected by Marcel's tyranny. We must offer them hope, reassurance that a new era has dawned. With our actions, we will prove that the sins of the past will no longer define us."

Nods of agreement ripple through the room, accompanied by murmurs of determination. Together, we will extend a hand to those who have been oppressed, working to regain their trust and restore their faith in our family's leadership. It will be a delicate dance, one that requires empathy, understanding, and a commitment to right the wrongs of the past.

"Furthermore," I continue, my gaze sweeping across the faces of those gathered, "we must strengthen our alliances. Claude does not run this city any longer."



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**Ruthless Heir**



THE DARK SKY STRETCHED deep purple over the oasis city of Las Vegas. The moon was as bright as the neon signs on the streets below, a crescent-shaped icon in the sky. The palm trees swayed in the gentle breeze along the boulevard. Music drifted from nearly every open door, one bass beat fading into the next. The air itself thrummed with a sense of possibility.

Vegas was a city that insisted on itself. The desert of Nevada was hardly a hospitable location for an extravagant explosion of lights, sights, and fortunes. And yet, there it was: loud and sparkling like a mirage on the horizon. People came to the city with all kinds of fantasies tucked into their pockets, and Las Vegas was all too happy to oblige.

Nothing was off-limits. Nothing was too much.

The stars may have been blotted out by the fuzzy glow of the city lights, but there were plenty of stars on the Strip to keep it shining bright. Celebrities and beautiful people strutted the streets under halogen glow, relaxed in smoky lounges, and sat at blackjack tables. There were endless activities, never a dull moment. Excitement could be found around any corner. Any thrill you could dream of was available... at the right place, for the right price.

Down a side street just off the Strip, under the flashing digital billboards that advertised swanky hotels and casinos, one such place existed. The exterior of the building was covered in a glossy white marble, with two majestic pillars standing guard at the entrance. The doors were darkly tinted glass which obscured the world within, and only a simple, shimmery blue sign with the name *The Desert Pearl* was emblazoned over the entrance. It was a Saturday night, and there was a line of patrons—mostly young men—waiting eagerly to get inside as a bouncer checked IDs and kept the tipsy shenanigans at bay. Only the thickest wallets and slickest connections could get you in on a night like this, but there were plenty of extras willing to hang around and try anyway.

Once inside, the lucky patron took a short flight of stairs down into a cavernous space. The sexy rhythm of the DJ's set bumped through the floorboards, and the client was welcomed by the scent of booze, cologne, and perfume. It was dimly lit by false-candle sconces, whose flickering flames sent undulating waves of light across the walls. There were a few ceiling panels installed across the room, too, which emitted blue and pink light. Disco balls hung here and there to further catch the whirling lights of the stage. Clients sat in velvety pink armchairs designed to resemble giant clamshells. A small fountain in the center of the club displayed rivulets of water trickling down the body of a topless stone mermaid. All these elements came together to produce a pearlescent, under-the-sea kind of atmosphere.

Only the most beautiful, talented women made the cut at the Pearl. The twisting, rolling bodies of the dancers shimmered with sparkly lotion under the glowing lights. They wore designer lingerie, draped in crystals and gems

as they writhed on the stage and slid down the gleaming pole. Between the charismatic young women and the trancelike music, the show was nearly hypnotic for its slack-jawed audience. They sat in stunned reverence, sipping the Pearl's signature cocktail, the Classic Gibson. It was a gin and dry vermouth concoction that featured a pearl onion for garnish, invoking the name of the club.

The clients themselves ranged from blue-collar locals happy to spend their last hard-earned dollar on a pretty face to insanely wealthy out-of-towners who seemed to almost spill cash with every privileged step they took. If you could pay the door fee and blend in with the crowd, you were welcome at the Pearl. Regardless of their background, one thing was certain: the clientele dressed in their best for the event. There were no slouchy sweatpants and pit-stained hoodies to be found. Even the roughest layman would pull a suit from the back of his closet to visit the Desert Pearl. It wasn't just a sleazy strip club; it was a high-class experience.

Behind the shiny marble bar counter, a stoic-looking young man with a well-groomed mustache was serving up Gibsons and other classic cocktails. Patrons gathered at the bar for their drinks, splitting attention between the bartender's soft conversation and the women working the stage. The Pearl was bumping tonight with flocks of titillated patrons, but one tall, dark man in particular strode across the club with the swagger of a man who owned the place.

He towered over the average strip club client, at an imposing height of six-foot-three, but he was so powerfully built that he seemed larger. His muscles were readily apparent even under his black blazer and fitted black shirt. He wore dark gray pants tailored to perfectly complement his body, and high-dollar shoes that set him apart from some of the less wealthy clientele. His ensemble oozed style and class, but it was also an outfit suitable for physical activity. He could run like a bolt of lightning in those fancy shoes, and the comfy clothing gave him a full range of motion. Apart from being physically intimidating, he was also strikingly handsome. He had a full head of thick, jet-black hair softly pushed back from his forehead. His face boasted a chiseled jaw and cheekbones that could cut glass. His eyes were a cold ice blue, with a gaze that subdued men and enchanted women.

The dancers and waitresses of the Pearl were normally immune to any and all attempts by men to garner their attention. They were used to high-rollers and big players. They didn't bat an eyelash at a five-figure payout or

even a good-looking charmer. These women had their eyes on the prize. They were professionals at the top of their industry.

And yet, when the stony-eyed man entered the club, he became their new interest. He carried himself with such unshakable confidence. His body exuded strength and power. One glance from him, and even the most seasoned stripper felt weak in the knees. He had a way of making a girl feel like the only woman on the planet... even as he flippantly chewed up her heart and spat it back out. The man was clearly bad news, but women still couldn't help coming back for more every time.

He walked through the crowds, parting them without having to say so much as an 'Excuse me' to make his presence known. Men moved out of his way, realizing instantly that they were no match for him. The dancers in between stage shifts sauntered up to him, wearing their scanty silvery lingerie and a seductive smile. He felt the eyes of every woman boring into him, and it only made him feel more powerful. He knew the effect he had on them, and it was intoxicating. They were all vying for his time and attention. He dripped wealth, but they wanted his body as much or more than they coveted his cash. A pair of doe-eyed identical twins with blond hair and perky breasts came traipsing over to him. They were holding hands and biting their lips, gazing up at him with the promise of double trouble.

"Hey there, tall-dark-and-handsome," the first one said.

"You look like you can handle two girls at once," said her twin.

"Not like these other schmucks hanging around tonight."

"What do you say we get a private room—"

"—and see where things go?"

The man raised one thick, dark eyebrow at them in bemusement. It would be so easy to take them up on that offer. He could see himself bending and twisting those girls into submission, ravishing them until they were spent. They were right; he could easily handle two women at once. With pleasure.

But not tonight. He was on a mission.

So he gently sidestepped the twin strippers and replied in a husky baritone voice, "Maybe another night, ladies."

There was a faint Russian accent to his words. The twins pouted as he pushed past them and stepped up to the bar counter. The bartender immediately detached himself from his current patrons to address the charismatic newcomer.

"Good evening, sir," he greeted.

“Likewise, Stan,” the mysterious man replied with a glance at his nametag. He slid a large bill across the counter and said, “Double vodka, top shelf.”

“Of course, Mr. Sokolov,” the bartender replied as he got to work pouring the drink.

Mr. Sokolov smiled. He hadn’t expected it, but he also wasn’t surprised that the bartender already knew his name.

Stan hurried to explain in a lowered voice, “I would be a shameful member of the brotherhood if I didn’t know who *you* are. Please allow me to offer my services. Anything you need, I can provide.”

He set down the double vodka and Mr. Sokolov took a sip. He leaned in close and, in a gruff whisper, asked, “I understand you’ve been keeping something ‘on ice’ for me.”

Stan nodded. He knew instantly what the man was asking about. With a knowing glance toward the bouncers at the front of the club, Stan stepped out from behind the bar. He spread one arm out and bowed slightly as he offered, “Right this way, sir.”

He began to lead Mr. Sokolov across the club, past the glittering stages toward a narrow, shadowy corridor in the back. Patrons and dancers alike looked him up and down as he passed, but they were hastily shut down with a single withering look from Mr. Sokolov. The two men continued on and disappeared down the dark hallway.

There were numerous locked doors flanking the corridor, behind which elaborate lap dances and private bookings took place. The walls and doors were designed to be thick and somewhat soundproof, lending more privacy to these back rooms. Only the occasional peal of laughter or sensual moan broke through. But Mr. Sokolov was not interested in the steamy side of the business tonight. In fact, as Stan led him along the winding corridor, the taller man cracked his knuckles and flexed his muscles. He rolled his broad shoulders back and straightened his posture, making him look even more intimidating. He raised his arms and twisted them behind his back, lifting his blazer to reveal a quick flash of something shiny and sharp underneath: a knife. Mr. Sokolov appeared to be stretching, preparing himself for some kind of physical effort, but not the sexy kind.

Stan led him to the end of the long corridor, which concluded with another heavy, soundproof door. He fit a key into the lock and turned it until it clicked. With a slight heave of pressure release, the door cracked open.

The bartender turned back to him and said, “All yours, Mr. Sokolov. And, of course, I will personally ensure that the scene is wiped clean when you’re finished. No trace left behind. Our team is quite efficient,” added Stan pointedly.

“Excellent. Leave me to it. This won’t take long,” the man replied with a sly smile.

Stan bowed out of the way and headed back up the corridor, leaving Mr. Sokolov to his private room. He rubbed his hands together in anticipation, assumed a cold, cruel expression, and walked into the room, closing the heavy door behind him. It automatically engaged the lock with a resounding click.

The room was larger than the others but decorated in much the same way. There were two velvety armchairs and a plush leather sofa with a chic marble coffee table in between for drinks. Glowing lights illuminated the dark, cave-like space. Music pumped through the speakers and buzzed under the tile floor. But the centerpiece of the room was not a beautiful, half-naked woman enticing him to enter. Instead, there was a red-faced, bug-eyed man bound with rope to one of the chairs, a gag tightly wound around his head and digging into his mouth. He began to struggle feverishly against his restraints and vocalize incoherently when he laid eyes on the tall, dark man. He was panicking and nearly rocking the chair back and forth.

Meanwhile, Mr. Sokolov appeared to enjoy the man’s fear as he slowly approached him. The captive had absolute terror in his eyes when the powerful man lifted his blazer to pull out a long, gleaming blade and hold it up in front of his face.

“You know who I am,” he growled.

The frightened man nodded.

“So you know why I’m here.”

The guy’s eyes widened even more, and he began to shake his head violently. But Mr. Sokolov immediately pressed the tip of the blade to the man’s throat, and he went still. The guy took shallow breaths as the knife’s edge trailed delicately up his neck. Then, in one swift movement, the knife slashed upward. The man shouted in terror, but only the gag fell away from his face, cleanly sliced in half.

Realizing he wasn’t dead yet, the captive began pleading for his life.

“Don’t do it! I-I’m sorry! I’ll never show my face here again, I swear!” he gasped.

Mr. Sokolov was unmoved. "The time for apologies has long passed."

"It was just a mistake! I'll never do it again, please!"

"A mistake happens once. Maybe twice if you're an idiot," the powerful man said, bending to lean into the guy's fearful face. "More than that, and you've got yourself a bad habit."

"I've learned my lesson! I'm a changed man!"

Mr. Sokolov laughed, but there was no real mirth in it. His eyes remained steely and cold. He traced the knife along the man's jawline, never breaking eye contact.

"What a joke. There aren't enough 'lessons' in the world to teach a Baranov common decency," he hissed.

The color drained from the captive's face. Mr. Sokolov grinned.

"That's right. I know who sent you," he said. "You thought you could slip into the crowd, gather intel, report back to your coward of an Avtoritet, and get a leg up on us. I bet you were proud of this assignment. It's not every day a worthless grunt like you gets to hang around the Pearl on the boss's dime, ogling our women and taking up space. But you couldn't even get that right. Not surprised in the least that a Baranov man can't hold his liquor."

"I'm sorry! I never meant to hurt that girl. I just... It got out of hand," the guy claimed.

"Not only were you spying on us. Not only did you drink too much and cause a scene on multiple occasions, jeopardizing our bottom line. But you had the nerve to lay your hands on one of *our* girls," the dark-haired man went on. "What did you think? That you could rob her blind, leave her beaten and bruised, and get away with it?"

By now, the captive was tearful. His inevitable fate was closing in on him. Mr. Sokolov pressed the tip of his blade against the man's throat... hard.

"I know I'm a screw-up, but come on, man!" he blubbered. "Have some mercy!"

"The bouncers here showed you plenty of mercy when they threw your ass out instead of dismembering you piece by piece," he snarled back coldly. "You've had your fun with them. Now it's *my* turn."

The captive seemed delirious with fear. He had rounded the corner, from teary pleading to defiance. He knew he was finished. All that was left now were the final words.

"I should've killed that bitch when I had the chance," he sneered.



Mr. Sokolov narrowed his sharp gaze and pushed the knife harder into the man's skin, just shy of breaking the surface. "You can take those regrets to the grave, you Baranov bastard. But I have to know... How could you be stupid enough to wander willingly into our territory? You have your own strip clubs to desecrate."

The captive shrugged and jeered lewdly, "You have better girls. Besides, what's yours will be ours soon, haven't you heard?"

The cold-eyed man glared at him with unbridled hatred. "I would sooner die than call the Baranovs family," he rumbled.

The captive lifted his chin and smirked, exposing his throat for the knife. "Then you'll die, Mikhail Sokolov," he tossed back with utter disgust.

A cruel grin spread across Mikhail's handsome face as he raised the knife.

"You first," he grunted, and slashed the man's throat from ear to ear.

Find Ruthless Heir here: [Ruthless Heir \(Sokolov Bratva Book 1\) - Kindle edition by James, Roma, Design, Cosmic Letterz, Editing, Wicked Words . Literature & Fiction Kindle eBooks @ Amazon.com.](#)



*A FEW LAST THINGS...*

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