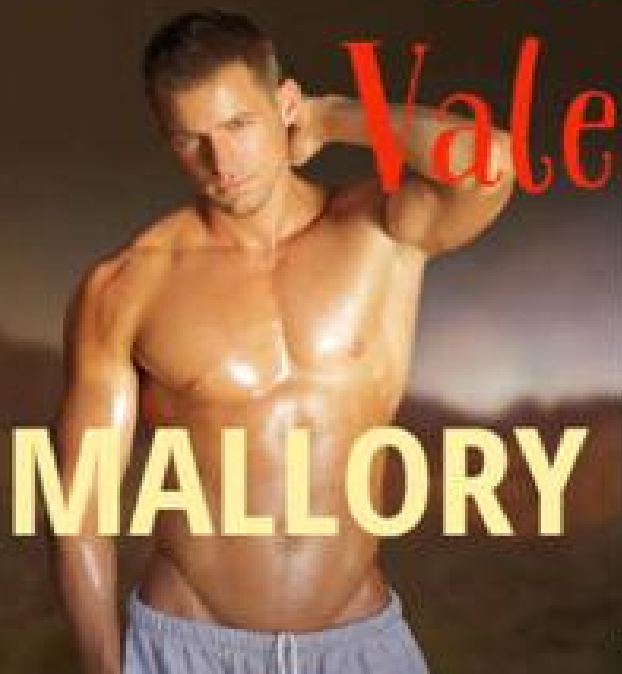


GIRLS ON THE RUN



A Gabrini Valentine



MALLORY



MONROE

GIRLS ON THE RUN
A GABRINI VALENTINE
BY
MALLORY MONROE

Copyright©2023 Mallory Monroe

All rights reserved. Any use of the materials contained in this book without the expressed written consent of the author and/or her affiliates, including scanning, uploading and downloading at file sharing and other sites, and distribution of this book by way of the Internet or any other means, is illegal and strictly prohibited.

AUSTIN BROOK PUBLISHING

**THIS NOVEL IS NOT LEGALLY AVAILABLE FOR
FREE ANYWHERE IN THIS WORLD.**

**IT IS ILLEGAL TO UPLOAD THIS BOOK TO ANY
FILE SHARING SITE.**

**IT IS ILLEGAL TO READ THIS BOOK AT ANY
WEBSITE.**

**IT IS ILLEGAL TO DOWNLOAD THIS BOOK
FROM ANY FILE SHARING SITE.**

**IT IS ILLEGAL TO SELL OR GIVE THIS eBook
TO ANYBODY ELSE ONLINE**

**OR OTHERWISE, OR TO MAKE IT AVAILABLE
ONLINE IN ANY FORM.**

**THE AUTHOR AND AUSTIN BROOK
PUBLISHING DOES NOT GIVE THEIR
CONSENT.**

This novel is a work of fiction. All characters are fictitious. Any similarities to anyone living or dead are completely accidental. The specific mention of known places or venues are not meant to be exact replicas of those places, but they are purposely embellished or imagined for the story's sake. The cover art are models. They are not actual characters.

THE RAGS TO ROMANCE SERIES

STANDALONE BOOKS

IN PUBLICATION ORDER:

- 1. BOBBY SINATRA: IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES**
- 2. BOONE & CHARLY: SECOND CHANCE LOVE**
- 3. PLAIN JANE EVANS AND THE BILLIONAIRE**
- 4. GENTLEMAN JAMES AND GINA**
- 5. MONTY & LaSHAY: RESCUE ME**
- 6. TONY SINATRA: IF LOVING YOU IS WRONG**
- 7. WHEN A MAN LOVES A WOMAN**
- 8. THE DUKE AND THE MAID**
- 9. BOONE AND CHARLY: UPSIDE DOWN LOVE**
- 10. HOOD RILEY AND THE ICE MAN**
- 11. RECRUITED BY THE BILLIONAIRE**
- 12. ABANDONED HEARTS**
- 13. HOOD RILEY AND THE ICE MAN 2:
JUST WHEN I NEEDED YOU MOST**

MALLORY MONROE SERIES:

THE RENO GABRINI/MOB BOSS SERIES (22 BOOKS)

THE SAL GABRINI SERIES (12 BOOKS)

THE TOMMY GABRINI SERIES (11 BOOKS)

THE MICK SINATRA SERIES (15 BOOKS)

THE BIG DADDY SINATRA SERIES (7 BOOKS)

THE TEDDY SINATRA SERIES (5 BOOKS)

THE TREVOR REESE SERIES (3 BOOKS)

THE AMELIA SINATRA SERIES (2 BOOKS)

THE BRENT SINATRA SERIES (1 BOOK)

THE ALEX DRAKOS SERIES (9 BOOKS)

THE OZ DRAKOS SERIES (2 BOOKS)

THE MONK PALETTI SERIES (2 BOOKS)

THE PRESIDENT'S GIRLFRIEND SERIES (8 BOOKS)

THE PRESIDENT'S BOYFRIEND SERIES (1 BOOK)

THE RAGS TO ROMANCE SERIES (12 BOOKS)

GIRLS ON THE RUN: A GABRINI VALENTINE

STANDALONE BOOKS:

ROMANCING MO RYAN

MAEBELLE MARIE

LOVING HER SOUL MATE

LOVING THE HEAD MAN

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

CHAPTER ONE

“You see what I see?”

“I see his ass.”

“Past-posting like it’s the eighties. I didn’t know they still tried that shit.”

“They try it every day of the week,” Reno Gabrini said as he stood near the back of his Vegas casino, alongside his cousin and best friend Tommy Gabrini, as they watched the big man in a New York Mets jersey cheat repeatedly at the craps table. “Some old ladies I may let slide. Some old men I do, too, sometimes, when they don’t press it.” Reno looked at the cheater again. “But not his ass.”

“This is the third time I’ve seen him place a bet on the table after the dice landed,” said Tommy. “Everybody’s looking at the dice and as soon as he sees it’s a winner, he drops a bet on the table.” Tommy’s broad shoulder was leaned against Reno as each man, both wearing Armani suits, had one of their expensive dress shoes pushed against the back wall where they were standing as if it would give them the

momentum they needed if they had to move quickly. “Why would you let him get away with it three times?”

“Because he’s not comfortable yet. When he gets comfortable stealing my money, that’s when I’ll make my move.”

It was a cold February afternoon and the crowd was swelling to near-capacity. Tommy was in town to check on the Vegas office of his Gabrini Corporation, but also to allow his wife time to meet with the other Gabrini wives to plan for their annual Valentine’s Day festivities.

But that cheater was front and center on Reno’s mind. And as soon as he saw him up the ante the way Reno knew he would eventually do, which signaled he was feeling real comfortable, he motioned to the supervisor of his pit bosses. And the supervisor motioned to Pax, their chief enforcer, and Pax made his way over to the supervisor. At the same time, Mo Kennedy, the General Manager of both the casino and the hotel, came over and leaned against Reno. “How you feeling, Boss?”

Reno knew Mo wasn’t in that casino to inquire about his health. “Got problems?”

“A few cheaters flying around,” said Mo. “Control Room seems to think one in particular, over at craps in the Mets jersey, may become chronic. He’s going slow, but he’s building his take. A tell-tell sign.”

“Tell them good looking out,” said Reno. “At least I know their asses earning those fat checks I pay them. But I’m on it.”

“I figured you would be.” Then Mo looked past Reno. “How ya doing, Tommy?”

“I’m good, Mo. You?”

“Would be better if the boss gave me a few days off to rest my weary bones.”

“I’ll rest those weary bones for good,” Reno said, “if you don’t get your ass back to work.”

Although Mo and Tommy laughed, Mo knew Reno. He could say things in jest that was funny to everybody, but was no joke to him. Mo left and got back to work.

While Pax, after getting his assignment, headed over to the craps table, Reno and Tommy headed to a soundproof backroom just off from the casino.

Reno sat down in the chair and stretched out his muscular legs. Although he wore a freshly-pressed Armani suit, and it was only early afternoon, his suit had become so well-worn already that it looked more like a Goodwill giveaway rather than the tailored clothing it was.

Tommy, on the other hand, didn't have a wrinkle on his suit nor a hair out of place on his head as he leaned against the front of the desk and folded his arms. Then he smiled that smile the press boys called enchanting. "Guy cheating in a Reno Gabriini casino. Out of his fucking mind."

"They don't give a damn about who you are anymore," bemoaned Reno. "They win at video games in their mamas basements and figure they can take on the world now. Their asses can't fight their way out of a paper bag, but they figure they can take me on. Until they come in contact with me."

Tommy laughed such an infectious laugh that it made Reno take a look at him and smile too. Tommy was voted by more than a few major magazines as the sexiest man alive, when the best Reno ever got were a couple gaming magazines voting him the most powerful man in Vegas. But he won most-powerful almost every year, which was a record. Which made him the King of Vegas. Which made Reno, the man

who once had to take over his old man's crime syndicate when his old man was assassinated, a force to be reckoned with. Reno had muscle.

“Once fist meets face,” said Tommy, “they learn to be respectful.”

They both chuckled. But when that died down, Reno looked at Tommy again. “How's he doing?”

Tommy didn't have to ask who he was talking about. Reno's oldest son ran Tommy's Vegas office. “He's doing excellent actually. I couldn't ask more from him. Matter of fact,” Tommy added as he unfolded his arms, placed his hands on the edge of the desk, and spoke in that laid-back, cautious monotone he was known for, “I'm thinking seriously about promoting him.”

“Yeah?” That pleased Reno. “To what?”

Tommy never rushed a response. “CEO,” he eventually said.

Reno was astounded. “Get the fuck out of here.” He looked at Tommy with a sense of amazement on his face. “CEO? You think he's ready for that level?”

“I know he’s ready. Jimmy is the best executive I have, Reno, and it’s been that way for years now. He’s my go-to person. He’s my right hand man. I know he’s ready.”

Reno smiled and shook his head. “Wow. That’s great news, Tommy. His ass worked for me and couldn’t keep himself out of trouble. He goes to work for you and excel beyond belief. Does he know yet?”

Tommy shook his head. “Not yet. I’ve got to move some pieces around first.”

“Like demoting your current CEO?”

“Something like that,” said Tommy. “So hold on before any announcements.”

“What I look like stealing your thunder? I’m just happy for my boy,” Reno added as a knock was heard on the door and then Reno’s casino enforcer, along with the jersey-wearing cheater, walked in.

“I’ll take it from here, Pax,” Reno said to his enforcer and the enforcer, who had a tight grip on the cheater’s arm, released him with a shove.

“I’ll be right outside this door, Boss,” Pax said, looking hatefully at the cheater as if it was his money he had tried to

steal, and then he walked back out and closed the door.

“What am I doing in here?” the cheater asked. “I haven’t done anything wrong!”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s what they all say,” Reno responded.

“But it’s the truth. You can ask the Dealer. I didn’t—”

“Shut the fuck up!” Reno yelled without standing up.

“What’s your name?”

“What?”

“He’s not asking you again,” said Tommy.

“My name’s Carl. Carl Damone.”

“A good name like that,” said Reno. “Vic Damone is turning over in his grave thanks to the likes of you.”

The cheater frowned. Tommy laughed. “He doesn’t know who Vic Damone is, Reno.”

“And stupid on top of it,” Reno said to more laughter from Tommy.

But Reno stared at the guy who had the balls to try and cheat him, and his levity left. “This is what you’re going to do. You’re going to write my establishment a check for one-hundred-thousand dollars.”

Damone protested vehemently. “*A hundred thousand dollars?* I can’t write no check for that kind of dough. I didn’t steal nowhere near that much.”

As soon as the man inadvertently confessed, Reno and Tommy smiled.

“What I meant to say is that I didn’t steal anything,” Damone said quickly, realizing his grave error. “I didn’t mean to put it that way. I was just joking around. I was ...” He was now flustered.

But Reno wasn’t. He stood up and walked over to the man. Tommy could see the man flinch in fear as soon as Reno invaded his personal space. He was a thief as soft as jelly just like Reno said.

“You will write that check for a hundred grand and give it to my enforcer waiting outside of this door.”

Reno was so close to the man he could smell Reno’s aftershave lotion, which made him realize just how crazy he was to try to steal from a man with Mafia written all over him.

“If you don’t have that kind of dough as you claim, then that same enforcer out there will take you to a remote location, break both arms and one of your legs. Take out an

eye. And then I'll consider us even." Reno angrily grabbed the man by his shirt collar and slammed him against the wall. "Gonna cheat me? That's what we're doing now? Cheating the king of the mountain now? Don't you ever show your cheating ass in my casino ever again!" Then he slammed him against that wall again. "You feel me, motherfucker?"

The man was nodding his head vigorously. "I feel you. Every inch of you. I feel you, sir, yes, sir."

"You're gonna write that check?"

The man was still nodding. "Yes, sir. Right away, sir."

Reno stared at him. He more than likely didn't have a hundred thousand grand laying around, but was a gambler to his core and would say anything to get him out of a situation until the next situation. But he put himself in that boat.

Reno, still gripping the man, walked over to the door, opened it, and then flung the cheater into his enforcer's grasp. "A hundred grand," said Reno. "Or two, one and one."

The enforcer smiled. "With pleasure, sir." Then he frowned. "Come on, Crook. Time to pay the piper."

As they walked away, Reno watched the poor sob look back at him, his eyes begging for mercy. And Reno felt for the

guy, he truly did. But he could never allow any chronic thief to ever think he could steal from a man like him and expect to get away with it. He'd have to beat the crooks off with a broom if he let some joker of that caliber slide. He closed the door in the man's face.

CHAPTER TWO

The Bugatti stopped in front of the butcher shop and Sal Gabrini, behind the wheel, stepped out and buttoned his double-breasted suit. His underboss, Robby Yale, got out from the passenger side and hurried across the sidewalk to open the entrance door for the boss. When Sal walked in he did as he always did and stood at the door, checking out the place before he made any moves.

The front of the shop was empty, except for the butcher behind the display case, his apron still blood-stained from shopping raw meat. He gave Sal a nod for a greeting, since Sal owned the shop, and then Sal and Robby made their way to the back, through the freezer and the racks of meat hanging around, to a room behind the freezer.

Two of Sal's capos, Brodie and Stock, were already in the room waiting. In the middle of the room, tied to a chair and already badly beaten with both eyes nearly swollen shut, was a man everybody knew as Pounce for the way he used his fists. But it wasn't his fists he was worried about.

Because as soon as Sal walked into that room, he grabbed the tire iron Brodie held in his hand and slammed it across Pounce's face, opening up a huge gash on his cheek. Pounce screamed out in pain, but nobody was going to hear him that far back in that shop. They were forced to call Sal in. Sal wasn't fucking around.

"Who iced Luigi in the joint?" Sal angrily asked Pounce and then hit him with the iron again. "Who iced Luigi?"

"I don't know," Pounce cried out. "I told them I don't know, Sal."

Sal pressed the flat end of the iron against Pounce's eye. "I'll take it out," Sal warned. "You don't believe me? I'll take it out! Now stop fucking with me. You'll be a one-eyed motherfucker fucking with me. Now I'm asking you for the last time. Who iced Luigi?"

"I don't know," Pounce said again. But Sal didn't hesitate. He pressed that iron so hard against that eye that Pounce began bleeding from his swollen eye.

And the fact that it was Sal rendering the punishment was the breakthrough. Pounce knew he was out of options.

“Dovanni!” he screamed out before the pressure could built.

“Dovanni killed him. It was Dovanni ordered that hit.”

It was the name Sal had been waiting to hear. He suspected Dovanni all along, but he needed proof. He stood back erect and tossed the tire iron across the floor.

“I was just the messenger,” Pounce was crying. “I never laid a hand on the guy. I was just doing what I was told.” He looked at the man he’d known for decades. “He’s gonna kill me, Sal. He find out I snitched, he’s gonna kill me.”

Sal stared at Pounce. “How do you know it was Dovanni?”

“He told me himself. He didn’t use no middle man. He told me to get the word out, but not to any of his guys inside the joint because he was scared of you, Sal. He told me to get the word to a freelance lifer. He’d pay the guy’s family once the job was done.”

“Why Luigi? He only had a few months left.”

“That’s why he wanted him out. He was trying to date his sister. He didn’t want him in his family.”

Sal could hardly believe the stupid reasons these fools killed each other over. But it wasn't as if his ass had clean hands either. He began leaving. "Let him go," he said as he headed for the exit.

But Robby and both capos were shocked. Even Pounce didn't expect to be released. "You believe him?" Robby asked as Sal was walking away. But Sal didn't respond to him and walked out the door.

The two capos looked at Robby as if they knew they had heard Sal wrong. "Did we hear him right, Robby? Did he say let him go?"

Robby didn't answer those questions. He hurried behind the boss.

When Sal made it out of the shop and was standing on the sidewalk, Robby hurried out behind him. "What do you mean let him go, Boss? They killed Luigi. He was a made man. They knew he was a made man and they killed him anyway."

"I know what they did. What the fuck you telling me like I don't know what they did to my own guy?" Then Sal exhaled. "He confirmed what I already knew."

“But what if he talks?”

“Then let him talk. I didn’t order no hit. At least none he knows about.” Then he looked at Robby. “Take care of Dovanni, that’s who you worry about.”

“Public or private?”

“Private. I want that fucker to see it coming the way he made Luigi see it.”

“Go all the way?”

“No. Work him over bad, but don’t take him out.”

Robby frowned. “But why not, Boss? He had Luigi killed.”

“And if we kill him then what, Robby? They gotta try to take you out because they know damn well they aren’t taking me out. They know not to come for a Gabrini. But you’re the next best thing. That what you want? You wanna be next?”

Robby knew it was a vicious cycle. He knew Sal was telling the truth. “No,” he admitted.

“Then do what I told your ass to do. I’m not going to war over that shit. I told Luigi to leave that girl alone. I told him before he got locked up. But he was a hothead. Kept

sneaking around seeing her anyway. Kept letting her come to the joint to see him. Dovanni had already warned him, but he wouldn't listen. Now you want me to go to war a week before Valentine's Day because of that hardheaded fucker? Just do what I said," Sal said as he began heading to his car.

"You're leaving me? How am I supposed to get home?" Robby asked as Sal opened his car door.

"What are you an invalid? Catch a ride with one of the guys. What is that my problem?"

"Because I rode with you," Robby said to his ears only as Sal was already in his Bugatti and speeding away. And then Brodie, who had been listening from inside the shop, walked out.

"He's not gonna even take Dovanni out?" Brodie asked as he watched Sal speed away too. "Is he serious? Or is Boss getting soft?"

Then Brodie looked at Sal's second in command. "It ain't just me saying that either, Robby. He's not handling business the way he used to. He's going all soft on us and shit."

Robby looked angrily at Brodie. “Soft? The man that saved your life two-three times before soft? Get the fuck out of my face.”

But Brodie was undeterred. “Maybe you should consider taking over, Robby. Maybe it’s time. And it’s not just me saying that shit either.”

Robby stared at Brodie with an ice-cold stare. “What is that your business?” he asked, and then walked back into the shop.

But Brodie smiled. Because it wasn’t as if he heard any objection. It wasn’t as if Robby said no outright. He went back inside too.

CHAPTER THREE

“*Chile*, it is cold out there!”

Trina plodded down on the booth seat across from Gemma and Grace as love songs blared over the intercom. “I’m shocked I still have all five fingers and all five toes.”

“If you’ve only got five fingers and five toes,” Grace said jokingly, “then you ought to be shocked.”

Gemma laughed out loud, but Trina was confused. “What are you talking about five fingers?” Then she realized her error. “Did I say five fingers?”

“You said five fingers and five toes,” said Gemma.

Trina smiled and shook her head as she unfurled her scarf. “I meant ten *chile*. Lord help me. Ten fingers and toes. What’s wrong with me?”

“Maybe what’s wrong with you,” said Grace, “is what’s wrong with all of us. We’re just tired and need a break.”

Trina started pointing her finger at Grace. “That’s it. Point blank. That’s it. You’re right, Grace. Our asses need a

break. That's why we're gonna do this. I been putting out fires all morning long at the PaLargio where we're booked solid for Valentine's Day and the week leading up to it. And you know Reno's ass. All he cares about is his casinos. He leaves the running of that entire big-ass hotel to me and my team. Then I had to race over to Champagne's to help out with the big sale we're having over there."

"I saw the advertisement," said Grace. "It's a great sale."

"Oh tell me about it. You should have seen them fools. Skinny girls trying to grab cute blouses three sizes too big, and fat girls trying to grab blouses three sizes too small and they're fighting over it because that's the style they want even if it doesn't come in their size. They figure they'll buy it while it's forty percent off now and lose enormous amounts of weight or gain enormous amounts of weight just to fit it later. Ridiculous. And then, over at the PaLargio after Valentine's Day, I've got a biker's convention coming up, two audits to oversee, and not one, not two, but three medical conventions coming up. It's never-ending insanity."

"This is going to be one insane Valentine's week to be sure," said Grace. "The recession's over, the economy's

recovered, and people are going slap crazy spending every dime they can get their hands on. I'm glad they're spending, don't get me wrong. But that's a lot of work when you're in the trucking business like I am. My trucks can't get on the road fast enough hauling supplies to these stores like you and Gemma's."

"And I've been stuck in court every day and haven't been able to help out at any Champagne location at all." Gemma was reminding herself that she was still an equal partner in Champagne's clothing boutique along with Trina, although she was rarely there. "And every single client I have on my docket right now has been accused of the most horrific crimes. I'm talking every single one. I'm tired and need a break too. I finished a murder trial just this afternoon and the verdict came back in less than an hour after jury instructions."

Trina and Grace looked at her. They knew how Gemma always took those cases to heart. "How did it go?" Grace asked her.

"Guilty. Which his ass was guilty as sin. But I still had to put up a fight. But my stress level is just off the chain. Thank God this time, this week before Valentine's Day, I made certain I cleared my schedule. After we decided we're going

to actually do it this year, I turned over any court appearances I have coming up to associates in my firm.”

“Good for you,” Grace said.

“I can’t do it anymore,” said Gemma, “and still try to do everything Sal expects me to do too.”

“And Sal don’t ever give you a break,” said Trina with a smile. “He either wants you in that kitchen or in that bedroom satisfying his two favorite places: his stomach and his head. And I don’t mean the head on top of his neck either.”

Trina and Grace laughed.

But Gemma was not amused. “I don’t know what you’re laughing at, Trina. Reno lives between your legs. Everybody knows that.”

Grace laughed at that.

“What are you laughing at, Grace?” asked Trina. “You can’t laugh either. Destiny be telling Sophie all the time how Tommy hardly lets you come up for air with his fine self. So don’t even go there.”

Grace was appalled. “But that’s absurd. Destiny knows nothing about what Tommy and I are up to in the

privacy of our bedroom.”

“That’s what you think,” said Trina. “Those heifers know every time me and Reno doing it. That’s why they get so boy crazy so fast and wanna do it too. It’s a Gabrini vicious cycle I’m telling you,” she added, and they all laughed.

But after the waiter came over and took Trina’s drink order, her look turned more somber. She began removing her gloves. “Do y’all realize we been doing this same shit, every Valentine’s Day, for four years straight now? Just before Valentine’s week Tommy and Grace come to town and we three Gabrini girls get together to discuss the menu and the activities for Valentine’s day, as if it changes from year to year.”

“It never does.”

“Never,” said Trina. “But that’s what we’ve been doing four straight years. And the men don’t want it catered.”

“And no chefs,” said Grace.

“They want us slaving over hot stoves all day long cooking all that food as if it’s Christmas day. And I don’t care what y’all say,” Trina added, “that’s a lot of work.”

“Nobody said it wasn’t work. Me and Grace be right there over that hot stove with you. And have you girls notice that it’s never all three couples getting together to plan the week’s activities? It’s us three *ladies* who have to do all the planning and then meet up with the guys at the club later tonight to tell them the plans so that they can shoot every idea down until it’s the exact same idea as last year. Same menu, same activities, all the same. It’s insanity is right.”

“What genius came up with the idea to turn that night into a whole day of activities anyway?” asked Trina. “Used to be our spouse takes us out to dinner and call it a day. But it changed. Who changed it?” Then Trina and Gemma looked at Grace.

But Grace wasn’t bearing that burden. “What are you looking at me for? It wasn’t me. Reno and Sal came up with that idea.”

“Reno?” Trina didn’t believe it.

“Sal?” Gemma didn’t either.

“Reno and Sal came up with it,” said Grace, refusing to back down. “I remember it well. We were having a barbecue at Sal and Gemma’s one night. Both men got drunk, and then Reno said we should go all-out for Valentine’s day since it’s a

day of love. And Sal goes *yeah, let's do this shit*. And that's how this whole thing was born. Two drunk Italians at a backyard barbecue."

They laughed and shook their heads.

"But it's always the same events every single year," said Gemma. "And they have the nerve to call it romantic. At the end of Valentine's day, I'm so tired I can barely stand up."

"Me too," said Grace.

"Me three," said Trina. "And while we're doing all the work," she added, "the guys get to sit around getting fatter and fatter and arguing over the least little thing while watching basketball on TV. And then we're putting out fight after fight because of those same men and their overworked testosterones. But yet they look forward to this ritual every single year, they claim. It's romantic, they claim."

"Yeah, right," said Gemma.

"That's why we're doing this trip this year," said Trina. "We got to shake things up around here. We got to."

But Gemma and Grace glanced at each other. Trina saw that glance. "What's that about? What is it?"

"About the trip," said Gemma.

But Trina was already shaking her head. “Nope. We are not changing our minds this year, we are not doing that, ladies. No way, Gem. No way, Grace. Not this year. We can’t keep changing our minds. I got it all booked. We’re getting out of here tomorrow morning I don’t give a fuck! We just said how tired we are. We just said how we need a break. We’re taking that break and we’re taking it in style. Right ladies?”

Gemma looked at Grace. Although both ladies could see the hesitation in Grace’s eyes, they could see the need in those eyes too.

Then Grace smiled. “Right,” she said.

Gemma was already there. “Right,” she agreed. And the disaster, as far as Trina was concerned, was averted.

Grace pulled an iPad from out of her Gucci bag.

“What’s with the tablet?” Trina asked. “We’re here to relax.”

“You know Grace. She wants to write a script so that we’ll have our stories straight when we tell the guys this shocking news. She doesn’t want there to be any confusion.”

“Confusion? We’re Gabrinis honey. There will always be confusion in our households. That’s how we roll baby,” Trina added with a grin, and they all laughed.

“But I don’t know why y’all tripping anyway,” Trina said. “We tell them what we’re gonna do, where we’re gonna be, and then we bounce tomorrow morning. End of discussion. We’re grown-ass women, dog. What they gonna say?”

“No,” said Grace.

“Hell no,” said Gemma.

“Oh, I forgot,” said Trina. “Y’all have real husbands. They might actually miss y’all. I tell Reno how I intend to spend my Valentine’s week, he’ll hand me the keys to his plane. ‘Have fun,’ he’ll say. He’ll be glad to get a break from my ass.”

“I doubt that,” said Grace.

“I doubt it too,” said Gemma.

But Trina didn’t doubt it.

“Sal will definitely object,” said Gemma. “I can promise you that. But I think I can get him to warm to the idea.”

“Like I said,” said Trina, “his stomach and his head. And Grace and I both know which one will *warm* him to the idea.”

“Girl bye,” said Gemma, although she couldn’t help but smile.

Then Trina looked at Grace. “The problem, as I see it, won’t be Reno nor Sal. It’ll be Tommy. Because if Tommy’s on board, he’s smart enough to convince Bevis and Butthead to get onboard too. Think you can get Tommy to *warm* to the idea, Grace?”

Grace was shaking her head. “I honestly don’t know. Because if Tommy becomes a hard no, then I can forget it. But that’s why I was thinking.”

Both Trina and Gemma leaned in closer. “Thinking what, girl?” asked Trina.

“That maybe, instead of asking them separately when we all go home later tonight the way we planned to do it, we could ask them while all of us are together at the club. To convince them together.”

“Good idea,” said Gemma, nodding her head. “That may work.”

But Trina had a different take. “Number one,” she said, “I’m not *asking* Reno shit. I’m *telling* him what I’m going to do.” Then she frowned. “What I look like asking for his permission? Tommy and Sal may have y’all trained that way, but I’ve been married longer than both of y’all and they weren’t giving out training memos when I said *I Do* to Reno. Hell, we were trying to cover up a hit when we were saying *I Do!*”

“Trina, lower your voice please,” Gemma said nervously as she started looking around to see if anybody heard. As an attorney, she was an officer of the court. They already were looking side-eyed at her at the courthouse because of her husband’s reputed mob ties as it was.

“What I’m saying,” said Trina in a lower voice, “is that it’s hard to train somebody when you’re trying to dodge a bullet. And that wedding was completely indicative of just how our marriage was going to be.”

“Which is?”

“Tumultuous as hell,” Trina said, and they laughed.

The waiter arrived with Trina’s drink, and she took a sip.

“The thing is,” said Gemma, “we just don’t want any knockdown drag-outs, okay. We know there will be some objections, but we want to keep the peace as much as we can. And the only way we can do that is to plan ahead. I think Grace’s idea could work.”

“And we should do so publicly,” said Grace. “They may be less inclined to be as, let’s say *boisterous* about it.”

“I agree with that too,” said Gemma. “When we meet up with them at the club tonight, it’s on. We tell them what’s what, and that’s that’s.”

But although Trina didn’t say anything, she knew Grace and Gemma were dreaming if they thought their men would let a public space and the fact that they were all together stop them from going over the top with their objections. Nothing was going to stop that.

“Here’s to no objections,” Grace said with a raise of her glass.

“Ha! I wish Reno would object,” said Trina defiantly as she and Gemma raised their glasses too.

But who was Trina kidding when a very secret part of her actually wished to God Reno would show that he still

loved her as vigorously as he once did and object the hell out
of their idea.

CHAPTER FOUR

The club was fire as Reno, Sal, and Tommy sat in a back booth and relaxed over booze and a constant stream of ladies visiting their table. Only the women weren't their idea. Those women kept coming by the table trying to hit on them. They just wouldn't leave them alone.

And Sal was tired of it. "What do we look like over here?" he asked the latest young lady standing at their booth. "We look like a rack of lamb to your ass? A side of beef? We're married men. All three of us are married. How many times I got to tell you that? We're not interested."

But the woman only smiled. "I'm married too," she said with a grin, which made Tommy and Reno grin too.

Sal found it all disgusting. "Just get your ass away from this booth," he said in that authoritative way he used as one of the most feared mob bosses in the world. And the woman, sensing the danger, stopped smiling and took off.

"Come on, Sal, cut her some slack," said Reno. "Why you acting so Grinchie?"

“Because a man can’t have a peaceful drink in a club no more. What’s with these dames? You tell’em you’re married and even that don’t matter. You’d think we got some kind of signs on our foreheads.”

“We do have signs on our foreheads,” Reno said. As the owner of the largest casino on the Vegas Strip and the one voted year after year the most powerful man in Vegas, he was bombarded on the regular with thirsty females. “You, Sal, have a *you rolled up in your Bugatti* sign on your forehead, while it’s a *Tommy and me rolled up in my Lambo* sign on ours. It’s a money sign. It’s a power sign. And in the case of me and Tommy, it’s a *great-in-bed* sign.”

Tommy laughed.

But instead of being offended, Sal smiled. “So you and Tommy great in bed together, hun?”

Reno frowned. “Who said anything about together?” Then he caught the joke, which only made him angrier. “Ah fuck you, Sal,” he said, and Sal and Tommy leaned against each other laughing.

But Reno dismissed their jokes and started looking elsewhere. When he saw somebody interesting, he became distracted, even as Sal was asking him a question. Which

caused Sal to look too, but he didn't see what Reno was apparently seeing. "You know somebody in this joint?" he asked him.

"What if I did?" Reno asked.

"Oh, I love that song," said Tommy. "Grace does too."

"Oh here we go," said Sal. "He thinks he's Dean Martin," he said to Reno, but Reno was still distracted.

"*My love, my darling,*" Tommy started singing along with the North/Zaret-penned Righteous Brothers *Unchained Melody* tune that was playing over the club's stereo system. "*I've hungered for your touch.*"

Sal frowned. "Who are you looking at?" he asked Reno.

Tommy stopped singing and looked at his brother. "Why are you worried about who Reno's looking at?"

But Sal was still determined to find out. Because he knew Reno too well. "Who are you looking at, Ree?" he asked him again.

Reno nodded toward the back of the club. Tommy and Sal both looked and saw a good-looking black lady further over in another booth. "You know her?" Tommy asked Reno.

“No, I don’t know her. Why would I know her? She’s just hot, that’s all.”

Sal looked at Reno. “Trina’s gonna kick your hot ass. Keep it up.”

Reno took offense to that. “What do you mean keep it up? Who do you suppose to be? A saint all of a sudden? Like you ain’t done shit? I can look. Ain’t nobody’s stopping me from looking.”

But Sal was undeterred. “You just take that shit too far, Reno. We all got our issues. Not one of us at this table claiming to ever be perfect. But you go too far.”

“Ree, she’s coming this way,” Tommy said. “She’s coming straight for your ass.”

Reno looked as the woman he’d been admiring began walking over to their booth. Reno wasn’t expecting that. But what was the harm of her coming over and speaking? “Hello,” he said with a smile as she approached.

“Hi. I’m Stacy.” She had a gorgeous smile to match her gorgeous figure.

“How are you, Stacy? I’m Reno. These two knuckleheads are my cousins: Sal and Tommy.

“Hi,” she said to Sal and Tommy. But her focus was Reno. “Care to dance?”

Tommy and Sal looked at Reno. It was one thing to admire the woman from afar. It was another thing to take it to the dance floor.

But Reno didn’t hesitate. “Sure thing,” he said, got up, and escorted her onto the floor.

Sal shook his head as he began to sip his drink. “He’ll never learn,” he said.

“He just looks,” Tommy said to his kid brother. “He doesn’t touch.”

“What are you talking?” Sal was frowning at that too. “He’s touching her right now.”

“You know what I mean,” said Tommy.

And as he was saying it, the ladies walked in. Grace, Gemma, and then Trina. When Grace and Gemma saw Reno on that dance floor, they glanced at each other and slowed their roll, trying to block Trina’s view. But when Trina moved around them and saw Reno on that dance floor with some woman, she began to head straight for him.

“Trina, be nice,” Grace said to her as she went.

But Tommy, when he saw Trina make a break for it, smiled. “Uh-oh. You said he’ll never learn? He’s about to learn now!”

Sal looked too as Trina headed for Reno. And he started grinning and nodding his head. “We need some popcorn in this mug,” he said.

But it wasn’t until Reno did a dip with Stacy and then pulled her back into his arms did he realize Trina was in the building at all and that she was heading his way. “*Ah shit,*” he said when he saw her and immediately disentangled himself from the woman.

“What is it?” Stacy, confused, asked.

“Bathroom,” was all Reno could get out as he began to hurry for the restrooms as if he could barely hold his pee.

But Trina stopped in her tracks. “Reno Gabrini,” she yelled over the club noise. “Get your ass over here!”

Reno stopped in his tracks too as a group of men in the club who heard her began to grin. And now he was angry at Trina for calling him out like that. He turned quickly and hurried toward her.

“What’s your problem embarrassing me like that, Trina?” he said as soon as he got up to her.

“You embarrassed your own damn self. What you dancing with that hoe for?”

“Why does she have to be hoe, Tree? Because she’s dancing with me?”

“Exactly right,” Trina said.

“Then what does that make you since you married my ass?”

A sad look came into Trina’s eyes, as if she knew she was all talk when it came to Reno or she would have left him long ago. That was why she ignored him and made her way to the booth. She made her point.

Reno regretted coming back at her that way. Why was he always so combative with her? He wished to God he knew a better way!

When they made their way to the circular booth, Grace was already seated next to Tommy, and Gemma was already seated next to Sal. But Trina sat next to Tommy at the end of one side of the booth, which forced Reno to sit next to Sal.

“What you all up under me for?” Sal asked him.

“You can always leave,” said Reno.

“Just quit,” said Gemma because they all knew that Sal and Reno fought like cats and dogs, but when the chips were down they always had each other’s back. Which made all of their bickering ridiculous.

“The reason we come together like this a week before Valentine’s Day every single year going on five years now,” said Trina, “is to plan for the Gabrini Valentine gathering that will take place next week where we ladies will cook and clean and you men will take your ease.”

“Right,” said Tommy with a smile.

“Wrong,” said Grace without smiling. “Not this year, big boy,” she said.

All of the men looked at her. Tommy was surprised first by her language, but also by what she’d said.

Reno was stumped too. “What do you mean not this year?”

“We aren’t doing it this year,” said Trina. “That’s what she means. This is your year to do all the slaving over the stove since letting the chef do the cooking is out of the

question. And this year, us ladies will be the ones to take our ease.”

Sal frowned. “What you talking about, Trina?”

“You, Reno, and Tommy will cook and slave over the stove for a change,” said Gemma, “and prepare the Valentine’s dinner, and plan the festivities for us.”

“Oh I know you’re joking,” said Tommy.

“It’s no joke,” said Grace.

“Why we got to cook?” asked Reno. “What’s wrong with y’all asses?”

“We’re going to be in Paris for Valentine week,” said Trina.

All three men said *Paris* in unison. They could hardly believe it. “Are you serious?” asked Sal.

“Yes, we’re serious,” said Trina. “It’s all booked. Hotel, reservations, everything. We leave tomorrow and return on Valentine’s Day.”

“Wait a minute,” said Sal with a fixed frown on his face. “Are you telling me you’re taking my wife, *my wife*, on some girls’ trip for Valentine’s Day? The most romantic day of the year?”

“Your wife is taking herself,” said Gemma. “I want to do this too.”

“This some bullshit,” said Reno. “This is crazy.”

Trina looked angrily at Reno. “You mean crazy like your ass on that dance floor with that hoe when you knew I was coming up in this bitch? That kind of crazy?”

Reno didn’t respond to that.

“But I agree with, Reno,” said Sal. “This *is* batshit crazy.”

Trina was pleasantly surprised that Reno didn’t seem happy by the news. But she wasn’t sure if it was more about the fact that she wouldn’t be cooking for his ass rather than because she wouldn’t be there with his ass.

But although Tommy wasn’t outwardly showing much emotion at all compared to Reno and Sal, he was inwardly much more mortified. And resistant. Because Grace wasn’t nearly as streetwise and worldly as Trina and Gemma, and he knew it. There was no way he was allowing her to leave the country during the most romantic season of the year in the most romantic city in the world, and to do so without him around to protect her. There was no way.

“Who’s supposed to take care of all of our minor babies while y’all caravanning around Paris?” asked Reno. “Tell me that. I’m not taking care of Carmine by myself!”

“And why not?” asked Trina. “He’s your son.”

“You say,” said Reno and Trina rolled her eyes. Carmine was a certified genius, which made Reno constantly question whether he was switched at birth given his and Trina’s intellectual abilities. Although the kid looked just like him.

“All three of you guys will take care of the kids,” said Gemma. “And when we return on the morning of Valentine’s Day, you will feed us and let us watch basketball and get fatter and fatter while we’re cussing each other out.” Then she smiled. “It’ll be a blast.”

The ladies laughed. The men just stared at them. They weren’t feeling this plan at all!

It was Reno who spoke first. “Then take y’all asses on,” he said. “But your asses will fly commercial. Y’all won’t be going on any of our planes.”

“No problem,” said Trina, a little disappointed that Reno would be the first to give in. “I’ll just call Douglas and

he'll have his plane here for me in no time flat.”

Douglas Spencer was a billionaire music mogul very much in love with Trina. A man Trina had seriously considered as a potential love interest after she left Reno, but Reno fell ill. When Trina said his name, everybody looked at her because they all knew what Douglas represented. Reno especially knew. He gave her a look that could cut steel.

But Sal was still harping on what Reno had said. “What do you mean take their asses on?” he asked Reno. “My wife will not be going anywhere Valentine’s week but home every night with me. And Trina’s gonna be on that trip too? Oh hell no.”

Reno and Trina both looked at Sal. “What’s that supposed to mean?” Reno asked.

“What’s that supposed to mean, Sal?” asked Trina.

“Y’all know what it means.”

“What do you mean we know? I want you to tell us why my wife being on that trip with your wife and Tommy’s wife is a problem.”

“Because your wife is as batshit crazy as you are,” Sal said, not mincing words. “She’ll have Gemma and Grace

doing stripteases on top of the Eiffel Tower before it's over and done."

"That's a dirty lie," said Trina angrily.

But Reno was fighting back laughter. Trina looked at him. "Oh that's funny to your ass?"

"I don't like your tone," said Reno, his smiles all gone. "What if it is funny to my ass? What your ass gonna do about it?"

"Okay that's enough," said Gemma. "It's not that deep. We're going to Paris Valentine week, we got our tickets and the rooms are reserved. End of discussion."

Gemma sounded like the attorney she was, but it really wasn't the end of anything, and they all knew it.

But Sal, one of the most feared mob bosses in the world, was scared. He looked over at his big brother Tommy, the brains of the family beyond young Carmine, to get them out of this jam. "You're awfully quiet over there," he said. "You approve of this nonsense trip? You're okay with Grace just leaving like this?"

Everybody looked at Tommy. In their group he was usually the voice of reason that they all respected. "No, I'm

not okay with it,” he said.

Grace looked at the man dubbed *Dapper Tom* by the media and who'd been voted many times as the most beautiful man on the planet by various magazines. She stared at the man that shocked those same magazines when he fell in love with a supposedly *plain Jane* like her. But the one thing she least liked doing was going against what Tommy thought was best for her, because she knew hands down that he always had her best interest at heart.

But this time she agreed with Trina and Gemma. “I need a break, Tommy. For real. I'm worn out from all of the changes that have taken place at Trammel, and this get-together we commit ourselves to each and every year is more like work for us girls. I'm out of juice and need to be rejuvenated again.”

“Rejuvenated,” said Sal dismissively. “What kind of Oprah-Dr. Phil bullshit is that?”

“Watch it, Sal,” Tommy warned his kid brother. “You don't speak to my wife that way.” And everybody, especially Sal, knew *Backdoor Tommy* didn't play.

Then Tommy looked his big, sparkling eyes at his wife. “I'm not viewing it as a good idea,” he said to her.

Reno and Sal glanced at each other. He's not *viewing it* as a good idea? Was he kidding them? But that was Tommy. Very mild-mannered until he wasn't.

But Grace held her ground. "I need a break, Tommy," she said again as if he wasn't hearing her.

"I understand that, but that's too far away. Find another way here in the U.S. to take a break because Paris is a no."

Sal and Reno were suddenly hopeful that Tommy would put an end to the craziness. Trina and Gemma would respect what Tommy had to say even more than what they said about it. And Grace, in their eyes, did whatever Tommy told her ass to do. Tommy wore the pants in that family top to bottom. Even his children saluted his ass. Reno and Sal wore the pants in their families, too, make no mistake about that. But not without mighty resistance from Trina and Gemma and the kids. They envied Tommy. And Tommy, they were pleased to hear, wasn't having it.

But Grace wasn't having it either. She rarely put her foot down with Tommy. He was the kind of man who looked out for her interests and their children's interests in such a definite, no-nonsense way that she rarely had a need to dispute

him. But he wasn't hearing her! "I need a break, Tommy," she said for the third time, "and Paris is where I want to take it. Paris," she added, "is where I *will* take it."

"Oh *shit*," Reno thought as everybody looked at Tommy. They weren't accustomed to Grace going against any of his decisions.

Tommy wasn't used to it either. But he said nothing further, which infuriated Reno and Sal.

But Trina knew what that silence meant. It meant Tommy would take it up with Grace privately. Which meant, they all knew, that Grace would not be going with them to Paris. And Trina wasn't having that. "Let's put it this way," Trina said to Tommy. "She's tired of your ass too, okay?"

Tommy looked at Trina.

"After the divorce and you two remarried, Grace has been nothing but a great wife to you. She don't give you all that lip like me and Gemma give our men. She don't fight your ass like we always got to fight our men."

"What fight?" asked Sal. "That's you and Reno's shit. Don't include me and Gemma in you and Reno's shit."

“What I’m saying,” Trina said to Tommy, “is that we want Grace with us.”

“Who said y’all going?” asked Reno. “I haven’t signed off on any trip to Paris.”

Trina, as everybody expected, took offense. “What your ass look like signing off on anything I’m doing? When do you let me sign off on you? I’m going to Paris, and Gemma is too. That’s not even debatable. But I know Tommy. He put his foot down and Grace won’t cross him the way we’ll cross y’all.”

Sal frowned. “My wife won’t cross me, what kind of bullshit talk is that? You won’t cross me, will you, Gemma?”

“No,” Gemma agreed. “But I’m going to Paris,” she said bluntly.

Sal stared at his wife. He knew better than anybody that when Gemma made up her mind, there was no changing it. And he wasn’t going to waste his time trying. “Who said you wasn’t?” he said as if he was the understanding husband all along.

But it was good enough for Gemma. Because she knew, in the end, Sal always gave her whatever she wanted.

She smiled and gave him a big hug. “Thank you, baby,” she said. And seeing her happy made Sal happy. But he was still scared.

Trina looked at Reno. She knew she could forget any hugs from him, especially after she dropped the Douglas bomb in the fire. But inwardly Reno was as scared as Tommy and Sal.

Grace looked at Tommy. Plain Grace, they called her, a woman no man as great looking as Tommy could ever want. But he did want her. And took excellent care of her. She knew how fortunate she was to be his wife and the mother of his children. But she also knew how forceful Tommy could be, not by shouting and carrying on the way Reno and Sal often did, but by remaining silent. His silence was a powerful tonic to Grace. And she knew if he put his foot down firmly enough, and made that clear, she wasn't going to buck him.

“I want to go to Paris very much,” Grace said. “I think I'll really enjoy myself. It'll be different. It'll be exciting for me. But whatever you decide,” she added, “that's what I'll do.”

Trina wanted to roll her eyes. But Grace knew how to handle Tommy, and she had to let it play out.

Tommy considered his wife. Trina was right: she'd been nothing but a great wife to him and a fantastic mother to their children. And he was no tyrant. She wanted some time away. She deserved some time away even though the timing, he felt, was odd. And he trusted her above any human being alive.

He smiled at her. "Looks like you're going to Paris," he said, but before he could even get the word Paris off of his lips, Grace was yelping her happiness and falling into his arms. Tommy, still smiling, hugged her too.

Trina looked at Reno and decided to try the same ploy smart Grace had just employed. "I want to go to Paris really badly, Reno," she said. "But whatever you decide, that's what I'll do."

"Good," said Reno. "Your ass staying home and cooking our Valentine's Day dinner."

Trina frowned. "Why are you such a bastard, Reno?"

"Because I love your ass and I know every man out there is gonna want your ass and I won't be there. I'm not allowing that," he said bluntly and honestly and everybody looked at him. It wasn't like Reno to be so open.

And that openness threw Trina for a loop. But that was why she loved him so much that it hurt and she stayed with his mean ass come hell or high water. He was full of surprises. He still loved her too. “If I promise I won’t give those men a second thought?” she said.

“Or,” said Reno, “maybe we guys can move some things around, a lot of things, and go with you girls.”

But every one of the girls were quick to respond.

“No,” said Grace.

“No way,” said Gemma.

“Hell no, Reno,” said Trina. “Y’all are the ones we need a break from. What we looking like bringing y’all along? Absolutely not!”

She and Reno stared at each other. They both knew he was beat. There was no situation where he was going to talk Trina out of her girls trip, and the universe knew that. And he stopped pretending not to know himself. “Looks like your crusty ass going to Paris too,” he said to her, and then he smiled. And Trina, thrilled, hurried over to Reno, sat on his lap, and they hugged and kissed as if they were in a make-out session.

Sal shook his head. “Only Reno can call his wife crusty and still get hugs and kisses.” He looked at Gemma. “All I got was a hug.”

“And that’s all you’re going to get in this very public place,” she said. Then she decided to needle him. “You’re no Reno,” she added.

Sal frowned, which she knew he would. “What’s that supposed to mean? What my ass look like wanting to be Reno? I got your Reno right here, Gemma. I got it right here!”

They all laughed at that. Even Reno and Trina, who stopped kissing and Reno just held her. But even in their laughter, it was uneasy. They were in uncharted territory with this upcoming reverse role holiday week. And to a man and woman they weren’t so sure if it was even a good idea.

But it was done now. The girls were going to Paris.

CHAPTER FIVE

The morning of their departure was branding time. The ladies all expected it. Had even joked about it the night before.

Tommy was first to get going. He was deep inside of Grace before she even woke up. When she did wake up and felt that so familiar fullness, she began moaning in pure joy and leaned her ass against Tommy even more. They were naked and in the spoon position, and Tommy was fondling Grace's breasts as he did her. And it wasn't even about the sex for Tommy. It was about Grace. And how much he was going to miss her. And how much he truly didn't want her to go.

"Oh baby, I wish you didn't have to go," he said to her.

"I don't have to," said Grace, "but I want to."

"I'm going to miss you."

"I'm going to miss you too."

Then Tommy turned her face toward him, he leaned toward her, and they began kissing as they fucked. And just like every time Tommy was inside of Grace, it was the best

fuck he'd ever had. And because she'd be gone for a week away from him, it was also, for him, the saddest.

And that was why he didn't let up. He needed her to miss him too. In every way.

Sad wasn't the word Sal would use as he banged Gemma in the shower that morning. *Fuck* was the word he kept saying over and over again as his dick kept whipping her with every stroke. And when he looked down and saw her beautiful black ass shaking with every stroke, as if she was enjoying it as much as he was, he started adding *me* to his word. Because her response to him alone always turned him on.

"*Fuck me,*" Sal said again and again as he kept on pounding her. Her hands were splayed against the shower wall as Sal was putting a hurting on her tight ass. He was banging her so hard and saying those words so often that he had her grunting to his masterful strokes too. If she kept this up, she thought, and she wasn't going anywhere. She'd forego Paris for more of this any day of the week.

But there wasn't a selfish bone in Sal's body. If she said she was staying back to stay with him, he'd insist that she

go. And enjoy herself.

But right now, she knew, as he was saying those words again and banging her even harder, he was branding her all over again.

Trina had brushed and showered and was standing at her lingerie drawer about to get dressed when she saw Reno's ass for the first time that morning. He had spent all night putting out fires at the casino and was just dragging his ass home in his crumpled suit and bloodshot eyes. He was so tired he could barely stand up. Which should have angered the shit out of Trina. Why did she put up with his bullshit?

But as soon as she saw him, she knew why. Reno loved hard, played hard, and worked hard. He had no middle button. Either he gave it his all, or he gave nothing. But the problem was the time. He never had enough to go around. And the one who always got the short end of that lack of time stick was his tried and true: Trina.

She exhaled and turned back around to her lingerie drawer to pull out a pair of panties and a matching bra. But she knew Reno's tired ass wasn't going to just let her get dressed. He didn't on regular days. She knew he wasn't on

this day. But it pissed her off that he still couldn't find a way to spend the night with her before she left.

Reno could tell she was pissed by the way she glanced back at him, look into his tired eyes, and then turned her gorgeous face back around. That was Trina. One disapproving look was all it took sometimes to make Reno feel less like her husband and more like her wayward child. But as he looked down the length of her perfect black body, he also knew just one look of her nakedness was also all it took for him to get so aroused it was painful. Because he was about to show her what she truly meant to him, and how much she was going to miss every inch of his *show*.

A *show*, he realized, that was about to tent his pants if it didn't get any release. He made his way across their bedroom up to her sweet body.

As she already expected, Reno had come up behind her and was pressing his rock-hard penis against her bare ass as if he was reminding her *what* was still boss in their relationship. Because even to Trina it was. They had sexual chemistry that was still off the chain. But what Reno didn't realize, and she would never tell him, was that he was still boss of her even if

he never fucked her again, and no matter how much he disappointed her.

When he wrapped his big arms around her, he smelled like he usually smelled after work: like cigarettes, liquor, and cologne all mixed up together. Sometimes perfume was in the mix too because he was always around so many women in that damn casino. And that scent could have been there too. Trina just didn't have the energy to sniff it out.

“Sorry, babe,” said Reno as he began kissing her neck and dry humping her ass. “Every time I tried to get away, some new shit popped off. It was a madhouse all night long. Oh baby you smell so sweet.”

He quickly unbuckled, unzipped, and then dropped his pants and his underwear, revealing a dick so aroused he could hardly wait to put it inside of Trina.

But just as he was rubbing it between her legs, Trina grabbed her panties and bra and moved away from him.

Reno was astounded. “What are you doing? I was working here!”

“Work on your own ass,” said Trina. “It's too late to be working on me. I have a plane to catch.”

“Yeh, my plane motherfucker.”

Reno wasn't about to allow some joker in love with his wife to fly them to Paris. He not only provided his huge jet for their transportation, but he, Sal, and Tommy secretly flew a security detail to Paris on Sal's plane to follow their wives clandestinely during their weeklong trip. And just in case they needed to get to Paris themselves, they kept Tommy's big-ass plane in Vegas on standby. And although Security knew not to spy on their wives' every movement, they were to report back to the husbands if they found anything amiss. And they meant anything.

But Reno caved. “Please, Tree, come on now. You can't leave town without giving me some.”

“Is that all I am to you, Reno? Why I got to give you some? When you leave town you don't be going out of your way to give me some. But I got to give it to you? Fuck you.”

And she headed for the bathroom.

“Trina, I'm sorry.”

She stopped in her tracks.

“I know what I need to do and my stupid ass still can't do it. I planned to spend all night with you. I planned to make

you miss me. I'm sorry, Tree.”

Trina closed her eyes and exhaled. And when she turned around and saw the sorrow in Reno's eyes, a look he couldn't fake, she knew he had her over the barrel again. And she opened her arms.

And like a kid in a candy store, Reno came in a hurry, dragging his pants and underwear right along with him.

But when he got next to Trina, he lifted her into his arms and carried her to their bed. They were kissing nonstop as he fingered her on that bed and then, finally, put it deep inside of her in that Reno way that made Trina arch so high up that Reno got even further in.

And they fucked all morning long.

CHAPTER SIX

Trina, Gemma, and Grace were giddy on the plane trip over to Paris, and they were even more amped-up after they landed and went to the hotel into their separate luxury suites to shower and change.

By nightfall Paris time, they hit the streets. All three ladies were in all-white attire. They didn't care it was February and that there had been, earlier, a heavy downpour of rain that created water puddles everywhere. But they stepped around them easily. They were in Paris, and nothing was going to rain on their parade.

And as they stepped into the heart of the Champs-Élysées, where wonderful cafés and all kinds of clubs were within blocks of one another, it was working like a charm. They got far more than their share of men looking or gawking or just plain invading their space. And they'd laugh and move right along. It was all good to them.

"I'm tired of these thirsty fools," Trina said with a laugh. "Let's get to the other side. Not so crowded over there."

“Agreed,” said Grace.

“Just follow me. I’ll show you girls how to cross a Paris street. You have to know what you’re doing.”

And Trina stood in front at the curb and Grace and Gemma, finding her mother hen act humorous, stood behind her. But just as she was about to cross the street to get to the other side, a tiny, two-seater sports car made a point of swerving toward the curb where she was standing and splashed all three of them with a heavy dose of muddy water that immediately turned their all-white outfits all-black.

Trina, who took the full force of the splash, stood there with her arms out wide as she not only had to deal with the ice-cold water now freezing her, but the fact that some fool had just ruined her beautiful outfit.

But that wasn’t the worst of it for her. The worst happened when she looked and saw that the driver of the car was laughing his head off as he pulled over to the curb further up, as if he did that shit on purpose. That was when her anger went ballistic. “Oh hell no,” she cried out and began taking off toward that car.

Grace and Gemma, well aware of what Trina could do once unleashed, took off after her.

“Trina, what are you doing?” Grace was calling after her as they ran. “Tree?” But Trina didn’t look back.

“Oh, lord,” Gemma said as she and Grace had no choice but to run as fast as Trina was running to stop her crazy ass before she killed that foolish boy. He had no clue who he was dealing with.

And that same clueless young man, along with his passenger, were still smiling when they got out of his sportscar and were about to walk across the sidewalk to a shop. But Hurricane Katrina stopped them in their tracks.

“You think that shit funny?” she asked the tall, lanky driver as she hurried up on him. And before he could say a word, she began punching him like she was a man. “You think that shit funny? Hun? Hun? That shit funny to you?”

The young man had fallen against his car and was covering his face from her heavy blows. His passenger was bent over laughing.

But Trina was serious as serious could be and Grace and Gemma knew it. They tried to pull her off of the idiot, but that didn’t work. But when the young man stopped cowering and violently pushed Trina against Grace and Gemma as if he was ready to beat her ass, they knew it was on now. They

quickly surrounded the young man just enough for Trina to show him who was still boss and put an end to any retaliation.

And Trina didn't hesitate. She pulled out her fully-loaded Glock just enough to press it into his stomach. Grace and Gemma had them surrounded enough that nobody else could see what Trina was brandishing.

And she wasn't playing. "You wanna clap back?" she was asking the young man in that head-moving bravado nobody could match. "Your ass wanna clap back?" She got all in his personal space, and pressed that gun harder against his belly. "That's what your ass wanna do?"

But the young man wasn't stupid. He'd never seen anybody brandishing a firearm like that, and right in his abdomen, let alone a feisty black woman brandishing it. He didn't know, but he'd heard all his life how those particular ladies didn't play. You fuck with them they'd fuck you up.

And that was why he backed away from Trina. And then began hurrying around to the driver side of his car.

"*Allons-y.* (Let's go)," he said to his passenger.

"*Va?* (Go)?" his passenger responded. "*Mais nous venons juste d'arriver.* (But we just got here)."

“*Allons-y!*” the man yelled again, got in his car, and barely allowed his passenger a chance to get in before he was speeding away. Trina eased her gun back into her purse.

Gemma and Grace looked at her smiling and shaking their heads. And all three looked at the sorry state of their all-white black outfits, and they couldn't help but laugh.

“We're a mess,” said Gemma.

“And to think you had it all planned out,” said Grace to Trina. “This was supposed to be our white night. More like a mud night.” And they laughed at that too.

“Let's go get changed,” said Trina. “That bastard won't be ruining our night.”

And they all headed back to their hotel suites, and to their considerable wardrobes.

When they came out again, they went on a Seine River dinner cruise and then to the Moulin Rouge for a cabaret show.

CHAPTER SEVEN

But the next night was the best night. It was colder, but the rains were completely gone and there wasn't a water puddle in sight. And they weren't playing anymore.

They stepped out this night in their forty-thousand-dollar ankle-length Harlan coats and Valentino hats, with their outfits skintight on purpose. They stood out as soon as they walked out. And to say they were the toast of Paris was an understatement. Men, especially Frenchmen, were doing all they could to get their attention as soon as their stilettos hit the pavement.

But they only found it all amusing. They weren't thinking about those guys. They were just girls who wanted a break to have some fun, and that didn't include guy fun. They didn't pick up stupid just because they were on foreign soil. Their husbands would stomp their asses through the ground if they allowed any of their reverie to include men.

But that didn't stop the men.

One in particular wouldn't take no for an answer. He was in their group like he belonged there. But Trina knew

better than that.

“I know how to get rid of his ass,” she whispered to Grace. “Follow me.”

And Gemma and Grace followed Trina three blocks over to a building that bore no name.

“What kind of place is this, Trina?” asked Grace. “Where’s the marquee? There’s no marquee.”

“That’s because it’s by reservation only,” said Trina, “or by door decision. But we have a reservation.”

“Since when?” asked Gemma.

“Since I planned this trip,” said Trina as they made their way to the door and she gave the bouncer her name.

And the pesky Frenchman followed right behind them as they walked into the strip joint for ladies. As soon as they walked in, and the overzealous French lover boy realized what kind of place it was, he became so uncomfortable that he quickly turned around and left them alone. The girls laughed out loud and high-fived each other. Leave it to Trina!

But they weren’t in their seats a full five minutes before Grace got another text.

“Not Tommy again,” bemoaned Trina.

But Grace didn't say a word. Because it was Tommy again. Just making sure all was well. Again.

"All's good," she texted back, and threw her phone back into her Gucci bag.

Trina shook her head. "You're better than me," she said. "I wish Reno would bother me like that!"

But Grace and Gemma knew she envied Tommy's devotion to Grace. Gemma, too, had gotten a few texts from Sal, although nothing like finger-happy Tommy. But Trina? Not one text from Reno. Not one. But everybody knew that was how they rolled.

But Grace knew Trina wasn't as much of a tower of strength as she always projected. She knew Trina wanted a little attention too. She'd tell her so late at night on the phone while Reno was still at work. What girl didn't want attention?

"G & G," Trina said as she leaned over the table. Whenever Grace and Gemma were in the same space for long periods of time, that was the nickname she called them.

"Yes, Grand Dame," Gemma said jokingly, zinging Trina back.

"Watch out for Tommy's guys."

Grace frowned. “Why would my husband have guys here in Paris?”

“Because he’s the only one smart enough and sophisticated enough to have French security on his payroll,” said Trina. “That’s why.”

They all laughed. “True that,” said Grace, and then her phone beeped again.

“Not Tommy *again*,” said Trina.

But it was Tommy again, and Grace answered his text. Again.

“But you see what I’m saying?” said Trina. “It only proves my point. He knows we just went into a strip joint. That’s why he’s texting like a banjo player. His ass got eyes on us.”

“Or,” said Gemma, “he’s just concerned about his wife. Sal checked on me a few times already too. That’s not weird, Tree. Looks like Reno would have checked on you at least once since we landed.”

“Like I said,” said Trina, “his ass glad I’m gone. And I’m glad I’m gone too.” Then she sipped her drink as if she

was proving another point. And to Gemma and Grace she was. But not the point she thought.

But when the ladies, who were the warmup act, left the stage, and the men took center stage, the three Gabrinis were overjoyed to see that most of the male strippers were black and gorgeous and as buff as buff could get.

“This what I’m talking about!” Trina said happily as they forgot all about those workaholic husbands back in Vegas who may-or-may-not be spying on them, and paid strict attention to the show.

And when one of the strippers, the best of the best, got off stage and made his way to the ladies, they all geared up for some excitement. But when he focused his attention onto Grace, with his wang slinging in her face like a ponytail, and Grace looked more uncomfortable than a hoe in church, Trina and Gemma fell against each other laughing.

But Trina decided to have some funny. “Just touch it, Grace. Tommy won’t mind.”

Gemma hit Trina. “Quit lying, girl. Just quit.”

“I’m not thinking about Trina and her mess,” said Grace, as she kept trying to move her face away from Dick

Head.

“Don’t be acting like you don’t know what to do with that thang, Grace,” said Trina. “I heard you know real well what to do.”

Grace and Gemma both looked at Trina. “Says who?” asked Gemma.

“Says me,” said Trina. “She’s playing all innocent. But her ass satisfies Dapper Tom in bed. Her ass satisfies the master class of lovers in bed. She ain’t no innocent. Your ass know your way around a big-ass dick and you know I’m right.”

Even Grace had to smile at Trina unplugged. She’d never seen her so free. Opinionated, all the time. But not so free.

But Grace wasn’t about to touch another man’s penis or let him do anything else to her with that penis either. She wasn’t doing it.

But when Dick Head moved over to Trina, she was what Gemma and Grace would call a much more willing participant.

He slung that dick around, and Trina slung her tongue around too. Not trying to lick it. She wasn't about to touch that thang. But she was enjoying simulating it. And when he stood her up and pulled her against him, and began to simulate much more than any oral, she was more than enjoying it. She was getting horny as hell. So horny that she had to pull back. Fun and games were one thing. Horny was another level.

She sat back down.

But one stripper was eyeing Gemma's sleek body, and he kept on and kept on until he got her to get up. Then he escorted her up on stage with him. And Gemma, cutting loose too, did some remarkable feats with that pole. So much so that Grace leaned over to Trina. "I didn't know your girl was a gymnast."

Trina looked at Grace and bust out laughing. "That's what they calling it now? Okay," Trina said. And when she realized Grace didn't get it, she laughed even harder. "You're one of a kind, G," she said. "One of a kind."

And when Gemma did a full split on stage as if she was a professional, the entire room erupted in applause.

Trina and Grace were laughing and applauding too. They even stood up. "She good," Trina was saying as they

were applauding. “I gotta give our girl her props. Sal is gonna kick her black ass, but she good.”

“He’s not going to kick her butt,” said Grace. “If he finds out, he’s going to kick *your* butt.”

Trina nodded and grinned as they sat back down. They both knew how Sal was always quick to declare Trina the ringleader and therefore the blame for any missteps Gemma ever made. “You right girl. You are so right.”

“He puts her on a pedestal you know,” Grace said.

“Yes, he does,” said Trina as her big hazel eyes glazed over to the land of *I only wish Reno would do the same for me* again.

But then she and Grace jumped to their feet along with most of the audience when Gemma started twerking right alongside the guys.

“Damn she’s good,” Grace said in amazement, too, as they laughed and applauded and enjoyed every second.

And after the strip joint, they were back on the streets.

“I’m hungry,” said Gemma.

“I’m sure you are,” Grace said with joy in her voice, and Trina fell against her laughing.

“I’m serious,” Gemma said, trying to be serious, although she was smiling. “It’s almost one o’ clock in the morning and I’ve worked up an appetite. I’m serious.”

“They had plenty of food in that strip joint,” said Grace. “Why didn’t you eat in there?”

“The same reason you didn’t eat in there. It’s a foreign strip joint.”

“Then let’s go get something to eat,” Trina said as they looked around. They hadn’t traveled too far away from the *Champs-Élysées* and everywhere they looked were places to eat. “Pick one,” Trina said, and Gemma did.

But they weren’t seated at their table for ten minutes before they were being hounded again. This time by two brothers. Two very attractive French brothers.

“Welcome to *Paree*,” said the older brother in the heaviest of French accents as they stood at their table. “I am Phillippe. This is my younger brother Laurent. Laurent works here.”

“How nice,” said Gemma just to be polite.

“He just clocked out. And we truly do not mean rudeness. We are not so used to such beautiful ladies.”

All three ladies knew they were full of shit, but the brothers were so cute. They didn't mind the flattery.

Trina, at first, had a different idea. Those brothers, as far as she was concerned, had Tommy, Reno, and Sal written all over them. In her mind they were the French security detail Tommy had undoubtedly hired. But the more the brothers stood there talking and going on and on, it was clear to her that Tommy would not have hired such fools. They were more of a turnoff with all of their yapping than they were an inducement to join their group and become eyes and ears for those three musketeers back in Vegas.

But they were funny and warm and could help out with the ladies' nonexistent French when the serving staff finally made it to their table to take their orders. Trina saw a benefit, albeit a narrow one, in keeping them around.

That was why, when Philippe asked if they could join them at their table, she quickly said yes. Which amazed Gemma and Grace. Especially since neither brother was showing much interest in her. Laurent kept cutting his big blues at Grace, while Philippe kept taking peeps at Gemma.

But before they could object, the two brothers were happily taking their seats. Laurent sat beside Grace. Philippe sat beside Gemma.

It wasn't lost on Trina that she was the odd girl out, something she wasn't used to being by any stretch of the imagination. She was usually the one the men paid too much attention to. But she was the oldest of the group and wasn't getting any younger. She figured she had better get used to less attention.

After eating a wonderful meal and laughing with the two Frenchmen until their bellies ached, it was time for them to leave.

"We must walk you safely to your hotel," said Laurent. "It is nearly two a.m. now. It is not, how do you say? Safe."

None of the ladies objected. By now it was obvious to all three of them that the brothers were essentially harmless. And if they weren't, Trina had her loaded Glock on her like always. And Gemma and Grace were armed to the teeth too. It came with the territory of being a Gabrini. None of them were worried about two upstarts like those two Frenchmen.

But as they were heading for the exit, Trina saw somebody heading out in front of them that looked so familiar it astonished her. She stopped so suddenly that Laurent ran into the back of her. “Douglas?” she asked. “Douglas Spencer?”

When the tall white man in front of them turned around, and Trina realized she wasn’t mistaken, she couldn’t believe it.

Gemma and Grace looked at each other. What kind of bullshit coincidence was this? They couldn’t believe it either.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Douglas Spencer, the billionaire music mogul that almost won Trina's heart not that long ago, smiled too when he saw her standing there. He was as shocked as she was. "Katrina Gabrini? What are you doing here?"

"I was going to ask you that very same question."

"I'm here for Taylor's music video premiere. Thought I'd get a bite to eat. What's your excuse?"

Trina knew that *Taylor* probably meant Taylor Swift because Douglas only dealt with the biggest of the big, and she knew her own reason for being in Paris wasn't going to compete with that on any given day. "Girls trip," she said, and she and Douglas laughed. Which was what she loved most about him. He always put her at ease.

Gemma had already elbowed Grace as they watched the handsome mogul laugh it up with Tree. They'd heard that fateful story about how Trina was within seconds of leaving Reno for Douglas and never looking back. But Reno suddenly was rushed to the hospital and Trina rushed to his bedside.

And never left again. But Grace and Gemma both wondered if Douglas was the one, for Trina, that got away?

“A girls trip,” asked Douglas in his usual smooth way. “Or is it a girls and guys trip?” he added, as he eyed the two brothers.

“Oh, I forgot. Let me introduce you to my two best friends in this world. I don’t recall if you met them before, but this is Tommy’s wife Grace, and Sal’s wife Gemma.”

“I’ve certainly heard of your husbands,” said Douglas as he shook their hands. “Nice to see you both.”

They met before, but Gemma said nothing. She was always blown away by how better looking he was than Reno would ever be. But she also knew Trina never married Reno for his looks. Reno had the kind of off-the-charts charm that mere good looks could never capture. He was a man’s man in every sense of the word and every woman craved that animalistic, take-charge nature Reno had. Douglas might have been the King of Music, as Hollywood called him. But Reno was the King of the Jungle. Although this Douglas, she also had to admit, had a powerful look about him too.

“And these two young men,” said Trina, “are Philippe and Laurent. Our brand-new French friends.”

“Hello,” Douglas said with more reserve as he shook their hands. Trina could tell he wasn’t sold on them yet. He was going to feel them out.

“Where are you headed?” Douglas asked.

“Home to bed,” said Trina. “We’ve been at it all night long.”

Douglas laughed, which made everybody else laugh too.

Trina hit him playfully with her handbag. “Not like that you idiot. The two brothers here have graciously offered to walk us to our hotel. That’s it.”

“May I join in?” asked Douglas, which caused the brothers to laugh again.

“We wouldn’t want to trouble you,” Grace quickly said.

“We’re certain you have other things to do than to walk us home,” Gemma added. Which surprised Trina. They had no qualms about the brothers walking them home and they just met their asses. At least Trina knew Douglas more than for a minute.

But Douglas quickly put an end to such talk. “Nonsense,” he said. “I see Katrina in town and I let strangers walk her to her hotel? Not in my America.”

“We aren’t in America,” Grace pointed out. Which made Douglas smile, and then they all laughed at that too. But his little comment settled it. And made their way, three boys and three girls, to the hotel.

But Gemma and Grace kept a side-eye on Douglas. No matter what the outcome, they were certain Reno would have a panic attack on Trina’s ass if he ever found out.

CHAPTER NINE

It was almost two a.m. in Paris, but it wasn't even eleven a.m. back in Vegas. Reno had come up with a bright idea: cook the entire Valentine's Day dinner early, freeze it, and then on Valentine's Day, when the ladies return, all they had to do was heat and serve. That was what they would have stuck to their pledge to cook it themselves and not involve any chefs or takeout or caterers of any kind, and they would have the entire Valentine's Day free.

But they were having a hell of a time, as they sat around the massive center island inside Reno's gourmet kitchen, just trying to decide on the menu.

"We keep talking about what the ladies want," said Reno. "Their asses in Paris. Is that what we wanted? No! And they didn't give a fuck that we didn't want that. So forget what they want and let's just settle on the menu we want. We got to settle on the menu we wanna put together."

"What's to settle?" asked Sal. "We do the ham and the chicken and the dumplings and the macaroni and the cheese and the collard greens and all the rest of that great-tasting soul

food the ladies put together for us every year on Valentine's Day. I be craving that shit every year, what are you talking? What's to settle? What's the big deal?"

Reno looked at Sal. "You know how to cook a ham?"

Sal said nothing.

"What about chicken-and-dumplings?"

Sal said nothing.

"What about macaroni and cheese and collard greens?"

Still nothing from Sal.

"Yeah, I thought so," said Reno.

"I don't know why we can't just cater the dinner," said Sal, feeling called out. "What we got to cook it for?"

"Because those wives of ours will know we're full of shit and didn't cook that food. And I don't know about you two, but I'm not about to let Trina cuss my ass out over food. Especially when it's no big deal to throw a meal together anyway."

"But what meal, Reno?" asked Tommy. "We've been going around and around all morning. I agreed to remain in

Vegas to cook the meal, but we haven't even decided on what to cook! What are we going to cook?"

"A meal, Tommy, a meal. Whatever we decide."

"Whatever we decide?" said Sal. "This is going to be a meal for Valentine's Day, Reno. Not potluck Friday. What's with this whatever we decide? Because if we don't come up with something in the next few minutes, I'm going to take Gemma out to dinner that night and call it a day. This shit getting ridiculous."

"Your ass ridiculous," Reno shot back.

"You can't even decide what we're going to eat," said Sal, "and you're calling me ridiculous?"

"Why I got to decide it?" Reno asked. "Why your ass haven't decided it?"

"Because my ass never pretended to be able to do this shit. You're the one that always figure whatever the ladies can do we can do better."

"We can!"

"That's why you got to decide."

Reno decided to put an end to any thoughts of going gourmet the way he hoped. "What are we standing up here?"

“Idiots?” asked Tommy.

“We’re proud Italians, that’s what we are,” Reno answered his own question. “We’re do a homemade pizza.”

“A pizza, Reno?” asked Tommy. “For Valentine’s Day?”

“It’ll be special, trust me. It’ll blow their socks off because it’ll be nothing like the ladies ever had. And their men would have cooked it. Now tell me what do you like to eat, Tommy? What would you call your favorite food?”

Tommy leaned back and folded his arms. “I don’t believe I have a favorite food. Everything Grace cooks is tasty. But I guess if I had to pick one, I’d choose well-cooked oysters.”

“Yuk,” said Sal. “Who likes that slimy-ass shit like that?”

“What’s wrong with oysters?” asked Tommy.

Reno wrote down Tommy’s preference.

“What’s your favorite?” Reno asked Sal.

“Pasta. Spaghetti. What else?”

Reno wrote that down too.

“And my favorite,” Reno said as he was writing down his favorite even as he was telling what it was, “is a well-made cheeseburger, but putting that aside! My favorite are good, old-fashioned fried sardines.” Then he finished writing. “So there you have it,” he said.

Tommy and Sal looked at him. “There you have what?” Sal asked him.

“Our Valentine’s Day pizza.”

Tommy frowned. “You have got to be kidding me, Reno.”

“Are you telling us,” asked Sal, “that a pizza with oysters, fried sardines, and spaghetti are going to be our Valentine’s dinner?”

“With some good old-fashioned American French fries tossed on top up there too, yes,” said Reno.

Sal looked at Tommy and shook his head.

But Reno was offended. “What are you looking like that for? You got a better idea? What’s your suggestion? I’ll write it down. Just let me know what you two suggest.”

But Tommy did like oysters. And Sal did like spaghetti. And they assumed, although they had never cooked

them in ages if they ever had, that both of those dishes would be easy to prepare. They filed no objection.

Reno nodded. “Yeah, I thought so. Now let’s get to the market, get the ingredients, and get to work.”

But Sal was confused. “Why can’t we just go downstairs to one of the thousand restaurants down there and get the ingredients?”

“And they run short for my customers? Not on your life,” said Reno. “We go to the market, get what we need, get back here and cook our pizza, and then we freeze that shit until Valentine’s Day when the ladies get back home. And that’ll be that.”

“It better be,” said Tommy, looking at his Rolex, “because I’ve got a business to run.”

“And I don’t?” said Reno.

“And I don’t?” said Sal.

“Let’s just get this over with,” said Tommy, who felt they wasted too much time already.

And although the dish didn’t sound appetizing to them in any way whatsoever, Reno was certain they could spruce it up just enough that it could be something special.

“Special how, Reno?” Sal was asking him as they made their way to the exit.

“We’ll have the oysters on one part of the pizza, spaghetti on the other part, and sardines on the third part. And the forth part will have all three mixed up together for anybody that has the stomach for it.”

Even their stomachs turned at the mere suggestion. But they convinced themselves, as they headed to market, that it would be just fine. They convinced themselves that they just might be able to pull off the Valentine’s dinner to end all Valentine’s dinners, and make their women proud.

CHAPTER TEN

The Gabrini ladies, Douglas Spencer, and the two French brothers entered the Parisian hotel after two a.m. and made their way to the elevators. The brothers, and Douglas too, insisted on walking them to their doors.

“It is perhaps most dangerous in the corridors,” said Laurent.

But when the elevator stopped on the thirty-third floor, which was where Gemma and Grace’s suites were located, they insisted on riding up to the fortieth floor where Trina’s suite was located. But Trina would have none of that.

“You’re on your floor. What are you riding up with me for? You didn’t ride up with me when we first got to the hotel.”

“Don’t worry ladies,” said Douglas, “I’ll see her safely to her room.”

That was what they were worried about as they glanced at each other. But they both knew Trina was a grown-ass woman. She knew how to take care of herself.

“Nice meeting you, Douglas,” Grace said as they got off of the elevator.

“Nice meeting you too, Grace,” Douglas said. And Grace and Gemma stood there, with the brothers, staring at Trina as if they dared her to do something stupid, as the elevator doors closed them out.

Inside the elevator, Trina smiled and shook her head as they began their ascent up to her floor. “They think I’m going to be up to all sorts of no good with your ass,” she admitted to Douglas.

Douglas smiled too. “I expected as much. Which is weird to me.”

“What’s weird about it? They remembered how close I came to leaving Reno. They’re just being concerned family members.”

“Nothing to be concerned about,” said Douglas as the elevator doors dinged open on Trina’s floor. “Right?”

Trina saw him look down what he always called her superfine body just as she was looking down his gorgeous hunk of body too, and they got off the elevator and headed down the corridors to her suite.

Douglas was watching Katrina's tight ass with a hawk's eye. No other woman turned him on the way she did. In many ways, she remained perfection to him: the woman of his dreams. But was it still going to be just a dream? Or did he stand a chance this time? He would have a chance if Gabrini was neglecting her again. He would have a chance if her fantasies of a loving husband were being shaken again.

He didn't know what was going on inside Katrina's head, or her marriage. The only thing he knew for sure was that she didn't respond to his very direct question. She didn't dismiss it out of hand at all. And because of that lack of answer, and the fact that he was walking her to her room at two a.m. in the most romantic city in the world during the most romantic week of the year, put a pep in his step and a song in his heart. Her non-answer was where his horny heart went home to roost.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was afternoon the next day in Paris, but it was nine at night in Vegas. Reno, Sal, and Tommy, who'd been cooking all day, were passed out in the once pristine gourmet kitchen that now looked like a war zone. Food was everywhere. Food that had cooked to the dry bone on the stove and had exploded in the pots, sending shards of meat and pasta and tomato sauce all over the walls and countertops. Oysters were all over the center island as Tommy and gang couldn't figure out how to clean them, and Reno's fried sardines had been left unattended in the frying pan and now were decorative pieces on the ceiling, stinking up the whole penthouse.

And when Reno's phone began ringing, and they all began waking up, their faces and expensive suits were covered in flour from the pizza dough they were trying to make and because Reno thought you had to dip the oysters in tons of flour to take the slim away. He also thought you dipped the pasta in flour before you cooked that too. He claimed to have seen it on a cooking show once, but Sal and Tommy stopped buying it when he could never name what show.

Carmine, who should have been in bed, was still wide awake and staring angrily at his father and his uncles for destroying his mama's kitchen. He couldn't believe the mess they made! And then they were just laying around all on his mama's countertop like the sorry assholes they were. He was fuming.

Carmine's disapproving young face was the first thing Reno saw when he finally woke up. After knocking flour out of his face, he frowned right back at him. "What your ass staring at?"

"You and Uncle Sal and Uncle Tommy," Carmine said boldly as he usually did. "What have you idiotic people done to my mama's kitchen?"

"Watch your tongue boy. You're the idiot!"

"I'm the exact opposite of an idiot and you know it. And I didn't say you were an idiot. I said you were idiotic. Which you are."

"Whatta you talking? We cooked a meal!"

"You mean you cooked the ceiling. You cooked the walls. You cooked a stove. But you certainly didn't cook a

meal.” Then he stared daggers at his father. “You don’t know what you’re doing,” he said.

“I know what I’m doing asshole,” Reno shot back as his phone began to ring. “But what your ass doing is the question? Isn’t it past your bedtime? Why don’t you get your Florence Nightingale ass out of my sight, how about you do that?”

Carmine hit his forehead with his hand. Because Carmine enjoyed knitting as his release from all the brain activities he had to constantly participate in as a certified genius, his father loved referring to him as Florence Nightingale. When he pointed out that Betsy Ross might be a better comparison if he had to indulge himself in such comparisons, since Betsy was a seamstress and Florence was a nurse and social worker, his father wouldn’t even hear him out. Carmine was Florence Nightingale as far as Reno was concerned no matter what she did for a living. Which bothered Carmine no end. But he left it alone and left the kitchen. But not before giving a parting shot: “How can a genius have a father this stupid?” he said beneath his breath.

But Reno, who had completely forgotten his phone was ringing, heard his young son’s parting shot and jumped from

his crawled-up fetal position on the center island and ran after his young son.

Carmine, terrified, began apologizing. “I was just talking, Father,” he said to Reno. “I was merely conversing with myself.”

But Reno was removing his belt. “Calling me stupid. I got your stupid right here.” And he began beating the crap out of Carmine’s butt in that Reno unrelenting fashion that he woke up Tommy and Sal.

“Who’s getting his ass kicked?” Reno was yelling at his son as he beat him. “I’m not too stupid to kick your ass! Who’s getting their ass kicked?”

“I am,” said Carmine, refusing, as usual, to cry.

“Who’s stupid now?” Reno yelled.

“I am,” Carmine yelled back, but still defiant even though he was in severe pain.

The fact that Carmine never cried in the face of agony was something Reno loved about his boy. But no son of his would ever disrespect him, he didn’t care how much he loved him. But Carmine’s refusal to buckle under pain did garner Reno’s respect, and did end the beating much sooner than

Reno's other children would have gotten. But was that brilliant Carmine's strategy all along? Don't cry and the beating will end quickly? Reno didn't know. What did his stupid ass know about mind games?

"Now get your ass out of my sight," he said to Carmine.

Carmine, relieved it was all over, shut his trap this time, and took off.

Reno made his way back to the center island. When he saw Tommy and Sal still waking up, with all that flour all over them, he laughed. "You two look like aliens from another planet."

"We might look like it," said Sal. "You, on the other hand," he started saying before Tommy cut him off.

"Your phone was ringing," Tommy said to Reno.

"Oh right!" Reno grabbed his phone from off the countertop. It started ringing again before he could check the Caller ID.

He answered quickly. "Yeah?"

It was Jay Mollett, the chief of the security detail Reno had hired to be their eyes and ears. "Sorry to disturb you, sir."

His accent was undeniably French, but it was not a heavy one.

“Jay?”

When Reno said that name, Tommy and Sal were all ears too. “Put it on Speaker, Ree,” Tommy said.

“What’s happened?” Reno asked as he put the call on Speaker.

“A status report, sir,” Jay said.

It was nighttime in Vegas, but Reno knew it was just after noon in Paris. But he why would Jay need to give them a status report if nothing happened? They were all ears. “Go on,” said Reno.

“The ladies went for a night out on the town after arriving in Paris. It had been a rainy day and puddles were everywhere.”

“Don’t tell me they were splashed?”

“They were splashed, sir,” Jay said and Reno, Tommy, and Sal all laughed.

“Mrs. Katrina Gabrini handled the young car-driving splasher, however, without any need on our part to intervene.”

Reno frowned. “What do you mean she handled him?”

“She gave him a beating he won’t soon forget, sir,” said Jay. “And then the young man fled in fear for his life.”

Sal and Tommy smiled and shook their heads. Reno felt proud. “That’s my Tree,” he said. “What next?”

“After they changed, their first night in town was standard. They visited various clubs and had dinner.”

“And last night?”

“It was livelier, shall we say. They did the usual sightseeing and eating and then by nightfall they went clubbing again.”

“Strip joints?” asked Sal.

“One of them was, yes, sir.”

Sal looked at Reno. “Figures.”

Reno frowned. “What are you looking at me for? Trina didn’t put no gun to Gemma and Grace’s heads and forced them anywhere.”

“Says who?” asked Sal.

“Go on, Jay,” said Tommy.

“After the club, they went to a restaurant to eat a very late dinner, and that was when they ran into two Frenchmen.”

“Young? Good looking?” Reno asked.

“Yes, sir.”

That sounded like Trina’s ass, Reno wanted to say. “So these French heads liked the girls?” he said instead.

“Actually, sir, they took a shine, as you Americans might put it, to Mrs. Grace Gabrini and Mrs. Gemma Gabrini.”

Reno was offended. “But not my wife?”

“No, sir. From our vantage point it was definitely the other two ladies they were most interested in.”

“And the other two were interested in them?”

“They were quite friendly, yes, sir.”

“Uh-hun,” said Reno. “They act all innocent around you two,” he said to Tommy and Sal, “but they ain’t so innocent in Paris.”

“What are you talking? Trina would be leading the parade if a guy showed some interest in her ass. They weren’t interested in her ass.”

“Bullshit,” Reno said with a frown. “Tree had to beat’em off of her I guarantee you that.”

“Go on, Jay,” Tommy said, ignoring Reno and Sal.

“After dinner, the three men walked the ladies to their hotel rooms.”

Reno frowned. “What three men? You said it was two Frenchmen.”

“Oh, I apologize, sir. There was eventually a third man. An American. He was leaving the restaurant at the same time as your wives. Your wife, apparently, knew him quite well and they began holding a conversation.”

Reno looked dejected.

“Who’s the Paris slut now?” Sal asked him.

Reno ignored him. “You said he walked Tree, I mean Mrs. Gabrini to her hotel?”

“Yes, sir. All three men walked the ladies to the hotel. Then the two Frenchmen walked the other two wives to their rooms, while the American walked your wife to her room.”

“Keep going,” Reno said, hoping there was no there there.

“The two Frenchmen left the hotel immediately after the other two wives entered their rooms.”

“And the American?” asked Reno.

Jay wasn't as quick with that response, but he responded. "He stayed all night, sir."

Sal and Tommy wasn't expecting to hear that. They looked at Reno.

Reno held the phone with two hands. "What do you mean he stayed all night?"

"He stayed all night, sir. We monitored her room all night, and he stayed all night. He left five hours ago, sir, just after seven this morning. My men didn't notify me until a few minutes ago. They weren't sure if it was something they should report. I assured them it absolutely was."

"Where are the ladies now?" Tommy asked.

"Still inside their rooms, sir. Sleeping it off apparently. They had a very long night."

All three men were floored. Reno didn't know what to say next. He sat the phone, face down, on the countertop.

"Tell him to send a photo, Reno," Tommy said.

But when Reno still seemed stumped for words, Sal grabbed his phone from him. "Send a picture of that motherfucker," Sal said into Reno's phone.

"Yes, sir," said Jay, and Sal ended the call.

“It’s probably nothing, Reno,” Tommy said, to ease the pain he could see on his cousin’s face.

“Nothing?” Reno looked at Tommy, the only man he knew fully got him. The only man he always turned to when he was in a jam. “Why would she let him stay all night if it’s nothing, Tommy? What her ass letting him stay all night for? I get on a dance floor with some broad and she wanna kick my ass, but she let some bastard stay in her hotel room all night? Are you fucking kidding me?”

Reno’s phone dinged and Tommy and Sal hurried over to either side of Reno, the flour on their clothes and hair flying off in every direction, as they positioned themselves to see the photo too. And as soon as Reno opened the link, and they saw that handsome face with those deep-set violet blue eyes staring back at them, their collective hearts dropped. Even Sal couldn’t find the humor in that shit. He remembered like Tommy remembered how destroyed Reno was when he thought Trina was leaving him for Douglas Spencer. *And Douglas Spencer was the one in her hotel room all night?*

They all knew what that meant as Tommy began pulling out his phone. “I’ll order my pilot to get my plane ready,” he said.

But Reno was too devastated to say anything.

Sal, devastated too, helped Reno to a seat.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Earlier that morning in Paris, before the Gabrini men got the news, Douglas woke up suddenly and leaned forward. When he realized he was still in Katrina's hotel suite, he relaxed. But when he looked over beyond the empty shot glasses and bottles of gin and saw that Katrina was still passed out on the sofa, he smiled. She looked angelic even in after a nightlong drunk. She still looked hot. And he was getting horny as hell just watching her. Because he knew the deal. He living in fucking Hollywood. He knew if he was that kind of man, he'd be all over her. He'd take full advantage tapping that tight ass for hours on end. He'd convince himself that maybe that was why she invited him in for a nightcap in the first place. Maybe she didn't want a nightcap, she wanted a *night-tap*. Maybe after Gabrini fell ill and she went back to him, he got physically better but didn't change his neglectful ways. Douglas didn't know the true answers to any of that. But he knew he wasn't that kind of man.

He looked at his watch to see what time it was, but he couldn't focus his eyes well enough to see anything but a blur of numbers. When he pulled out his phone and realized it was

almost seven a.m., he knew he had to get out of there. He had meetings to attend and deals to make. He wasn't in Paris for the fun of it.

He got up and went over to Katrina. He knew he should have awakened her, but she was sleeping so peacefully. But he wasn't about to tip out with her still asleep on that couch. No way was he not leaving her more comfortable than he found her.

That was why he lifted her up off that couch, cradled her in his arms, and carried her to the bedroom. While still cradling her, he pulled by her covers and put her to bed. He stood there several seconds, staring at her. Gabrini didn't know how fortunate he was. What Douglas would give to have a woman he adored.

But he knew Katrina didn't play that shit. But if she ever wised up and left Gabrini for good, she knew where to find him.

But he didn't fuck around with married women. At least not lately. And he wasn't going backwards, not even to have Katrina. He stared at her a few moments longer, and then he left.

Five hours later, Trina awakened to loud knocks on the door of her suite. She threw the covers off of her still fully clothed body and attempted to stand up. But her head started swimming. She had to slow her roll. When she did manage to get up, she made her way to the door.

“Who is it?” she asked with a hoarse voice. *What time was it*, she wondered. After clearing her throat, she asked again, but this time louder. “Who is it?”

“Who do you think?” It was Gemma’s voice. “Open up!” She opened the door.

“You’re still asleep?” Grace asked as they crossed the threshold. “We thought,” she added until she saw the shot glasses and gin bottles.

Gemma saw it all too. “What in the world is going on here?”

“What do you mean?” Trina asked as she closed the door.

They motioned toward the table. Trina saw it and yawned. “I haven’t cleaned up yet.”

“Please don’t tell us he’s still here,” Grace said.

Trina was still in her sleep fog. “What? Who’s still here?”

Gemma and Grace, both alarmed that, in typical Trina fashion, she didn’t out and out deny it, hurried toward the back of the suite looking for him. Trina went and sat down on the sofa. When they came back up front and plopped down in the chairs, she shook her head. “Now y’all know good n’ well I don’t have no man up in this bitch.”

“So you’re telling us you did all of this all by yourself?”

“He came in for a nightcap. Yes, he did. But he was a total gentleman.”

“What happened?” asked Gemma.

“What do you mean what happened? Nothing happened. We talked.”

“About what?” asked Grace.

“He asked me how was I really doing. I told him I been okay. He says just okay? Then he implied I was just okay because Reno must be cheating on me again.”

“Again?” asked Grace.

“I set his ass straight. I told him Reno was no cheater, I didn’t care what press reports or any of those heifers out there said.”

“What did he say to that?”

“He acted as if I was protesting too much. He said I didn’t have to convince him. He said he doesn’t have to live with Reno.”

“He’s grasping at straws,” said Gemma. “You and Reno act like zip-dang fools, that’s for damn sure, but you’ll never leave that man.”

Trina didn’t respond to that. She thought it was going to be so different after Reno fell ill, but it really hasn’t been.

“What else did you talk about?” asked Grace.

“I asked about him and if he was married yet. Stuff like that. He said nope.”

“Why not?” asked Grace. “A great looking guy like him?”

“He said his standards are too high.”

Grace and Gemma glance at each other. Then they looked at Trina. “You know what that means,” said Gemma.

“Girl bye!” Trina didn’t even want to hear that *he’s nuts about you* crap. “Then we got drunk and toasted a lot.”

“To what?” asked Grace.

“Friendship,” said Trina.

“You said earlier he was a total gentleman. How do you know that if you were drinking this heavily?”

“Because when he thought I was passed out drunk,” said Trina, “I was wide awake.”

“Wide awake? You can fake being passed out that good?”

“Yep.”

This fascinated Gemma. “How Tree?”

“When we first got married, Reno taught me how. In case I got into any tough spots. It’s a lesson you never forget.”

Gemma smiled and shook her head. “Reno taught his brand-new bride how to pretend to be passed out. Some family we married into,” she added, and they all laughed.

“But what I don’t understand is why would you pretend to be passed out in the first place?” asked Grace.

“Were you testing him?”

Trina nodded. "That's exactly what I was doing."

"But why would you need to test a man if he's only a friend?"

Gemma was impressed with Grace's comeback. "Right," she said, agreeing.

Even Trina hadn't expected her to go in that direction. But she nodded. "I get your point. But I wanted to see if he was a true friend, or somebody just looking for some bed action."

"And your verdict?"

"True friend," said Trina. "He even put me to bed without once taking advantage. He's a good man."

"Not according to the press," said Grace. "He has a trail of broken hearts if you listen to the press."

"Since I don't listen to the press, I can only go by what I know. And in my view? He's good. I could be wrong," she added just as knocks were heard on her door. "Who is it now?" she said frustratingly as she stood up. "I haven't even showered yet."

"Maybe he's coming back for more," Gemma asked.

"More of what?" Trina glanced back as she walked.

“Riveting conversation,” said Gemma, and they all laughed.

But when Trina saw who was at her door, she frowned. “What does he want?”

“Who?”

“That kid from last night. Laurent?”

He was the one who liked Grace. “What is he doing here?” she asked.

Trina looked around and saw that she had left her purse on the table by the door. Once she eyed it, she opened the door. “Hello, Laurent.”

“Trina, hello.” His French was heavily-accented, but she could make out all his words. “My brother asked me to come by on his behalf.”

“Oh really now? And why is that?”

“To make sure you are doing okay.”

Trina knew that was bullshit. Why would his brother care how she was doing? “Come on in,” she said and opened the door wider.

But as soon as Laurent stepped across the threshold, he quickly slammed the door shut and pulled out a knife. “Okay,” he said as he looked from Trina to Grace and Gemma and back to Trina. Which made Trina know he’d been scoping out the place.

She tried to move closer to him, but he flung that knife in her face and backed her up against the foyer table. “Do not play with me, madame. I want all the money,” he said.

“That’s what your brother asked you to come and do?”

“He knows nothing of my plan. He will kill me if he finds out. This is my invention.”

“You robbing us at knifepoint is your doing?”

“Yes. Now stop talking,” he said as he pulled out a white trash bag. “Put all the money in this bag.”

Trina shook her head. “I know better than this.”

“Do as I say or I will start chopping off heads!”

“Alright alright,” Trina said swiftly. The only thing worst than a nervous man with a knife, she felt, was a calm woman with a gun. Which she quickly became when she grabbed her purse from off of the foyer table, as if she was about to give up her money, and then pulled out her loaded

Glock and swiftly put it to his head. “Is this the money you mean, motherfucker? Is this the money?”

He tried to back up away from her.

“Now drop that knife,” she angrily ordered, holding her gun sideways against his head. “Or I won’t chop it off, I’ll blow it off.”

He looked at the other two women in the room. When he realized they, too, had pulled out guns and had them aimed directly at him too, he frowned. “What kind of ladies are you? Who goes around with guns like this?”

“Wanna find out who?” asked Trina. “Didn’t I say drop it?”

He quickly dropped his knife. But as he was trying to apologize, Trina would have none of it.

“Coming up in my bitch trying to rob *me*?” she said, her gangster out in full force. “Oh hell no.”

She began pistol-whipping him with her Glock, and then, needing to feel flesh, she threw the gun up on the table and began beating him down with her fists, causing the young man to cry out in terror.

When Gemma and Grace saw that Trina was in full-anger mode, they knew what she was capable of. They hurried over to rescue the thieving fool. But by the time they got there, Trina had knocked him to the floor, was straddling him, and was beating the shit out of him. They had to pull her off to save his life.

“Trying to rob me?” Trina was yelling as she kicked him. “Get the fuck out of here. Get the fuck out of here!”

“Get him out, Gem,” Grace said as she held Trina back, “before she kills that boy.”

“Come on, you fool,” Gemma said as she helped him to his feet, opened the door, and threw him out into the hall. “Run and tell that if you want to,” she warned him. “There’s a whole lot more where that came from. Understand me?”

“Yes. A thousand percent. Kilos and kilos of understanding.”

“Just get out of here,” she ordered, and the battered and bruised young man, his empty white bag still in his hand, ran for his life.

When Gemma made it back into the room, she closed the door and leaned against it. And then she, Grace, and Trina

burst into laughter. “You scared the shit out of that boy,” Gemma said.

“That boy?” asked Grace. “She scared the shit out of me.” They laughed at that too.

But when the laughter died down, Trina exhaled. Because she wasn’t in a good place. Not that she was thinking about that French fool who had the nerve to try her like that. But she couldn’t seem to stop thinking about another man. And the problem: his name wasn’t Reno.

“I’m going to take a bathe,” she said.

“We’ll be downstairs in the restaurant,” said Gemma. “I’m starved.”

“When aren’t you starving, Gemma?” asked Grace.

“And don’t gain a pound,” agreed Trina. “While me, on the other hand,” she added, and they laughed. Trina was the most curvaceous of all three of them, but all three of them, if you were to ask their husbands, had the perfect figure for them.

“We’ll be downstairs,” said Grace, “or we won’t ever see the sights. I want to see Paris in the daytime too.”

“Here here,” said Gemma. Then she looked at Trina.
“Just don’t take all day,” she added, and they left.

But after they were gone, Trina closed the door and just stood there thinking. Why did she let Spencer come up to her room? Why did she do the kind of shit she’d kick Reno’s ass for doing? What was she thinking? Had it gotten that bad again?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

They left Vegas by eleven pm, which was eight am Paris time. They arrived in Paris twelve hours later, which was eight pm Paris time. Reno had ordered Jay Mollett and his security detail to arrange for a car at the airfield and then for Jay and his crew to focus their attention on Douglas Spencer. Their work was done watching the Gabrini ladies. The Gabrini men would take over from there. And when they deplaned there was the car: a Peugeot 508 SW waiting for them.

Reno frowned. “This the best they can come up with? A fucking station wagon? This some bullshit!”

“Who cares, Reno?” asked Tommy. “It’s a car. It’s what they like in this town.”

“I’m with Reno on this,” said Sal. “I didn’t even know they still made station wagons. This looks like somebody’s grandma car.”

Tommy rolled his eyes. They were actually complaining about a rental car. Who complains about a rental

car? “Let’s just go,” he said, getting in on the front passenger seat.

But Sal frowned. “Wait a minute. Who’s driving?”

“Who do you think?” Reno said as he got in behind the wheel.

Sal began to panic. “Tommy, take the wheel. Tommy, take the wheel. Tommy, take that wheel! We’ll end up in the Seine river fooling with this fool.”

“Man, I been driving before Tommy knew what driving was,” said Reno. “What you talking?”

Sal shook his head and got in the backseat. “Reno, have you ever drove in Europe before, or did you always have drivers?”

“I’ve driven everywhere before,” Reno bragged as he sped away. “Wow. It feels weird the way the steering wheel on the wrong side.”

“Oh lord,” said Sal.

“I mean how you supposed to drive with the steering wheel pulling you the wrong way?”

Tommy laughed, but Sal wasn’t amused. “It’s not pulling you any way. You have to drive the car,” said Sal.

“Just drive the car.”

“What you think I’m doing?”

You better not kill me, Reno. Gemma will kill your ass you kill me.”

“Sure she’ll kill me?” Reno was looking into the rearview mirror at Sal rather than at the road. “She’ll throw me a parade I take you off her hands.”

“Watch out!” Sal cried out and Reno, who had eased over into the wrong lane, had to swerve to avoid an oncoming car.

“What’s wrong with these people?” Reno asked, recovering. “They drive stupid.”

“No, you drive stupid,” said Sal, recovering too.

But even Tommy was no longer amused. “Pull over, Reno.”

“What pull over?”

“Pull over.”

When Reno had to swerve again, barely missing another car, he got the message. And pulled over.

“Thank-you Jesus,” said Sal. Reno frowned at him through the rearview mirror.

But when Tommy got behind the wheel and Reno got on the front passenger seat, Tommy didn’t drive away. He turned and looked at the two men. “How are we going to handle this?”

“What do you mean? Once the guys find Douglas Spencer I’m going to break his neck. But first I’m going to break Trina’s.”

“What good will that do if he’s won Trina’s heart again, Reno?” Tommy asked him.

“Not to mention her whatever else all night long he won,” said Sal.

Reno didn’t want to even have to deal with that.

“This is what I propose,” always level-headed Tommy said. “It’s already night time here in Paris. Jay already said the girls are in their suites and retired for the night after a long day of sightseeing. My team reserved rooms for us in the same hotel. I say we stay out of sight and don’t let them know we’re in town just yet.”

Reno and Sal both frowned. “Why the hell not, Tommy?” asked Reno.

“That way,” said Tommy, “we won’t spoil their vacation.”

“Fuck their vacation!” Reno lashed out.

“Who takes a vacation without their husbands anyway?” asked Sal. “They need it spoiled.”

“How will not letting Trina know I’m onto her ass help my situation?” asked Reno.

“You’ll have a chance to see for yourself rather than accusing her without knowing what really happened in that suite. We’re their security now anyway. We know how to keep it undercover. We’ll have a chance to see how all of our spouses behave away from us. It can be very insightful if we handle it right.”

“What shit we ever handle right? Jimmy and the kids still cleaning up our mess back at the house because we couldn’t even handle cooking a meal right,” said Reno.

“*Our* mess?” asked Sal. “More like your mess.”

“Are you two onboard or not?”

“I’m on board. Didn’t say I wasn’t on board.”

“Reno?” asked Tommy.

Reno didn't know what to think. “What if it's true?” he said to the two men closest to him in this world. “What if that shit true?”

Tommy and Sal both looked at Reno. They could feel his agony. “It's not true,” said Tommy. “You know Trina don't play that.”

Reno nodded. “She wouldn't do that to me, would she, Tommy?”

“Not on your life, Reno.”

“Sal?” asked Reno. “You agree?”

Sal said nothing.

Reno and Tommy turned and looked at him. Reno knew, when the chips were down, Sal would be honest with him too. “Sal, you agree?” he asked again.

“As much as I hate to admit it,” said Sal, “but Tommy's right. Trina, for reasons nobody in their right mind could understand, loves your stank ass. She wouldn't hurt you.”

Reno nodded. “Right,” he said. “Thanks Sal,” he added, and then turned around.

Sal and Tommy glanced at each other. They knew then that Reno was scared to death. Because he rarely ever apologized.

“It’s agreed then,” said Tommy. “We stay in the shadows, at least until we see what we can see. Right? Are we on the same page?”

Reno nodded. “Yes.”

“Sal?”

“Yes, damn! You two treating me like we’re in the fucking third grade. *She love me, don’t she, Sal? We stay in the shadows, don’t we Sal? We on the same page, aren’t we Sal?* Just get on with this shit!”

Tommy laughed and turned back around. But his laughter angered Reno and Sal no end. “What’s so funny, Tommy?” Reno asked. “How can you laugh at a time like this?”

“And why are you so relaxed anyway?” asked Sal. “You don’t know what shit Grace is up to either.”

“Oh, but I do know,” said Tommy. “Grace is a good, Christian girl who wouldn’t dream of anything untoward.”

“That’s what your ass think,” said Sal. “Get the right man up in her face and she’d be sitting on *his face* in no time flat.”

Tommy looked at his younger brother through the rearview mirror. He wanted to lash back at him for being disrespectful, but he didn’t. Because every time there was an argument about Grace, they always mentioned the fact that she divorced Tommy once, which wasn’t fair to Grace. He drove her to that point with his neglectfulness. But he wasn’t going there with them. He didn’t want to keep fighting that same old battle that had nothing to do with anything anymore.

“Let’s see what we can see,” he said instead, and got them back on the long road ahead of them.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The next morning, the guys were freshly bathed and shaved and in their business suits parked across the street from the hotel. They were able to watch with binoculars as the ladies were having breakfast inside the glass-enclosed restaurant. But it was only Grace and Gemma.

“Look how they’re dressed,” said Sal as he watched them. “Like movie stars or something. Like they wanna attract male attention.”

“They look nice,” said Tommy. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Text Grace, Tommy,” said Reno, who was looking through the binoculars, “to see if she’ll mention where Tree ass at.”

“And why can’t you simply text Trina yourself?”

“Because you text Grace every hour on the hour anyway. If I suddenly start texting Tree, she’ll know something’s up. I just wanna know why she’s not downstairs having breakfast with Grace and Gem. I wanna know where she’s at.”

“You know where she’s at,” said Sal. “In the bed asleep like she always is. Her ass don’t get up before noon.”

“That’s a motherfucking lie,” said Reno and he and Sal went back and forth.

Tommy texted Grace. And then watched her after he sent it. “She’s checking it now,” he said as Grace pulled out her phone.

When Grace saw it, she immediately text him back. After she sent it, Tommy read it. “Having breakfast at hotel restaurant with Gem. Tree on her way down. Plan to go on boat ride today. Luv you. And she sent a heart emoji,” Tommy added.

But still no Trina a few minutes later and even Grace and Gemma began to get concerned.

“Where are you?” asked Grace as she text Trina again. “Are you coming?”

“She said she was heading out when you last text her,” said Gemma.

“But that was ten minutes ago. It doesn’t take that long to come downstairs.”

“True that,” said Gemma. And then she and Grace looked at each other because they both could sense something wasn’t right. Trina didn’t give out platitudes. If she said she was about to leave her suite, she meant it. Grace paid for their breakfast at the restaurant kiosk, and then made their way to the elevators.

“Looks like they’re going to get Trina now,” said Tommy.

“More like to wake her ass up,” said Sal.

“This shadow shit ain’t working for me,” said Reno. “I been in Paris since last night and haven’t seen my wife yet. I wanna see Trina’s eyes. I’ll know what shit went down when I see her eyes.”

“You’ll see her eyes,” said Tommy. “Stop worrying.”

But as the women went upstairs to Trina’s suite, they were the ones worried. Because the door to Trina’s suite was slightly ajar, which was nothing like Trina at all. She knew better than that.

Gemma pushed the door open further. “Trina?” she called out as they slowly entered the suite. But they didn’t

have to get any further than the front of the suite to see furniture overturned.

Grace frowned. “What on earth,” she said when they saw the mess.

But when they looked toward the hall and saw what looked like blood, and that it was everywhere on those walls, as if a massively violent struggle had occurred, their hearts dropped in fear and they nervously pulled out their weapons.

“Trina?” they started calling out as they searched the entire suite. “Trina!” But nobody was there.

“Where is she?” cried Gemma. “What do we do?”

“I’m calling Tommy,” said Grace. “If he’s got security on us like Trina claimed, this is the time we need them.”

Outside in the car, Tommy’s phone began ringing. “It’s Grace,” he said as he answered the call and placed it on Speaker. “Hey, babe, what’s up?”

“Trina’s in trouble, Tommy,” Grace said anxiously and Reno was out of the car and running toward the hotel. “There’s blood in her suite and furniture overturned. She’s in trouble, Tommy!”

Sal and Tommy were right behind Reno and were jumping out of the Peugeot, too, and running toward the hotel's entrance.

“Should we call the Police?” Grace was asking. “Or is Security here?”

“No cops. That'll only slow us down,” Tommy said. “Just stay where you are,” he added, as they ran.

Within a minute, the Gabrini men were running off of the elevator on the fortieth floor and running down the corridor where Grace and Gemma were standing outside of Trina's suite. The fright on their faces was undeniable.

They had fully expected to see the security detail they thought Tommy had in place running to their aid. Instead, to their utter amazement, they saw their husbands!

“Sal?” asked Gemma.

“Tommy?” asked Grace.

But Reno pushed past them both and ran into the suite with his gun in his hand. They all went inside the suite too. But it was Sal who noticed that a type of paste covered the entrance door's lock.

When they saw the state of that suite, and the amount of blood, they all grew faint.

“Tree?” Reno was crying out. “Trina?!”

“Did you call her phone?” asked Tommy. Even he was could barely control his fear.

“Yes, we called it,” said Gemma. “But it’s down there.”

They looked and saw that Trina’s phone was lying just outside of the bedroom, covered in blood.

Now there was no doubt in anybody’s mind. No more excuses. No more yes, buts. Trina went nowhere without her phone. And all that blood.

Trina was in trouble.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

They all were in a state of panic by now, including Tommy, but it was Reno who took charge and settled everybody back down. He was breathing heavily and fighting back panic with all he had for the sake of Trina.

“We got to think this through,” he was saying as he was moving, unable to stay still. “She needs us to think this through. I need to know everything that happened since she’s been in Paris. And I mean everything.”

“There was an attack yesterday morning,” said Grace. “That was the biggest thing.”

All three men looked at Grace in shock. “*An attack?*” asked Tommy. “You never told me anything about an attack.”

“What happened?” asked Reno.

“One of the French guys that walked us back to our hotel our first night in town came back the next morning and tried to rob us.”

“*What?*” Tommy couldn’t believe it.

“Keep going,” Reno said anxiously.

“He came into Trina’s room and pulled a knife on us.”

Sal looked at Gemma. “Why wasn’t I told?” he asked his wife.

“Because we all had guns on him and because Trina beat his ass,” said Gemma. “There was nothing to tell. He was a nobody. Scared out of his skin. He couldn’t get away from us fast enough.”

“Not so fast that he couldn’t rig that door,” said Sal.

They all looked at him. “Rigged the door?” asked Reno.

Sal walked them over to the entrance door and showed them the paste on the lock. “It’ll close,” he said, closing it, “but it pops back open, but not enough to be noticed.”

He demonstrated it, and he was right.

Reno looked at Grace and Gemma. “Who’s this motherfucker?” he asked.

“His name is Laurent,” said Grace. “All we know about him is that he works at a restaurant we visited.”

“Take us to that restaurant,” said Reno, and they all hurried out of the suite, removing the paste, putting a *do not disturb* sign on the door, and closing it shut.

On the elevator, Tommy and Sal had their arms around their wives, but their bodies were pressed against Reno, who stood in the middle of both men. They knew he was in a state of devastation. They knew they had to hold him up.

And they all rode down in silence.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Reno's phone began ringing as they drove to the restaurant. He answered quickly. Could it be Trina calling? "Hello? Hello?" He was overly-anxious.

But Mick Sinatra, the boss of all mob bosses in America and abroad, was not. "Good morning. It is still morning in Paris, is it not?"

Reno exhaled. *Where was his wife???* "It's still morning. But not such a good one. Somebody snatched Tree, Uncle Mick."

There was a definite sigh of anguish on Mick's end. "Yes. I heard."

Gemma and Grace looked at each other. He heard? *Already?*

"Need me to get some men there?" Mick asked.

"I'll never say no. We need all the help we can get until we find Tree."

"Consider it done. I already ordered Dommi to get to Vegas to oversee the family as a just in case."

“That’s good to know. Jimmy’s got that role now, but it’ll be good to have Dommi there too.”

“What about Thomas’s children?”

Reno wanted to shake his head. Mick was always more worried about Tommy and his family than anybody else. At least that was how it seemed to everybody else in the family. “Amelia was in L.A. She’s sending Hammer’s plane to pick them up as we speak. We just don’t know what happened here. Who would wanna harm Tree?”

“Everybody,” said Mick, “and nobody. You know that.”

Reno knew it. But he was having a hard time accepting it.

“If it drags on,” Mick said, “I’ll be there.”

Everybody in the car were impressed and thrilled to hear that! “Thanks, Uncle Mick,” said Reno, truly grateful.

“But Trina’s resourceful,” added Mick. “It won’t drag on.”

Reno had forgotten until that statement that Mick once had his eyes on Trina, too, and would have staked a claim if she didn’t belong to Reno. But she belonged to Reno. And

everybody, including those fucking kidnappers, had better remember that.

Mick ordered them all to “*get those bastards,*” and then he ended the call.

Grace was still puzzled. “How in the world did he find out so fast?” she asked.

“Because he already got men here,” said Sal. “Don’t buy that dog and pony show Uncle Mick always putting on when he calls out of the blue like this. I guarantee you as soon as Reno’s plane took off with you, Gem, and Tree onboard, he had his Paris team already on alert.”

“I didn’t know he had a Paris team,” said Gemma.

“He has a team in every country,” said Sal. “Believe that.”

“But how did he know we were going to Paris?” asked Gemma. “We didn’t even tell you guys until the night before.”

“He got spies,” said Sal. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

“Yeah, he got spies alright,” said Reno. “Spies named Tommy.”

Everybody looked at Tommy, who was closest to Mick than anybody in the family. But Tommy said nothing. And their rental car arrived at the restaurant that was within walking distance of the hotel.

The place was filled with the brunch crowd when they walked in, which caused them to stand in place and try to find it. It was Grace who saw him first.

“There he is!” she said as she pointed across the room.

Gemma saw him, too, and began hurrying, along with Grace and the men, to the table where Laurent, in his full waiter uniform, was writing down an order. He didn't see them until they were almost at his table. But when he saw them, he left no doubt in their minds of his guilt. He dropped the pad and pen he was writing with and took off running. And all of the Gabrinis, with Reno taking the lead, began running behind him.

But Tommy pulled Grace back, and with her hand in his hand they ran for the front exit instead.

Laurent was younger and faster, and he was easily outpacing the Gabrinis. But not by much. Reno was keeping pace. There was no way that kid was going to get away from him before he gave them some information that would lead

him to Trina. That robbery attempt and Trina's kidnapping were related. Reno could feel it in his bones. Trina was in trouble. She was hurt if that blood was any indication. Reno felt as if his heart was going to explode if he didn't catch that kid.

Laurent ran through the restaurant's kitchen, where the staff was shocked to see such speed in their midst.

“Qu'est-ce qui t'arrive, Laurent,” cried the chef.
“Arrête de courir si vite!”

But the chef and his staff were even more surprised when the Gabrinis came tearing through that kitchen running just as fast as Laurent. They yelled French profanity when pots and pans began dropping from the hands of the staff the Gabrinis were running into, and just-prepared meals went flying across the room. The chef had never seen such outrageousness.

But manners were the last thing on Reno's mind as they ran through the kitchen, down a corridor, and out of the back door that led into an alley so narrow Reno's body ran out of the door and bumped against the wall.

By the time Gemma and Sal ran into the alley, too, Reno was nearly halfway up the alley.

But Laurent was much farther ahead because he knew where he was going. At the end of the alley and across the street and he'd be in a park where he could get lost in a sea of tourists. He just had to get there!

But he didn't quite make it. Because as soon as he ran out of the alley, that Peugeot Reno hated so much pulled in front of the alley and knocked him on his ass. Laurent tried to get up, to regain his momentum, but Reno was already upon him and grabbed him up.

Sal ran up and grabbed him, too, and they flung him into the backseat of the car and got in on either side of him. Gemma squeezed on the front seat with Tommy and Grace. Tommy sped away.

Reno punched Laurent twice on the jaw for making them run after his ass. But because Laurent was still bruised from the punches Trina had put on him during his attempted robbery a wound was opened up on his face, causing him to bleed. But he was determined to play the fool anyway. "I know not what you want," he cried.

"Where is my wife?" yelled Reno. "Where's Trina?"

"I know not what you want," Laurent cried again.

But Reno wasn't playing with his ass. He pulled out his loaded gun and pressed it in a place he knew the young man prided: right against his balls. "Both get blown off," he said, "if you don't tell me what happened to my wife."

"Tell the man, Laurent," yelled Gemma from the front seat. "Just tell him the truth!"

"I did what I was told to do," said Laurent, crying sincere tears now. "Please don't harm me. I did what I was told to do."

"What were you told to do? To kidnap my wife?"

Laurent looked at Reno. "To kidnap? I kidnapped no one. I was to go to her suite under false pretense and then, when she opened the door, I was to place paste against the lock. That was all I was ordered to do."

"Why?" asked Reno.

"He did not say why."

"What fucker ordered you to do something like that and you just do it without asking questions?" asked Sal.

Laurent didn't say. It was obvious he was afraid to say.

Reno pressed the barrel of his gun harder against the young man's balls. "Who ordered you to do it?"

“I know not his name,” said Laurent, “but I took a photo of him should I need it.”

Reno and Sal looked at each other. Tommy glanced at them both through the rearview.

“Show me,” said Reno.

Laurent pulled out his phone, pulled up the photo, and showed it to Reno and Sal. It wasn't the same photo they had been sent back in Vegas, but it was the same man.

Sal was stunned. He looked at Reno. “Douglas Spencer?” he asked.

As soon as Tommy heard the name, he was on his phone to Jay Mollett, who was tasked with finding and then following Douglas Spencer.

But Reno was still puzzled. “Why would Doug Spencer order you to rig the door to my wife's suite?”

“He did not say why,” Laurent insisted. “I swear to you he did not say why.”

“Then why would you do it if he was a stranger to you?” asked Sal.

“I hate to admit it,” said Laurent, “but I needed the money badly and he was willing to pay well enough for me to

risk it.”

“How well?” asked Tommy as he ended his call.

“23,335 euro,” said Laurent.

Reno and Sal looked at Tommy. “About twenty-five thousand dollars,” Tommy said.

They were all blown away.

“What else did he say?” asked Reno.

“Nothing else, sir. He told me to put the paste on the lock and leave.”

“But you tried to rob her,” said Grace as she turned around and looked at Laurent.

Laurent looked down. “Yes, madame. You are correct. For that I am ashamed. But that was my doing alone. He simply wanted me to provide an avenue for entry later.”

“And twenty-five grand wasn’t enough for you?” asked Sal.

But Tommy got a call back. He answered quickly. After listening, he ended the call and pulled to the side of the road. “Get rid of him,” he said.

“Shouldn’t we safehouse him just in case he knows more than he’s letting on?” asked Sal.

“I’ve got a crew behind us. They’ll pick him up.”

Sal looked at Tommy. “You got a crew? Following our asses?”

“Protecting our asses, yes,” said Tommy. “Get rid of him.”

But Reno wasn’t about to let the opportunist just walk away scot-free. “This is for putting my wife in harm’s way. This is for that attempted robbery you tried on my wife,” said Reno, and then he shot Laurent in the balls so unexpectedly that it caused everybody in the car to jump. The ladies even let out a surprised scream.

Laurent bent over in screams.

But Reno wasn’t fucking around. “If you go to the cops about anybody associated with me,” he said into Laurent’s ear, “I’ll be back to finish the job. You feel me?”

Laurent was nodding his head as if he could dislodge it. “*Oui, oui,*” he was saying repeatedly as he held his bleeding balls with a face of pure agony. “*Oui.*”

Sal opened the door, got out, and then Reno kicked Laurent out of the car. Then Sal hopped back in. “You didn’t have to shoot him, Reno,” yelled Sal as soon as he closed the door. “Are you out of your fucking mind?”

“Yes!” screamed Reno. “Wouldn’t you be if it was Gemma?”

Sal couldn’t argue with that. Tommy couldn’t either as he glanced at Reno through the rearview.

“Yes,” said Sal. “I would be too.”

Then as soon as his backup crew rolled up, Tommy sped away.

“Where are we going?” asked Grace.

“One guess,” said Tommy. But nobody had to guess. They knew where they were going.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It was an exclusive club in the 7th arrondissement of Paris and Reno left them all in the dust as they hopped out of the Peugeot and made their way into the club's lobby. Because the maître d knew all the members, he immediately knew something wasn't right when Reno hurried up to his podium. He spoke English flawlessly, but before he could speak anything, Reno was already speaking as he hurried to the podium. "Doug Spencer," he said. "Where is he?"

"Welcome to—"

"Where the fuck is Doug Spencer? What are you welcoming me for? I need to see Doug Spencer!"

When Tommy, Sal, and Grace and Gemma hurried in, the maître d looked beyond Reno. Because there was a face he recognized. "Mr. Gabrini, welcome back," he said with a smile on his face. But Tommy could tell his eyes were begging for assistance.

"Hello, Maurice," said Tommy. "I see you've met my cousin." There was some question that Reno could actually be

their brother, given their crazy-ass family, but it was never proven to be a fact.

“So you know this gentleman? I did not realize he was —”

“We need to see Douglas Spencer,” said Tommy, cutting him off, but with a smile. “Urgently.”

The maître d knew Tommy was no drama king like the man beside him. And if Tommy said it was urgent, it was urgent. “Right this way, sir,” he said and began escorting them into the club.

But as soon as Reno spotted Douglas at a wall table with a young lady, he broke away from the group again and hurried to his side. Tommy and Sal, fearing the worst, hurried behind him. But not before Tommy told Grace and Gemma to wait there.

Douglas was laughing it up with the woman, as if he was innocent as air, but Reno wasn't buying that act for a second. As soon as he got to that table, and before Tommy and Sal could stop him, he grabbed Douglas by his suitcoat lapels and flung him up on his feet.

But Douglas, a scrapper himself, grabbed onto Reno and the two men began scuffling for position so forcefully that they both fell over a separate table, causing the occupants to scream and scatter.

Douglas's bodyguard, who was at a nearby table, ran over and grabbed Reno from behind, attempting to pull him away from his boss. But Sal and Tommy ran over and grabbed the guard from behind and attempted to pull him away from Reno. But the two titans refused to let go of each other as the crowd in the usually staid club were appalled by the action, and by the inaction of their maître d.

The maître d had already ordered the wait staff to get security, but that was as far in the weeds as he was going to get. Those were two powerful men in that battle, men who were on the club's board of directors and could cost him everything at the drop of a hat. He was staying out of it.

But Douglas was confused when Reno kept asking him about Katrina. "Where's my wife?" he kept asking him. "What have you done to my wife? I saw that blood motherfucker. Where's my wife?" Reno said with clenched teeth as he and Douglas remained locked together in a death-grip embrace.

But when Reno mentioned blood, and kept asking about Katrina's whereabouts, Douglas realized that something horrific had apparently happened to Katrina. And Reno was blaming him. Knowing he wouldn't be getting any answers in this tug-of-war, he gave in. "Let's take it to my private lounge," he said. "I'll answer your questions there."

Reno had the upper hand by now, as Douglas was on his back on the table, and Reno wanted the answers while he had him where he wanted him. But Tommy pulled him back. "Let's get it out of public view."

"I'm not going to any private lounge of his," said Reno.

"Then let's take it to my private lounge," Tommy said to Reno.

When Tommy made the suggestion, Reno was surprised that Tommy had such a lounge, but it was enough for Reno to give in too. He let go.

Douglas waved off his bodyguard as Tommy called over Grace and Gemma, Douglas excused himself from his brunch date, and the entire party made their way to Tommy's private lounge inside the club.

When they all got inside, and the door was shut, Reno, like the bulldog he was, was right back in Douglas's face. "What did you do to my wife?" he asked him.

"I didn't do anything to your wife. Is Katrina alright?"

"I'm not falling for your bullshit, Spencer. We got a witness. We got that French kid you paid all that good money to boobytrap the lock on my wife's suite."

Douglas frowned. "I paid *what*? What are you talking about? What lock? Please tell me what has happened to Katrina."

Tommy and the others could see the distress in Douglas's eyes. But all Reno saw was how Douglas almost became the man who busted up his marriage. He was still on position one.

Gemma, the lawyer, took over the questioning. "You didn't pay Laurent to put some sort of paste on Trina's suite door lock?" she asked Douglas.

"Absolutely not," said Douglas. "Why would I pay someone to do such a thing?"

It was beginning to sound like a good question to Gemma and the rest of the Gabrinis. Even Reno was

beginning to have his doubts. But he pressed on. “Somebody snatched her from her room,” said Gemma. “And it was a mighty struggle.”

“And there was blood?” asked Douglas.

“Your ass know it because you paid to have it done.”

“I didn’t pay anybody to have anything done and I would appreciate you stop accusing me of something I couldn’t fathom doing and focus on getting your wife back. Because as much as I hate to admit it, I don’t have her.”

Reno believed him. Instantly he saw what the others had already seen. This man was not going to kidnap a woman to be with him. It was absurd on its face. “That’s what we were told,” said Reno.

“By whom?”

“A French waiter by the name of Laurent,” said Grace. “He was one of the men who walked us to our hotel that same night you walked Trina to her suite.”

“And stayed all night,” added Reno.

“I met that young man that night for that brief moment and never saw him again. I didn’t order him, I didn’t

commission him, I didn't hire him to do anything for me or anybody else whatsoever. He is a liar if he says otherwise."

"He has your photo," said Reno.

"I'm not bragging, but getting my photo is as easy as a click of the mouse. And that young man heard Katrina call my name that night."

"That's true," said Gemma.

"I am telling you, Gabrini, I do not have Katrina. You are on the wrong scent."

Reno knew in that moment that they'd been had. Reno grabbed a chair and threw it violently against a wall.

Tommy was calling his security chief in Paris and ordering him to torture the truth out of Laurent, and to withhold any further medical treatment for his serious injury until he told them where they could find Trina Gabrini. "Go hard," Tommy said. "We need a confession."

Jay Mollett voiced his understanding and Tommy ended the call.

"Why would that asshole lead us on this wild goose chase?" asked Sal. "His ass knew Doug Spencer had nothing to do with it."

“But he knew Doug Spencer liked Trina,” said Gemma, “just from his body language with her that night perhaps.”

“But why?” asked Sal. “Why?”

“Maybe he did what he did for his own purposes and decided to use Douglas’s name to buy him some time,” said Grace. “He never expected Reno to react so decisively.”

“That could be it. Or it couldn’t be. We just don’t know shit at this point. We know nothing at this point,” said Sal, frustrated too.

Reno rubbed the back of his neck as he paced the private room in a club Grace didn’t even know Tommy was a member of, in a room she didn’t know he owned. Their marriage wasn’t perfection either.

But where was Trina? That was all she could think about. “Where on earth is Trina?” she said out loud. “And how could they have gotten her out of that hotel and nobody heard anything?”

“They drugged her,” said Sal. “How else?”

“No,” said Grace, shaking her head. “It wasn’t enough time.”

Everybody, including Reno and Douglas, looked at Grace. “What do you mean it wasn’t enough time, babe?” Tommy asked her.

“We called Tree and she told us she was leaving the suite and should be downstairs in two minutes. When she still hadn’t arrived ten minutes later, and she didn’t answer her phone when we phoned her again, we decided to go upstairs and check on her.”

“And the way furniture was overturned and the blood we saw,” said Gemma, “there’s no way they would have been able to fight her like they did, then subdue her, and then drug her and drag her out of that hotel in that small window of time. There’s no way.”

“Then how did they get her out of there,” asked Sal, “because it’s for damn sure she’s not in that suite anymore. I checked that mother up and down.”

“Not in the suite,” said Reno, his mind now focusing. He stopped pacing. “But in the hotel.”

Tommy was the first to catch on. “You think she didn’t leave the hotel?”

“Hell, Tommy,” said Reno, “I don’t think she left that fortieth floor. How could she, just like Grace said, and nobody heard her loud ass?”

“You believe whomever kidnapped her has a room on that same floor, and that he dragged her from her room to his room?”

As soon as Tommy spoke out loud what Reno was thinking, there was no longer any conversation to be had. Reno tore out of that lounge.

Sal looked at Douglas. “Safe-house his ass,” he said to Tommy, “until we find out who’s behind this shit.”

“You aren’t safe-housing my boss,” said Douglas’s bodyguard, but Douglas was too concerned about Katrina to fall on any formalities.

“That’s fine,” he said to Sal. “I’ll go to your safe house. Just go find Katrina.”

Sal looked at him. He saw the concern in his eyes. And it was good enough for him. He took off after Reno.

Tommy notified his security detail out front as he and the ladies, along with Douglas and Douglas’s bodyguard, all

made their way outside through Tommy's private exit in the back of his lounge.

"Where are they taking me?" Douglas asked as they walked to the car.

"My chateau," said Tommy. "Until we can make sure you aren't involved."

Gemma leaned against Grace. "I didn't know Tommy had a chateau in Paris," she said.

Grace was staring at her husband. "Neither did I," she said.

But even that didn't matter. All that mattered to Grace was bringing Trina home, safe and sound.

And that was why, after escorting Douglas and his bodyguard to get in the car with his security, and after Security frisked Douglas and his guard and then drove them away, Tommy and the ladies got into a second security car that had driven up, and sped away too, ordering the driver to catch up to Reno and Sal.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

They were so full of themselves that they didn't even bother to tie her down. They tossed her on that bed, on her stomach, like a sack of potatoes, and locked her in that room still believing she was unconscious. They were careless, but that didn't mean they weren't dangerous.

As she laid there, she remembered every second of their ordeal. She had just ended a call with Grace and Gemma, promising that she was on her way out of her suite to meet them downstairs for breakfast. But just as she was about to leave her bedroom, she heard a noise up front. It was probably the maid, she decided, but she didn't take any chances. As she made her way up front, she pulled her Glock out of her handbag and placed the gun in the pocket of the jacket she wore. If it was the maid, no sweat. But if it was something altogether different, she would reach into that pocket and handle her business.

She walked slowly down the hall toward the front of the suite. But as soon as she turned the corner that led into the living room area, a pair of heavy hands reached out from around that wall and grabbed her by both of her arms. She

tried to break free, to grab her gun, but she was virtually immobile. And then the man who held her slammed her against the wall.

As soon as she hit the wall, she could see another hand cover her mouth as they attempted to tape it and subdue her. But Trina was a fighter. And she bit the hand of the man covering her mouth with her mighty teeth, and kicked the man holding her arms with the strength of her mighty calf, causing all three of them to fall to the hallway floor with a loud thump.

Although she was still restrained and had landed on her stomach, which pained her with a severe pain, the smaller kidnapper hit his head against the hall table so violently when he fell that he started bleeding profusely.

“Bitch!” he cried out. “You bitch!”

“Just calm your ass down,” the bigger kidnapper cried out as he put his knee into Trina’s back, effectively holding her down. “Just do your job and tape her!”

Trina was trying to scream out, but the smaller crook was able to put tape over her mouth. She was still screaming, but her screams were so muted even her kidnappers could barely hear her.

Although each one had a heavy accent, it wasn't French, Trina realized, but more like a Jersey accent, or some New York borough accent. Which made her wonder if this wasn't some random robbery, but a mob snatch and run.

The smaller kidnapper proved her point when he was trying to staunch the bleeding from his head and started cussing her out in American Italian, which was in a class by itself because Reno could get that way when he was angry enough. But he was blaming Trina for his injury and wouldn't let it go. And the more he cussed, the angrier he was becoming.

“Shut the fuck up!” the larger one yelled at him.

But he wouldn't let it go. “You shut the fuck up,” he yelled back. “Look what this bitch did to me.” And then, while the larger one was still restraining Trina's arms from any movement, effectively rendering her his prisoner and thereby doing his job, the bleeding man punched Trina across the jaw with a hit that didn't pack the kind of punch she was used to, but it hurt like hell. But it wouldn't have knocked a child unconscious as far as she was concerned. She'd been hit by real mobsters, the kind who packed a punch that would kill anybody twice her size. This was nothing to Trina.

But she knew she had to do something. She was outmanned and she didn't know what weapons they possessed. And thanks to Reno she knew how to play unconscious.

That was why, as soon as he hit her, she lobbed her head around as if she was punch drunk, and then acted as if she had passed out.

"That'll teach that bitch," she remembered hearing the smaller one say as if his nothing punch had showed her.

They grabbed her up, and the larger one placed her over his broad shoulders. She peeped out of one eye and saw the smaller one rifling through her purse and grabbing her wallet and pocketing it. Then he kept her purse too.

"Leave her phone," the bigger one said, "so nobody can trace her."

The smaller one searched the purse for her phone and threw it on the floor. And then they headed for the exit.

"Make sure nobody's out there," said the larger one as he began carrying Trina to the door. "And hurry your ass up!"

The smaller one hurried to the door and peeped out. When he saw that the coast was clear, he motioned to his

partner to bring her on.

What they didn't realize was that she was trying with all she had to grab her gun out of her jacket, but the way he was carrying her rendered that impossible. She just couldn't reach it. And she knew, if he realized she was trying to get to her jacket pocket, then he would look to see what all the fuss was about. Without the security of knowing that they weren't the brightest bulbs in the box, and that she might actually be able to use that Glock on their ass at some point, she stopped trying to grab it. As they carried her out of her suite and into what appeared to be another suite on the same floor, she kept her composure and waited her turn.

But now, after waiting what seemed like hours to Trina, it appeared as if her turn was upon her because the door of that bedroom where she was imprisoned was being unlocked. She already had one hand beneath her stomach, as if she had been thrown on the bed that way, but it was actually concealing the fact that it held her gun. She was ready for those bastards.

When they first walked in, they stood at the foot of the bed watching her. She couldn't look to see if they were armed, so she knew she couldn't make a move that would give

them the advantage. So she waited. And listened to their sorry asses.

“So that’s Reno Gabrini’s old lady.” It was the larger one talking. She could tell by the heavier sound of his voice. “That’s a good-looking dame.”

“She’s no better looking than all these Italian good-looking dames running around America,” said the smaller one. “Why couldn’t he marry a good-looking Italian girl and have Italian children he can leave all that money to? Keep it in the family like a real man.”

“What are you nuts? Gabrini’s Italian, you idiot. That means his children are Italian too.”

“Half-Italian. Half-breeds don’t count.”

“Stop being ridiculous,” said the larger one. But then Trina heard him sigh. She knew that kind of sigh like she knew her name. He was getting horny. “Wouldn’t mind plugging that hole before we have to turn her over. See what sweet juice she got between those thighs that kept a man like Reno Gabrini around her ass all these years.”

“What are you talking? He said hands off. He said we fuck her we’re dead.”

“And how’s he gonna know? He pay us what he owes us and we’re gone. We’re back in the States before he has a chance to hit that ass himself. How’s he gonna know what we did to this *moulinyan*?”

Trina knew that word too. Which, to her, all the more confirmed the fact that they were American Italians. There was already no doubt about that. But were they mob? And who was this guy that told them hands off?

Then she heard the larger one ask the smaller one what he thought.

“I think, if we’re gonna do her ass, I get to go first after this knot she put on my head. Savage beast!”

“But you don’t mind fucking the savage?” asked the larger one. “You racists are stupid.”

“Are we gonna tap her ass or not?” asked the smaller one.

“We are. But I don’t do leftovers. I’m going first,” said the larger one, and Trina could hear them both approaching the bed. But then she heard them stop, as if they noticed something. The only thing they could have noticed

was that her arm wasn't in the position they had left it in. If that was why they stopped, she knew it was now or never.

And she was right. She was turning onto her back to aim at her captors just as they were grabbing hold of her. And when they saw that gun it became an epic battle of wills because Trina was doing all she could to pull that trigger before either of them wrestled it away from her.

And then the gun went off.

Reno and Sal were just getting off of the elevator onto the fortieth floor when they heard that single gunshot. As soon as they heard it, they ran as fast as they could, with Reno leading the pack, to where that sound was heard. They both agreed it was the room directly across from Trina's suite.

Reno leaned back and kicked the door in on his first try, and then he and Sal ran into the room.

When they ran into the room, Trina was on her knees on the bed. The smaller kidnapper was on the floor holding his bleeding arm, and the larger kidnapper was on his knees on that same floor with his arms in the air.

“She shot me!” the smaller one cried out as if he was still in a state of disbelief. “She shot me!”

But Reno was so relieved when he saw his wife in one piece and her captors under her total control that he had to stoop down to calm his racing heart back down. He thought he was going to die when he heard that gunshot. He thought he was within reach of his wife, but he was too late. To realize he wasn't too late, and she had it well in hand, had him saying a silent prayer.

Sal, too, was thrilled that Trina was okay, and motioned, with his own gun, for the two kidnappers to get over against the wall so he could frisk them.

But Reno was hurrying to Trina. He'd deal with those bastards in a moment.

And Trina, who was amazed to see that Reno was in Paris, and so relieved and happy that he was, that she lost her sense of fearlessness and reached out for him, her hands flapping like a child in need of comfort. And when he pulled her into his arms, she couldn't help it. She broke down sobbing uncontrollably.

And Reno, his heart aching with pure pain that his wife had to be put through more bullshit as if she hadn't already

seen her share, had him tearing up too. “It’s alright, baby,” he was saying as he held her. “It’s alright.”

By the time Tommy, Grace, and Gemma arrived after Sal phoned and told them what room they were in, they could hardly contain their joy of seeing Trina in one piece too.

Grace and Gemma ran to her, and group hugged her and Reno both. There wasn’t a dry eye in that group.

The security detail that had driven Tommy and the ladies to the hotel, came in at Tommy’s direction to remove the two offenders before the cops could arrive and hamper their need to know why Trina was taken in the first place.

“Take them to my chateau,” Tommy ordered them, and they took off with the two hapless kidnappers.

But Gemma could tell Grace was still kind of alarmed about yet another property Tommy apparently owned in Paris, and she knew nothing about them. But it was the age-old problem for each and every Gabrini woman: that veil of secrecy that could never be lifted. They only knew what their men allowed them to know. And that, to every one of the women, including Grace, was scary as fuck.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

While the men were in the kitchen strategizing, the ladies were sitting out on the patio of the well-fortified mansion, sipping wine and trying to make sense of it all. Mainly, who would want to kidnap Trina?

“And why would Laurent lie like that about Douglas Spencer?” asked Gemma.

“I have no idea,” said Trina. “But I know he had nothing to do with it.”

Grace looked at Trina. “What makes you so sure?”

“Because he’s not like that. If he wanted to kidnap me, why didn’t he do it the night he was in my hotel suite and thought I was passed out?”

“Good question,” said Gemma.

“Maybe he knew you were faking,” said Grace.

“Good answer,” said Gemma, and they all laughed.

“But what I don’t understand is how did they get you out of your room and across the hall without you putting up

the fight of your life? They didn't have time to drug you. At least we didn't think they did."

"They didn't drug me. One of those creeps called himself knocking me unconscious. So I pretended to be knocked out."

Gemma and Grace looked at each other and bust out laughing. "Reno taught you well, girl," said Gemma.

But then the laughter died down. "Our plans haven't quite gone the way we had hoped, have they, ladies?" asked Gemma.

"Not at all," said Grace.

"And when did the guys show up?" asked Trina. "I didn't even know they were in this country."

"Neither did we!"

"Then why were they here? To spy on us?"

"They came after one of their security chiefs told them about Douglas spending the night in your hotel suite."

"*What?*" Trina shook her head. "I should have known," she said. "I told y'all they had spies on our every move."

“You told us Tommy had spies on your every move,” said Grace. “It was more like Reno’s spies.”

Trina looked at her. “Really?”

“Tree, why are you always surprised when Reno’s worried sick about you?”

“I’m not surprised. I’m just ... I wasn’t expecting it.”

“Why not?” asked Grace. “He’s mad about you. You do realize that. Don’t you?”

Trina tried to smile it off. “I just thought it would be Tommy who went all out like that. That’s all.”

“It was Tommy too,” said Gemma, “and Sal as well. They all had people keeping eyes on us like we’re some hoes from way back that they can’t trust as far as they can throw.”

“Yet the only time one of us gets kidnapped is while they’re in control of our security,” said Grace, and they all laughed.

But then they thought about the ordeal Trina had been through, and the questions still unanswered as to why, and they curbed their enthusiasm.

While the ladies were on the patio of Tommy's chateau trying to ease back into normalcy, Reno, Sal, and Tommy were walking down into the basement of that same mansion, not as three businessmen the way they always tried to project to the world, but as three thugs with baseball bats. They were ready to kick ass and take names. No more bullshit. They weren't going to play games with either one of Trina's captors the way they got tossed around by that French asshole Laurent. They wanted the truth.

Baladerri and Rhodes, the two captors, were seated in chairs in the middle of the basement staring at the poor guy in the corner. Rhodes, whose arm and head had been bandaged up, was still in tremendous pain, but he had already been warned by Security, and knocked around a few times, to cut out the theatrics. Take his pain like a man. After another knock around, he did. And stopped with all the complaints.

Until the Gabrini men came in with their baseball bats and Reno ran up to them and took a hard swing at Rhodes first and then Baladerri, like he was fucking Hank Aaron, and he knocked both of them over their chairs. Then he threw the chairs aside and began wailing on them with the bat, causing even Baladerri, the larger one, to scream in pain.

“Kidnap *my* wife?” Reno was yelling as he beat them down. “Kidnap *my* wife?”

When the men tried to crawl away from Reno, Reno let them. His arms were tired from slinging that bat. But Sal and Tommy took over and beat them down even more, forcing them to crawl back over to Reno.

Reno started beating on their asses again, despite their pleas and their cries for mercy, until he saw fresh blood. Then he knew he couldn't go any further. He needed answers, not corpses. He tossed his bat aside.

“Get up,” he said to the two kidnapers and they quickly complied. Then one of the five guards also in the basement sat the chairs back upright, and shoved the two men by their shoulders down onto the chairs.

Reno stared at them as they nursed their wounds. Especially Rhodes, who already had injuries. But that was his own damn fault. “Who's that bum in the corner?” Reno asked him.

Rhodes looked over at the guy in the corner. The guy, Laurent, was slumped down with a face bashed in every which way from Sunday. It was seeing him, when they were first thrown into that basement, that sobered Rhodes enough to

understand the gravity of the danger they were in. Reno's beating confirmed that danger. "I don't know who that is," he said.

"What about you?" asked Reno, looking at the larger kidnapper. "You know that bum over there?"

Baladerri was quick to shake his head. "Never seen him before in my life."

Reno stared at them. He was inclined to believe them, but time would tell. "What's your name?" he asked the smaller one.

"Rhodes. Benny Rhodes."

"And you?"

"Carney Baladerri."

Reno frowned. Baladerri's accent was far more discernible than Rhodes's. "What are you Americans?"

"Yes, sir," said Baladerri, who didn't have to see some beaten-to-a-pulp bum in a corner to understand the danger they were in.

"Where from?" asked Sal.

"Jersey."

“Jersey?” Sal was surprised. “That’s Monk Paletti’s territory. What the fuck you fucking around with a Gabrini when your ass in Monk Paletti’s territory? We have an alliance with him.”

“We aren’t affiliated with him.”

“Then who are you affiliated with?” asked Sal. “What motherfucker bigger than Monk Paletti in Jersey? Because he’s got to be big. There’s no second-rate alive that would even dream of kidnapping Reno Gabrini’s wife unless they were some stupid motherfuckers.”

“We aren’t affiliated with nobody. We were here on vacation same as everybody else. Just trying to pick up girls and have some fun. We weren’t trying to do no dirty work. He approached us. We didn’t approach him.”

“Who approached you?” asked Tommy.

“The guy that paid us. Some rich asshole named Douglas Spencer.”

All three Gabrini men stared at Baladerri. It was the same name Laurent had given to them. Reno frowned. “Douglas Spencer? He’s the one that paid you?”

“He’s the one.”

“How do you know him?”

“I don’t know him. Never heard of him before he approached us in the club.”

“What club?”

“I don’t know the name of it. Just some club. He said he’d pay us twenty-five grand apiece to do this job for him. How we gonna turn that kind of money down? We’re working stiffs. Okay, we’re thieves. But we ain’t no major money thieves.”

It was the same amount of money Laurent claimed Douglas had offered him too. Reno looked over at Laurent. He was out of it. He was half dead already. He looked at one of the three security guys in the basement. “Did he give you a different name after that beat down?”

“No, sir,” said the guard. “It was Douglas Spencer the whole time. He never changed his tune, no matter what we did to him. He’s either terrified of the guy, or ...”

“Or what?” asked Sal.

“Or he’s telling the truth,” said the guard.

“Your suspicion?”

“He’s telling the truth,” said the guard.

“Any line on his brother yet?” asked Sal.

“Nothing,” said the guard. “We still have people looking for him.”

Reno looked at Tommy and Sal. All three of them had reached the conclusion that Douglas wasn't lying to them. Their intuition was never wrong, especially when all three of them had the same intuition. “Go get him,” Reno ordered, “and bring him to me.”

“Yes, sir,” said the guard as two of the five left to go to the guest house, where Douglas and his guard was holed up.

Reno looked back at Baladerri. “Describe him,” he said. “Describe Douglas Spencer.”

Baladerri began to think about it. “He was about your height,” he said, “maybe a little shorter. Wore gold-rim glasses and had a receding hairline.”

Tommy and Sal glanced at each other. That didn't sound anything like the smooth Douglas Spencer!

“He was in his fifties or sixties,” Baladerri continued, “but I don't know that for sure because that dark club could hide all kinds of lines on faces. But he talked like he was one of us.”

Reno was puzzled. “One of us? What’s one of us?”

“You know. Italian. One of us. Only his voice was very raspy and hard to understand at times.”

Reno looked at Tommy and Sal. Douglas Spencer was a lot of things, but Italian wasn’t one of them. And he was nothing like the man Baladerri just described. Which was, in a lot of ways, worst. That meant they didn’t have a clue who was behind that kidnapping.

“How much did he pay you upfront?” asked Reno.

“Ten grand,” said Baladerri. “Fifteen when we finished the job.”

“What was the job?”

“Get her in that room and then call and let him know. Then late tonight he’ll contact us to let us know where to transport her.”

“On your own phones?”

“Burner phones he gave to us that night,” said Baladerri.

“Did you call him yet?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Why the fuck not?” asked Sal.

“Because they figured they’d get in a few fucks first,” said Reno. “Trina told me what their asses were up to.”

But Baladerri knew he had to deny all. “But that’s not true,” he said. “I knew she was your wife. He told me she was your wife, and he told us hands off. We would never touch the wife of Reno Gabrini, are you kidding? We would never disrespect you like that.”

“Get the fuck out of here,” said Reno angrily. “You kidnap my wife, put her through that torture, and you don’t think that’s being disrespectful? Get the fuck out of here!”

“Let’s keep our eye on the ball, Reno,” said Tommy, sensing Reno’s growing anger. “They need to make that phone call now.”

“But what if this asshole saw us get Trina out of that hotel? What if he saw us leave with Trina and with these fools?”

“It’s a chance we have to take. What else we got?” Tommy asked.

Reno knew that was the truth too. “Okay,” he said to Baladerri. “Get him on the phone. But one false move or

word or any shit we don't like," he said as he pulled out his gun, "and you're dead."

"No questions asked," said Sal, as he pulled out his gun too.

"And if I do everything you say?" asked Baladerri. "I can get out of here alive?"

"Depends on how good you do your job," said Reno.

Baladerri knew that was the best response he was going to get. "Sal took my phone," he said, motioning toward Sal.

Sal had turned over all the he pulled from his pocket to Security. Sal motioned to one of the guards and he went and retrieved the phones.

"Remember who you're dealing with," Reno said, "when you make that call."

"And put it on Speaker," said Tommy.

Baladerri did what he was told, and then pressed the number beside the name Douglas Spencer.

After a few rings, the call was answered, although no sound was made.

“We got her,” said Baladerri.

“She put up a fight?” asked the man on the other end of the phone. Reno, Tommy, and Sal were listening closely to see if they recognized the voice. But the voice was so raspy that it seemed purposely disguised.

“She put up a big fight,” said Baladerri, “but we handled it.”

“Good. Her friends will discover her missing soon, if they haven’t already. Have you drugged her yet?”

“You told us not to until we talk to you,” said Baladerri.

“Just making sure you were following orders. Drug her around six this evening. Then leave around nine that night, and bring her to me. She’ll be out cold by then.”

“Where?” Reno mouthed to Baladerri.

“Bring her where?” asked Baladerri.

“I’ll call and let you know. But she needs to be out for at least two hours before you transport her. You have the case to put her in?”

“We got it. They think we’re the front man for a visiting band and those are our instruments. That’s how I got

that big-ass case through the lobby without much attention.”

“Okay good. After those two hours put her in there. I’ll give you the where to bring her by then. Just lay low. Order room service if you have to eat.”

“Okay. And we get paid at the drop off?”

“Yes,” said the man on the other end of the phone. And then he ended the call.

“That the same voice as the guy in the club?” asked Reno.

“The exact same raspy voice,” said Baladerri.

Baladerri looked at Reno. The guard retrieved both Baladerri’s private phone and his burner phone. And the same for Rhodes’s phones too.

“Check’em both out,” said Reno. “See if we can get some line on that guy.”

“Yes, sir,” the guard said and was leaving just as the two guards were entering with Douglas Spencer.

Douglas looked at the beaten-up guy in the corner, and then he walked over to the Gabrinis and the two other men. They knew it couldn’t be Douglas on that call because he was being escorted to see them.

“What’s this about?” asked Douglas.

Reno walked over to Laurent, and the guard escorted Douglas over there too. Reno knelt down. “Is this the guy that paid you?” he asked Laurent.

Laurent, barely conscious, looked up with swollen eyes. But the little he could see frightened him.

Reno frowned. “What are you afraid of?”

“I didn’t ... I was trying to ... I was hoping that would keep me alive.”

Sal and Tommy glanced at each other with that *what the fuck is he talking about* look on their faces.

Reno was puzzled too. “You were hoping what would keep you alive?”

“Using his name.”

“Whose name?”

“His name,” Laurent said, pointing at Douglas. “If I said his name, I thought you’d focus on him.”

Reno could hardly believe it. “Are you telling me he isn’t the man?”

“It’s the only name I had. The guy who paid me said for me to use Douglas Spencer’s name if you caught me. You wouldn’t kill me as long as they think it’s somebody else. So I used that name to save my life.”

Tommy went over to Reno. “Don’t, Reno,” he said. “We need the info.”

Reno composed his rage at Laurent. “Who’s the guy behind it then?” he asked him.

“I don’t know his name. He never gave his name.”

“But he knew Douglas’s name?”

Laurent nodded. “I don’t know how,” he said. Then Laurent was crying. “I just don’t wanna die. He said you wouldn’t kill me if I gave you a name and stuck to that name.”

Laurent’s jaw was broken and it took a lot for him to formulate words. But Reno was so tired of him that he could barely look at him. “Where did you meet this guy?”

“In the restaurant where I work,” said Laurent.

“Describe him,” said Tommy.

And Laurent described the same receding hairline guy as Baladerri described.

Reno walked back over to the two kidnappers, with the guards shoving Douglas and forcing him to follow. “What’s this about, Reno?” he asked.

“Two more people claim you were the one who paid them to kidnap my wife.”

Douglas frowned. “What people? These two?”

Reno didn’t respond. It was obvious it was those two.

Douglas looked at them. “I don’t know neither one of them.”

Reno looked at Baladerri. “Is he the guy that approached you in the club?”

Baladerri frowned. “Who? Him?”

“No, the moon,” Reno said. “I’m talking about the moon. What do you think asshole?”

“I told you how the guy that approached us looked. He looked nothing like him. Who’s he?”

Reno exhaled.

“What about Katrina, Reno? Is she okay? They won’t tell me anything.”

“Because she ain’t your problem,” snapped Sal.

But Reno had a different take. Douglas was genuinely concerned about her. He was willing to be detained for her sake. That meant something to Reno. “She’s okay,” he said.

And Douglas seemed to let out a sigh of relief. “Thank God!”

Sal looked at Reno. The fact that another man was that into his wife didn’t bother him? He would have kicked his ass if he was that into Gemma.

“Am I now free to go?” asked Douglas. “I have a premiere to attend. I’m not here in Paris on vacation. I have work to do.”

Reno nodded. “You’re free to go. But I’ll track you down like a dog in the street if it turns out you’re involved.”

“They just told you I’m not involved,” said Douglas.

“The day I rest my hat on what some fucking kidnappers tell me will be the day I hang up my hat. I’ll be in touch,” Reno added, and then the guards began escorting Douglas out of the basement.

“And Spencer?” Reno said.

Douglas turned toward Reno.

“Blab a word of any of this and it’ll be the last word coming from your mouth. Think Sal Gabrini and Mick Sinatra and all those others in between. Are we understanding each other?”

Douglas nodded. He knew how the game was played. And he and the two guards left.

“Now what?” asked Sal.

“Now we wait until the man calls,” said Reno. “And then we go and get his ass.”

“I’m putting more men on these two,” said Sal. “Something about this shit stinks to me.”

“That’s because shit stinks,” said Reno. And although he agreed with Sal, there was no other plan of action they could institute. They were at the mercy of crooks and cons.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Later that evening, Trina had been lounging in the bath tub for nearly an hour when Reno made his way into the bathroom. He put the seat down on the commode and sat on it, staring at her. Not a more beautiful woman alive to Reno. She had it all in his view: the looks, the body, the brains, the brawn. She was the total package. And although most people saw their marriage as a train wreck because of the constant drama, Reno saw it as a partnership. They fought hard and loved hard. But he knew Trina was getting tired of the fights.

It wasn't until she took another sip of wine and then looked her gorgeous hazel eyes over at him, did he say something. "How you feeling?" he asked her.

"Sore as fuck. Mad that those a-holes ruined our trip."

That was Trina too. She always told it like it was. Reno loved that about her. "If it's any consolation," he said, "I ruined theirs."

"Find out anything?"

"Yep."

Trina hated it when Reno played that secretive shit.
“What did you find out, Reno? Your ass gonna tell me.”

“They were supposed to drug you and take you to the mastermind behind that kidnapping later tonight.”

Trina was intrigued. “How do you know that? Because they told you that?”

“We listened in on the phone conversation.”

“And you didn’t recognize the voice?”

“Not at all. Sounded disguised.”

“But what if it’s a trap, Reno? What if they had that phone call planned should they get caught?”

“I thought about that. But either way, we’ll be ready for their asses.”

“But that means I have to go with you.”

She expected Reno to object vehemently. But he didn’t. He sighed, as if it was a truth he hated facing. “Yeah, I know.”

Trina looked at him. “You don’t mind me going?”

“Hell yeah I mind! But I also know you can take care of yourself just like you took care of those two assholes that

kidnapped you. How you handled that was brilliant, Tree.”

Trina loved hearing that from an alpha-alpha like Reno. “Thanks.” She decided to shoot a compliment his way too. “I’m your mini-me, Reno,” she said to him, “and don’t you forget that.”

But Reno dismissed that out of hand. “My *mini-me* my ass,” he said. “You’re my maximum-me. You’re as good as me, Tree. And you have the scars to prove it.”

Trina’s heart soared when Reno said those words.

“None of these young bitches out here can hold a candle to your skills. And you’re right. If this guy doesn’t see some sign of you in that vehicle, he might disappear on us and remain a threat to you.” Reno shook his head. “That ain’t happening. We settle this shit tonight.”

“I know that’s right,” agreed Trina.

But Reno exhaled. “They also said that the mastermind, the bastard that paid them to snatch you, was Douglas Spencer.”

Trina was shocked. “*Douglas?* Didn’t you say Laurent made the same claim?”

Reno nodded, staring at her.

“But I thought you said he was full of shit.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“But you don’t think those two kidnapping assholes are full of shit?”

Reno didn’t respond to that. He just continued staring at her. He wanted to know how far she’d go to defend Spencer.

“What are you looking at me like that for? You know good and *gotdamn* well Douglas Spencer had nothing to do with kidnapping me, and you know he had nothing to do with that robbery Laurent tried to pull.”

“Did I say he had anything to do with it? I’m just telling you that three people said his name. That’s all I said.”

“But do you believe them?”

Reno hesitated. “I believe the guy who paid those two kidnappers told them his name was Douglas Spencer. But neither one of them identified the real Doug Spencer as the man they met with. And Laurent admitted he was lying all along. He said the guy who paid him told him to use Spencer’s name. There was no way he could have been Spencer.”

Trina nodded. “I could have told you Douglas had nothing to do with this. He wouldn’t harm me.”

Reno’s temper flared. “How the fuck you know what his ass would or wouldn’t do? You don’t know him like that.”

Trina’s temper flared right back. “Don’t you talk to me like that, Reno.”

Reno was offended. “I’ll talk to you any way I damn well please. You’re my wife,” he yelled out, “and don’t you forget that!”

Trina knew she was barking up the wrong tree. Reno tolerated a lot from her, and allowed her to be herself most times, but she also knew if she pushed him too hard he’d kick her ass. Reno was nobody’s pushover. Not even hers. “What I meant to say,” she said, “is that Douglas wouldn’t harm a flea. And that includes me.”

But that response only got Reno riled up again. “A flea? Since when your ass a flea? More like a motherfucking dragon. What flea?”

Trina leaned her head back and rolled her eyes. “I married a fucking moron!” she yelled out.

“And I married a fucking queen!” Reno shot back.

Trina, not expecting that response at all, looked at him.

“It’s the hands we were dealt, baby,” he added. “Deal with it.”

Trina stared at the casino mogul. He would use those terms. But she realized in that instant why she stayed with Reno all those years. He knew how to wound her up, and he knew how to bring her back down. No man on the face of this earth knew how to handle her so masterfully because even Trina would admit she was two handfuls. A bitch on two legs when she wanted to be. But she loved her some Reno.

“You’re still a moron,” she said. Then she smiled. “But a loveable one.”

“You’re still my queen,” said Reno. “Ain’t no woman taking your throne. But you still get on my last damn nerve.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you! Some of that shit you pull be just plain wrong, Tree. If I pull half that shit you pull you’d have a hammer to my head.”

“A hammer, Reno?”

“Or a fucking gun, yes.”

“Okay, what have I done now? What are you talking about?”

“Doug Spencer.”

Trina frowned. “Doug Spencer? But you just said you don’t believe he was involved, Reno.”

“Not that shit.”

“Then what shit?”

Then Trina suddenly realized what shit, and she shook her head. “They told me that was why your ass came all this way to Paris. I should have known.”

Reno’s heart started aching just thinking about it. This was the conversation he didn’t want to have because Trina was a lot of things, but a liar wasn’t one of them. She’d tell it to him straight. Whether he liked it or not. The *not* part was what was scaring him. Because Trina wising up and leaving his stupid ass was his second greatest fear. Her or their children getting harmed was his first.

“I’m certain you wouldn’t do anything to hurt me,” Reno said to her.

“You didn’t have to come all this way to know that. I could have told you that, Reno.”

She could tell Reno didn't like that response. "What your ass haven't told me," he fired back, "is why was Douglas Spencer in your hotel room at all. What his ass doing in your room, Tree? And his ass there all night long? Are you kidding me?"

Then he looked at Trina, the woman he loved so much it sometimes made his heart hurt. "You could have told me that too. But you didn't."

Trina and Reno stared into each other's eyes. Reno had the starkest blue eyes Trina had ever seen, and every emotion were in those eyes. But the one emotion that was standing out to her wasn't the anger, although it was there in spades. But what was standing out to her was the pain. Reno was in pain. Her decision, to invite Douglas into her suite, had hurt him to his core. She could see it all over his anguished face.

Trina's eyes used to tell her story to Reno, too, but now they just stared back at him as if she couldn't believe she got saddled with a joker like him. Or they were just plain unreadable to him. What was she really thinking? Why was she really putting up with his ass? Why was he always certain

she'd never leave him when she left his ass not all that long ago? And with the same man she spent the night with!

"I wouldn't hurt you, Reno," Trina said.

"But you did, Tree. That's the thing. When I got that report about Spencer spending the night in my wife's hotel room, I nearly had another panic attack. You know I can't handle that shit. What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't thinking. I hadn't seen him since that time, and I just was inviting a friend in for a nightcap, that's all. I fell asleep anyway."

Reno's eyebrows lifted. And his hysterics returned. "*You fell asleep?* What's that supposed to mean? Are you saying his ass slept with you?"

"No, Reno. He was a perfect gentleman."

"How your ass know? You were asleep!"

"When I woke up," Trina pointed out, "he was still sitting where he was sitting before I fell asleep."

"Yeah, I'm sure he was. After he was feeling on you every which way he could."

"That man didn't feel on me one time, okay? I woke up, but he didn't know I was awake."

Reno frowned. “How do you know he didn’t know?”

“Because he didn’t. I pretended to be passed out just to see if he’d try that shit on me.”

“To see it,” asked Reno, “or to hope it?”

Trina stared at Reno with guilty eyes. Sometimes Reno could be brilliant. Sometimes he could hit the nail on the head when everybody else was still groping in the dark. He knew how to make Trina be real, even with herself. “I don’t know,” she responded honestly.

Which wasn’t what Reno wanted to hear at all. His heart dropped. “So you wanna be with this joker?”

“No! Geez, Reno! I don’t wanna be with anybody but you. Haven’t you realized that yet? But sometimes you drive me away, Reno. Sometimes I declare you act as if ...”

Reno was steeling himself. “As if what?”

“As if you can take me or leave me. And that shit hurts.”

Reno frowned. He was floored. “*I can take you or leave you?* Are you out of your fucking mind? You’re my heartbeat, Trina. If I leave you, I leave myself. I’ll never leave you.”

He left her once, for nearly a year, but that was after his son died. But that was a lifetime ago. He stood up.

When he rose to his feet, Trina didn't know what to expect from him. Was he so offended that he'd just walk out the door to deal with it alone, which was usually his way? Or would he be that knight in shining armor she always saw him as and rescue her? When he began removing his clothing, her heart soared. He was still her knight.

As Reno was undressing, rescuing her wasn't exactly what he had in mind because he was the one who was drowning. She was thinking he could take her or leave her. Was she nuts? Every man on earth would want a gorgeous, smart, take-no-bullshit woman like Trina by his side. She was the blueprint all other women copied and paste onto themselves. She was the OG. He wasn't about to leave her.

But as he was undressing, another feeling began to overtake him. Because Trina sat upright in the tub when she had been slouched down all along. But now her big breasts were revealed. Those breasts he hungered for.

And by the time he was dropping his briefs as his final act of nakedness, his sleeping penis had awakened. By the time he stepped into that tub and sat down in front of her, and

she crawled over to him and sat on his lap straddle-style, he was so aroused his penis was like a rocket ready for takeoff.

But not so fast.

He wrapped his arms around Trina and pulled her to him, causing her vagina to slide along his rock-hard rod in such a way that made both of them groan. But he wanted to kiss her first. Nobody kissed like Trina, and he missed her kiss.

And when their lips touched, he kissed her with a kiss that was meant to linger. This was no branding session like they had before she left for Paris. This was a *begging* session for Reno. He wanted back in her good graces. He wanted to let her know in no uncertain terms that he would be crushed to pieces if she left him. That Douglas Spencer was better looking than him, had more money than him, and treated her like the star she was. But even he couldn't love her the way Reno did. That was what he had to make her see.

She saw it the way he held her and kissed her. She saw it the way he lifted her up and ate her. She saw it the way he lifted her up out of that tub, carried her to the bed, and with both of them soaking wet laid her on that bed and made long, sweet love to her. He was on top of her, slowly sliding inside

of her, and then grinding on her as if he was the Sahara desert and she was water. He was drinking her up. And she was wrapped around him as a woman proud to give it up to her man. She was in tears as Reno fucked her.

And as they were cumming, Reno leaned up to look into her beautiful face. He wanted to make certain she was feeling that wonderment he was feeling too. But when he saw those tears in her eyes, and saw her smile to let him know they were tears of joy, he was overcome with emotion too.

So much so that after they came, Reno couldn't stop stroking. And Trina couldn't stop loving his every stroke. And when he kissed her again with his masterful kiss, they were at it all over again. And emotional again. But when they began to cum this second time, they could no longer show restraint. He pounded her, and she lifted to receive his pounding, and they came with a loud, wild, raucous cum.

When they had it all out and there was nothing left inside of them, Reno finally rolled off of Trina onto his back, with both of them breathing so heavily and filled with so much sweat and cum that they didn't know if they would ever breathe normally again.

But it didn't matter. They were back on the same page again.

“That's how you do that shit,” he said. “That's Reno and Trina style, baby,” he added, with his arrogant self.

And Trina, who couldn't agree with him more, grinned the grin of a woman in love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Sal and Gemma were making up for lost time too. They were in the second of the six bedrooms Tommy had in that house, and he was on top of Gemma pumping his ass off. They were holding hands above her head, and Sal was kissing her hard as he did her.

Although their moans were muted because they were kissing, they were as alive as their naked bodies. The only good thing about Doug Spencer spending the night in Trina's room was the fact that it gave Sal an excuse to disrupt that so-called girls trip and be with Gemma again. He was a ruthless mob boss who didn't believe in divided loyalties. If you were in his syndicate, your ass had to be all in. Gemma, as his woman, had to be all his. No sister wives. No brother husbands. Nothing but him and Gemma period. This wasn't as much a lovemaking session for Sal as it was a branding session again.

And he was pumping and sweating and branding her ass off.

So much so that when she came, and then he came right along with her, they nearly fell off the bed they were fucking so hard.

And when it was all over, Sal's muscular body still had enough strength to roll onto his back and take Gemma with him. She was now on top of him.

And Gemma leaned up, placed her hands on either side of his rugged face, and studied him. "I'm happy you're here," she said.

"You better be."

She smiled. "That's what I miss most. Your humility."

"What humble? I'm stating a fact of life. You better be happy to see me whenever you see me. That's a fact. I'm always happy to see you whenever I see you. That's another fact. That's how we roll. That's us. And no fucking *girls trip* is gonna change who we are."

Gemma sighed. "It wasn't meant to change who we are."

Sal needed understanding. "Then what the fuck is the point of it? Why we couldn't just come to Paris as couples?"

"We told you why. We didn't want all the drama."

“What drama? Me and you ain’t got no drama.”

“But you and Reno does. You and Tommy does. Tommy and Reno does. They say ladies have all the drama going on? Not in the Gabrini family!”

But that answer still wasn’t satisfactory for Sal. “See how your ass feel when we leave y’all asses at home and go on a boys trip next Valentine’s day. Because that’s what we all said we’re going to do.”

Gemma smiled. “World war three will break out if the three of you are alone on vacation like that.”

“Then bring it on because that’s what we’re gonna do. It’ll be the boys on the run next time.”

Gemma stared at Sal. “You aren’t kidding, are you?”

“I don’t kid and you know it.” He could see he was getting to Gemma. “That’s why you don’t start these new traditions unless you flip that shit to see how you’d feel if the shoe was on the other foot. Y’all wearing your shoes now, and it’s not a comfortable fit or we wouldn’t be in Tommy’s house waiting to meet some asshole who masterminded a kidnapping. If it had been you, I don’t know what I would have done. I nearly died when I found out they snatched

Trina. I would have died if it had been you they snatched.”
Then he pulled Gemma into his arms. “I’m not a kid anymore,
Gemma. I can’t take this shit the way I used to. I just can’t do
it.”

Gemma looked up and rubbed his hair. And she kissed
him. “Understood,” she said.

And Sal smiled. And kissed her back.

And that was all it took.

They were at it once again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Tommy and Grace were out back, on the terrace, lying on the same lounge facing each other. Tommy had an arm around Grace's waist and his other hand was intertwined with hers. He was pleased and deeply satisfied to have his soulmate with him again.

"It's strange," he said to her.

"What's strange?"

"I have to leave and go on business trips all the time. And I handle being away from you just fine. It's business. But when you're away from me, I can't take it. I can't handle it. Don't you think that's strange?"

Grace smiled. "Yes. Very. But maybe it's because you're away a lot, and I'm hardly ever."

Tommy stared at Grace. That was her way. She knew how to tell his ass off without breaking a sweat. "I've improved," he said.

She nodded. She agreed with that. "That's not as strange to me as this other thing," she said.

Tommy looked at her. “What other thing?”

“This,” Grace said, looking around the grounds of Tommy’s Parisian estate. “This mansion that I didn’t even know you owned.”

Tommy didn’t respond to that.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this place, Tommy?”

“I’m rarely here.”

“But you do come here.”

“Sometimes, yes.”

“With other people?”

Tommy hesitated and looked at their intertwined hand.

“Sometimes, yes.”

Grace stared at him. Tommy was such a great-looking man that it seemed almost naïve of her to think he could be faithful. Nobody in the family seemed to think so. But she still did. “With other women?” she asked him.

Tommy continued to stare at their intertwined hand.

But Grace wasn’t going to let his silence be the answer the way she’d been known to do in the past. She knew she was probably too trusting. She knew she gave him way more

liberty than any of the other wives in the family gave their husbands. But she did trust him. With all her heart she did. And she believed his every word. “You didn’t answer my question, Tommy. Have you brought other women to this place?”

Tommy frowned, but didn’t look into her eyes. “Why would you ask me something like that, Grace?”

“Because I need to know.”

“I should be all you need to know.”

But Grace was shaking her head. “Why can’t you just answer my question?”

“I answered your question.”

“Tommy, have you or have you not brought a woman to this place?”

“You know I haven’t,” Tommy said, and looked at her. “No. I haven’t. Not ever.” Then he stared at her. “I don’t know about how I treated my women in my past, because my record has not been a good record, but I will never do that to you. I love you too much to ever do that to you.”

Grace smiled. And fell into his arms. “I love you too much too,” she said, tickling him, and he laughed. And they

held onto each other as evening rolled around.

Then the intercom buzzed. Tommy answered it. It was his longtime chef, who was also the caretaker of the estate.

“Dinner is served, sir,” he said, Tommy thanked him, and ended the call.

Grace gave Tommy a peck of a kiss and moved to get off of the lounge, but that peck wasn't enough for Tommy. He pulled her back down and gave her a more passionate kiss. And as he kissed her he moved her on top of him, unable to regulate his groans of need that soon had her groaning too.

And as he kissed her, he unzipped, pulled it out, and entered her with a thrust that caused them both to let out sounds of unbridled joy. Beside Grace, beneath Grace, on top of Grace, inside of Grace: There was nowhere else Tommy would rather be.

Despite dinner being ready to serve, they took their time. They made long, hot, passionate love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Where’s Tommy and Grace?” Reno asked as he and Trina, along with Sal and Gemma, sat down to dinner. “I thought we were the ones going to be late and their asses aren’t even here yet.” Then he looked at the chef, who was placing the plates on the table. “Has the boss been notified?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Gabrini have been informed, yes, sir.”

Reno smiled. “I like your style, Chef. You keep it formal. Keep it like it’s supposed to be. I like that. I own a slew of restaurants inside my hotel and every one of those damn chefs call me by my name. *Reno* this and *Reno* that, like they know me better than these people at this table knows me.”

“Then just tell them to call you Mr. Gabrini, Reno,” Trina said.

But Reno frowned. “And hurt their feelings? What am I a dream killer?”

Trina looked at Gemma and shook her head. But Sal grinned. “I told you his ass crazy.”

“Who’s crazy?” asked Tommy as he and Grace, cleaned up but still throbbing, arrived at the table.

Although they both were casually dressed, it was always jarring to the family to see Tommy dressed in anything but a pristine suit. He wore a beige cardigan sweater and blue jeans that time. But even casually dressed he looked like perfection to everybody at that table. An image Tommy hated all his life. Negativity was all good looks ever got him.

“Reno’s crazy,” Sal responded to his question. “Always saying stupid shit then contradicting his ass with more stupid shit.”

“And who are you supposed to be? Carmine?” Reno asked Sal as Tommy and Grace sat at the table. “You’re a genius now too? You developed brains in that big-ass empty head since the last time I saw you?”

“Don’t respond to him, Sal,” Trina said. “Please!” And they all laughed.

“What you two been up to?” asked Reno, looking at Tommy and Grace. Then he saw a smile escape Grace’s mouth. And he nodded. “Oh. *That’s* what your asses been up to.”

“And yours wasn’t?” asked Tommy.

“Yeah but I got an excuse.”

Then all looked at Reno. “What excuse?” asked Sal.

“My wife was kidnapped. She needed some relief.”

“Don’t even try that,” Trina said as they laughed.

“Trying to put it all on me.”

“Let’s just eat,” said Reno. “Say the grace, Grace.”

Grace smiled. “With pleasure,” she said. “May we bow our heads?”

She waited for everybody to bow. Then she spoke it: “Father in heaven, we thank you for being God Almighty, the Creator of this whole world, the only true and living God. We honor your son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We honor your indwelling Holy Spirit. Father we ask that you will bless this food we are about to eat, and bless the preparer, Lord. Let it nourish our minds, hearts, souls and bodies, and make us better. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.”

“Amen,” they said in unison, and began to attack their food.

But less than twenty minutes later, Robby Yale was at the front door.

The entire table didn't expect that. Especially Gemma. "Robby?" She stood up and gave him a hug. "What are you doing here?"

"Boss says I need to get to Paris, I get to Paris."

Tommy looked at his younger brother. "When did you call Robby in?"

"When we found out Trina was snatched. I wanted him to oversee Security while we did our search."

Reno nodded. "Good looking out, Sal."

"Thanks, Sal," said Trina and leaned over and planted a fat kiss on his cheek. He smiled.

Gemma frowned. "What are you blushing for?" she asked her husband, and everybody laughed.

Except Sal. "What are you talking blushing? I don't blush."

Gemma smiled. "I'm just messing with you, boy," she said, and laughed too.

“Sit down, Robby,” Tommy said and ordered his chef to prepare Rob a plate. Robby sat down.

“I take it you aren’t here just for the allure of my chateau?” Tommy asked.

“Chateau?” asked Robby. “That’s what this is? When I think of a chateau, I think of a cute little country house. This is a fucking mansion!”

“I told his ass,” said Sal. “But that’s my brother. A French mansion ain’t classy enough for him. It has to be a French *chateau*.” Sal said it with a high lilt in his voice and a flip of his wrist.

Robby grinned.

“But he asked the right question,” said Sal. “We got mail?”

Robby nodded. “The call came in,” he said, and everybody looked at him.

“When’s the meet?” asked Reno.

“In three hours.”

“Where?”

“Moreau Manor.”

“Moreau?” asked Reno. “We know anybody by that name?”

Everybody thought about it, but they all said no.

“Go on, Robby,” said Tommy.

“He wants Baladerri and Rhodes to bring Mrs. Gabrini to Moreau Manor in three hours. Those are the orders.”

But Sal frowned. “*Bring* Mrs. Gabrini? Is he nuts? Trina’s not going anywhere with those assholes.”

“Yes, I am, Sal,” said Trina. She had already figured there would be some pushback, so she wanted to push first. “If we’re going to smoke this guy out, we have no choice.”

“Reno has the final say on that,” said Sal. “And if I know Reno, your ass ain’t going nowhere.”

“Tree’s right,” said Reno. “Do I want her to go? Hell no. I want her to stay. But what we got? If this prick don’t see her with those two assholes, what’s the point in going? We may as well pack it up and let him get away with it. And keep trying to get it right the next time. I’m not putting myself nor my wife through that kind of torture. This ends tonight. We’re going to face that motherfucker tonight. And look how

Trina handled her kidnappers? She can face this other bastard just as good as you and Tommy can.”

“And you too,” said Gemma.

“I don’t know about all that,” said *always has to be in control* Reno. “But she’s going. She has to go.”

“And I’m going too,” said Gemma.

Sal looked at her. “Like hell!”

“I can handle myself.”

“I don’t give a fuck what you can handle. Your ass not going.”

“I’m not staying here!”

Sal looked at her as if he dared her to defy him. “Says who? You?”

But Reno wanted the intel. “Where’s this Moreau Manor?”

Robby waited for the chef to place his plate of food in front of him. After the chef left the room, he spoke up. “Jay says it’s this big property near the edge of the city, occupied by one house with sixty-two acres surrounding it.”

“Isolated?” Reno asked.

“As fuck,” said Robby. “No way to conduct surveillance in that area without being seen.”

“Shit!” said an already frustrated Reno. “Damn, damn, damn! How are we gonna have a team there if it’s one house and nothing else for miles?”

“Maybe not a team can be there,” said Tommy. “But there’s a way for us to be there.”

Reno looked at Tommy. “I figured your slick, *Mick Sinatra, Junior* ass would already have a plan in place. What’s your bright idea?”

“I sat up a contingency plan,” Tommy said.

Reno frowned. “Contingent on what?”

“Your ass not having a plan at all,” said Sal.

“Contingent on what, Tommy?” Reno asked him again, ignoring Sal.

“Contingent on any obstacles that would keep us from having any kind of clandestine arrangement,” Tommy responded.

“English please.”

“We’ll be able to be out of sight, but see everything that’s going on.”

“How?”

“Through Trina’s eyes,” said Tommy.

Sal looked at Tommy. “Camera contacts?”

Tommy nodded. “That’s right.”

“How you get a hold of those?”

“Yeah, Tommy,” said Reno. “I heard of that shit, but I never seen it either.”

“You guys forget that when I left the police force, I went into private security. I have my contacts. No pun intended.”

“Okay, we’ll be able to see the action,” said Sal. “But what if those two assholes decides to fuck us and fuck up Tree? We won’t be there to help her.”

“But I’ll be there to help myself until you guys can get there,” said Trina.

“Against two men, Tree?” asked Grace.

“It won’t be two,” said Reno. “It’s just Baladerri and Tree that’s going. Baladerri will drive, and Trina’s keeping

her weapon on his ass the entire ride. When they get there, if he tries some shit, he gets it first. They don't give a damn if Rhodes is there or not. They just wanna see Trina."

"It's still some risky shit," said Sal and he and Tommy looked at Reno. Neither one of them were onboard with Trina as part of the action.

Reno wasn't onboard with it either, and they could see the frustration all over his face. "If you know a better way, give it to me," he said. "I don't want her there. It's damn risky, you're right, Sal. But we got to get this guy and I know for a fact Trina can handle it or there's no way she'd be going."

"And if I didn't think I could handle it I wouldn't go," Trina said. "I'm no idiot. I have children. And Reno's ass."

Reno frowned. "Why I got to be *Reno's ass*?" he said to laughter. "Why I can't just be your husband? Or just plain Reno?"

"The point is," said Trina, "I'll be okay."

"You better be," Reno said and they shared a look only two totally connected people could share.

“Okay, so who’s going,” asked Robby, “so I’ll know the lay of the land?”

“I’m going,” said Trina.

“And I’m going,” said Gemma.

Sal just sat there. Stewing.

“What about you, Grace?” asked Robby. “You going too?”

“Yes,” said Grace.

“No,” said Tommy. “She absolutely will not be going.”

“But Grace wants to go, Tommy,” said Gemma. “That should be her decision.”

“*On a kill mission?*” Tommy had incredulity in his voice. “Are you out of your fucking mind? The idea that I would let my wife, the mother of my children, put herself at that level of risk is not happening. Not my wife. Not on my watch.”

They all knew how crazy Tommy could get when it came to Grace and those children of his. He babied all of them. Always wanted to keep the bad parts of being Gabrini away from them. Which, to Reno and Sal, was not good.

But Tommy and Grace knew she could handle herself when absolutely necessary. Tommy just didn't see the necessity in this moment.

But Gemma wanted to know what Grace saw. "Grace, what say you?" she asked her.

Grace wanted Tommy to trust her in tough situations the way Reno always trusted Trina, but she was no Trina and she knew it. Trina's background of leaving her parents' home at an early age forced her to be as savvy and as street-smart as any of the men. Grace's background was quite the opposite and she knew that too.

Tommy placed her in a tough position more than once, usually when their children were on the line, but they had no choice in those matters just like Reno and Trina had no choice in this matter. But Grace knew she had a choice. "If Tommy doesn't think it's a good idea," she said, "then it's not a good idea. I'm going to stay."

"But why, Grace?" asked Trina. "Why would you give up that much power to your man?"

Grace looked at Trina. Every one of the women at that table gave up power to their men. Why was she always singled out?

“Are you only staying because Tommy says so?” Trina continued.

“I’m staying because Tommy looks out for my best interest,” Grace said. “Because he knows a kill mission like the back of his hand and he knows that if I don’t have to go I shouldn’t go. I do defer to Tommy in these matters.”

“Tell her, Grace,” said Sal. “Because my wife’s not going either.”

“I am going,” said Gemma defiantly.

“You’re not going if I say your ass not going,” Sal shot back, with more defiance.

Everybody looked at Gemma. She was a fighter same as Sal. But Gemma knew her husband. She knew what line she was never to cross when Sal put his foot down firmly. Her security was that line. She didn’t fight back.

“If Grace and Gemma are staying back,” asked Reno, “then which one of us are staying with them? Because one of us will have to.”

“I’m staying back,” said Tommy. “I’m not leaving Grace’s protection to anybody but me.”

The husbands understood what he meant and wasn't offended at all. And Reno just wanted to get the ball rolling. "Good. All these fucking wives on a kill mission, we'd be a laughing stock! Gotta get a bigger car and all that shit. Craziness!"

Then he looked at Tommy. "Tell us the plan so we can get this show on the road," he said.

And Tommy told them a mouthful.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Van drove onto the vast, wide-open estate and made its way to the house at the end of the winding driveway. It looked poorly maintained to Trina, with mildew and peeling paint as prominent on the exterior stucco as the various posts and columns surrounding the house. Baladerri sat on the driver's side of the van while Trina, with her Glock to his side, sat on the passenger seat.

“We'll pulling up to the house now,” Trina said. “You got a read?”

“Copy that,” said Reno into her earpiece that only she could hear. “Those damn camera contacts work fantastic. Tell his ass to do exactly as master prick told him to and pull up around back.”

Trina looked at Baladerri. “What are you stopping here for? Didn't the man tell you to go around the back?”

“I forgot,” Baladerri said, and then began driving toward the back of the house. But he appeared even more nervous than Trina.

“What are you so nervous for?” Trina asked him.
“Think you’re going to try some stupid shit and get away with it? We got security where you wouldn’t believe. Don’t even try it.”

“I won’t,” Baladerri said. “Just make sure that gun don’t discharge.”

“You don’t tell me what to make sure of. Just do your job.”

“Okay okay,” said Baladerri. He heard how Trina Gabrini was just as bad-tempered as her husband. Which was very bad. He pulled around back.

But as soon as the Van drove up to the back entrance, three armed men with rifles hurried out of the back door and went to the van. While two searched the van, the third one went up to the passenger window as Trina eased her Glock back into her pocket. She pretended to be tied up, hand and feet, although a hard thrust would break those bonds. But those gunmen didn’t know that.

“Where’s Rhodie?” asked the third gunman.

“Passed out drunk. I didn’t know he was drinking that much.” That was the line Robby Yale had ordered him to tell,

and he kept to the script.

“His butt won’t get paid. I hope he knows that.”

“He will when he wakes up and find us gone.”

The third gunman laughed. Then he looked at Trina. “So that’s Reno Gabrini’s old lady.” He began nodding his head. “Not bad. Not bad at all.” Then he looked at Baladerri. “Bet you got a nice taste for yourself.”

Baladerri smiled. “A gentleman doesn’t tell,” he said, and the third gunman laughed. Trina wanted to puke.

The other two men were tearing apart the interior of that van as they checked under the floorboards and pulled out the backseats to make sure they didn’t have any uninvited guests. When they were satisfied, they closed the back doors. “All clear,” said the first gunman on the scene.

The third gunman then moved back. “Okay, get out,” he said to Trina with his rifle. Though not pointed at her, she knew that would only take a split second. She had to be cautious and give nothing away. She got out.

As Trina wobbled out of the van in her so-called restraints, Reno, Sal, and Robby were just out of eyeshot of

the property, hovering high above in a chopper with Tommy's pilot at the helm. They were watching it all unfold on a monitor that beamed back to them what Trina was seeing through the eyes of the camera contact lenses she wore.

“What if they frisk her?” asked Robby.

“Why would they frisk her?” asked Sal. “She was in their custody. All that frisking shit should have long been handled, as far as those jerks at that house are concerned.”

But as soon as Trina got out of the van, another man, this one shorter than the other three and heavysset, came out of the house. He carried no weapon and wore a suit.

“Who's that fucker?” Reno asked.

“Looks like the big man,” said Sal. “Looks like the description of the money man.”

“You recognize him, Boss?” Robby asked.

Sal nodded his head. “No. Never seen his ass before.”

But when the man walked up to Trina and suddenly slapped her, all three men yelled *Oh, shit!* at the same time. Robby and Sal looked at Reno.

But Reno was only worried about Trina's safety, not her honor. “Trina, don't hit back,” Reno was pleading in her

ear. “Keep your cool. I’ll get his ass. Keep your cool.”

Trina, at the house, was feeling the sting of that slap and wanted to kick his doughboy-looking ass. And he had the nerve to be smiling?

“That felt good,” he said to her. But then he angrily slapped her on the other cheek, causing her head to jerk to the other side. “And that one’s for Reno. The bastard.”

“Keep your cool, Tree,” Reno was saying into her earpiece. “Keep your cool. I’ll take care of him. Keep your cool.”

Trina was going to kick his ass no doubt about it, but she kept her cool. And then another vehicle, an SUV, drove up.

“What the fuck they need another car for?” Reno asked, beginning to panic.

But when the big man grabbed Trina and began forcing her toward that SUV, Reno nearly jumped out of his seat because he knew what that meant. “Go now!” he yelled at the pilot. “They’re trying to take her to another location. She can’t go to another location. Go!”

The pilot was already heading toward the house, while Reno, Sal and Robby grabbed their assault rifles, opened the chopper doors, and was ready to launch an attack. The chopper was at the house as the big man was still attempting to force a resistant Trina into that SUV.

“We gotta show we mean business,” said Reno. “Take out every one of those fuckers except for big man. Just don’t hit my wife!”

And they started firing from on high. They took out the three gunmen easily.

But when the big man looked and saw the helicopter and the firepower raining down from it, he jumped into the SUV, trying to take Trina with him. But Trina broke free from him and also broke free from those fake bonds, and began pulling out her Glock. Baladerri jumped in with the big man and the SUV took off just as Trina started firing.

“Don’t let them get away, Tree!” Reno was screaming. “Don’t let their asses get away!” Then Sal ordered the pilot to get them on the ground.

Trina started running after the SUV as she was shooting at Baladerri, the driver, and the tires, but she knew

she had to do all she could to miss the big man. They needed answers from him.

But trying to shoot at a moving vehicle and trying to avoid one of the occupants of that vehicle was an impossible task. She ran back to the house, instead, and hopped into the SUV just as the chopper had landed and Reno and Sal were jumping off. They had already ordered Robby to stay on the chopper and help the pilot find that SUV.

Reno and Sal hopped into the SUV with Trina, and Trina took off. The chopper took off too.

“That bastard didn’t hurt you, did he?” Reno asked his wife as he sat up front beside her. Sal got in the torn-up back.

“Nobody hurt me,” she said. “But I dug my nails into his sorry ass.”

“Oh I’m gonna dig more than that in that ass,” Reno said, remembering how hard that bastard hit his wife. And did so twice! But they had to preserve his life for now.

“Turn right at the next intersection,” Robby, on the Chopper, said into Trina’s earpiece.

Trina turned at the next intersection, even though Reno was wondering why. All of their communication equipment

was still on the Chopper with Robby. “They spotted them?” Reno asked Trina.

“I guess so,” said Trina. And that was when all three of them saw that SUV.

“There’s those fuckers!” Sal yelled, pointing, and Trina sped up even faster than she knew was safe to drive. But the Chopper was their guide and they weren’t going to lose that van. They raced down every street that SUV was racing down.

But when the SUV was approaching the train tracks and the bars were already down and the lights were already flashing and even everybody in the van could hear the sound of the warning bells ringing, they all braced themselves.

“He’s not gonna stop,” Reno said. “That fool is gonna blow right through that barrier!”

And that was exactly what the SUV did. It sped through that bar, knocking it off of its hinges, and sped across the train tracks. The train was trying to stop, they could all hear the screeching of the train brakes, and Trina had to lay on her own brakes and swerve to avoid getting caught up in that train’s path too.

They didn't see the crash because they had to swerve away, but they heard it. Then debris started flying. And as soon as the train sped out of their view, they saw it. And it was horrific.

As the train was finally coming to a stop much further away from the wreckage, Trina sped across the tracks to where the wreckage was. And it was a mangled mess.

Trina, Reno and Sal all jumped out of the van and ran to the SUV. Baladerri had been thrown and was face down in a ditch. Sal ran over to make sure that asshole was dead. But Reno and Trina hurried to the SUV, hoping against all evidence that the big man was still alive. They needed answers, not a dead body!

But when they got to the SUV, and was able to see inside, all hope was gone. The big man was halfway out of the shattered windshield, impaled in shards of glass sticking through. There was no doubt about it. He was gone.

Reno and Trina were relieved they at least didn't get away, but they truly wanted answers too. They looked over at Sal. Sal gave the cutthroat signal to let them know Baladerri was a goner too. But their eyes already told them all of that. It was their hearts that didn't want to believe it.

But Reno began taking out his phone. Trina looked at him. “What are you doing?”

“The next best thing,” Reno said as he began snapping as many photos of the big man as he possibly could. “We’re going to find out who he was if it’s the last thing I do. And I’m hoping *the who* will give us *the why*.”

Trina also hurried over and began rifling through the big man’s pockets, hoping he’d have ID. But all he had was a gun in one pocket, and a candy bar in the other. All else was empty.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Back at Tommy's house and the couples were seated around the living room attempting to be joyful but waiting for any news they could get on the man that masterminded the whole affair. Who was he, and why did he do it? It was bothering all of them. But Reno most of all.

He was lying on the sofa watching Trina and Grace and Gemma across the room laughing at the various photos they took before it all went south on them, while Tommy and Sal were at the dining room table playing cards. It was late at night, they all should be in bed trying to get some rest, but nobody was even thinking about sleep.

Reno was thinking about Trina. He kept looking over at her. She was laughing same as the other ladies, and telling her brand of jokes too, but he could feel the strain on her. All she wanted was a little getaway. Why did it always have to turn bad for her?

He loved Trina with a deep and abiding love. But he hadn't always knew how to show it. And he was tired of making promises to change after some event happened, when

he always went back to his same old workaholic ways. The casino was more his “family” than anything else, and that was the problem. Even his children viewed him more as some mythical figure they had to go to his job to spend any appreciable time with, and he was worried sick about all of them too.

Jimmy was going to be okay. He turned out good, probably because his mother, a woman from Reno’s past, raised him right. Reno didn’t know Jimmy even existed for most of Jimmy’s early years.

Dommi was still working for Uncle Mick, but he wasn’t happy with the arrangement at all. Especially after Teddy and Nikki’s promotions. It was just a matter of time before he started doing his own thing, and that worried the shit out of Reno too. Dommi was still more reckless than he was ruthless. He was just too terrified of Mick to go whole hog. But when he decided to go out on his own, it was going to be nothing short of pandemonium.

Sophia, his daughter, was still trying to make it work with her beau, but they were having more problems than a young woman needed to have to Reno. But Sophie was smart. She knew when to say when and wrap it up.

And Carmine. Reno worried least about that little man. Mainly because his ass was so smart, but also because he sometimes acted like he was the man of the house and Reno was a visitor. Reno once had a dream about Carmine beating his ass and yelling as he was beating him, “who’s the daddy now? Who’s the daddy now?!” It scared the shit out of Reno. It scared Reno so much that he woke up Trina and told her about it. Trina laughed for days when he told her.

But it was no fluke and Reno knew it. One day, Carmine was going to run Reno’s empire. Because where Dommi was more reckless than ruthless, Carmine was more ruthless than reckless. And he didn’t care what anybody thought about his knitting or his love of books or any of that shit either. The kid could handle his own.

Reno almost dozed off thinking about his family, until he heard somebody’s phone ringing. When he looked over and saw that it was Trina’s phone, Trina looked at the Caller ID and then walked over to where Reno was lying on the sofa and handed him her still-ringing phone.

Reno, confused, looked at the Caller ID, too, saw who was phoning, and answered it, putting it on Speaker as he did.

“Hello?”

“Oh. Reno. Hello.”

When everybody in the room realized it was Douglas Spencer on the phone, they looked over at Reno and Trina. Trina sat on the coffee table in front of the sofa and watched her husband. She realized something profound in Paris. She realized how much Reno truly loved her, although she always knew he loved her in his own way. She knew he wanted nothing but the best for her even if he stumbled more than succeeded trying to give her his best. But she now knew it was the best he could do. It was the best anybody was ever going to get from him. And she realized, in Paris, that her neglectful, boastful, loudmouth Reno was better than any man alive. She was surrendering completely to him now. No more *what ifs*. No more fantasies about a life with some attentive, loving, caring man that would bore her to death. Reno was her man. Reno was the best.

And Reno was frowning. “What are you calling my wife’s phone for?” he asked Douglas.

“I wanted to check on her. To make sure she’s okay.”

“I already told your ass she was okay. That should have been the end of that discussion for you.”

“May I speak with her?”

Reno looked at Trina. When she shook her head no, his heart soared. “Hell no,” he said to Douglas. “She doesn’t want to speak to you. Those days of playing footsie with your ass are over. Leave her alone.”

“Alright, I will. I was just being friendly.”

“Those days of being friendly with your ass are over too. Leave my wife alone.”

“Okay. Damn, Reno, I understand. But if she’s listening, and I’m sure she is, tell her I wish her well and she won’t be hearing from me again.”

“Good.”

“Goodbye,” Douglas said, and ended the call.

Everybody were still staring at them as Reno handed Trina her phone. In a lot of ways how Reno and Trina went, so went the family.

But Reno was staring at her. “Why did you want me to take that call?” he asked her.

“I think it’s past due.”

“What’s past due?”

“Me giving you your due,” Trina said, and Reno could hardly believe she said that. He continued staring at her.

“It’s high time I realize what treasure I have in you, Reno. I think I was forgetting who you really are. You’d die for me, Reno. Any other man I’ve ever been with in my entire life would hardly cry for me. Yeah your ass work too much. Yeah you’re a neglectful son-of-a-bitch most times. But you’ll drop the world to come and see about me if I truly need you. And that’s not just one good part of you. Or one good thing I can point and say about you. That’s everything, Reno. Everything.”

Reno was so touched that he could feel emotions bubbling deep inside of him. And he opened his arms to Trina. When she smiled and went to him, and he laid her on the sofa on top of him, he whispered in her ear. “Ditto to that,” he said. And she laughed.

Grace and Gemma and Tommy and Sal looked at each other with satisfactory smiles on their faces too, as if the dynamic duo were back on track. As if all was right with the world again. Even though it wasn’t.

Until Robby Yale came to the chateau with the news they’d been hoping for.

It was about an hour later. Reno and Trina had fallen asleep on the sofa, Grace and Gemma were no longer laughing it up but were on their individual phones answering texts or emails, but mainly checking up on the kids. It might have been ten at night in Paris, but it was almost seven a.m. in Vegas. Tommy and Sal were still playing cards when the intercom buzzed and Security alerted Tommy that Robby was coming through.

Tommy went over and shook Reno and Trina, waking them up, and they were sitting up by the time Robby entered the house.

Tommy was seated on the sofa with Reno and Trina. Grace and Gemma, along with Sal, made their way over by the sofa too. Grace sat beside Tommy. Gemma and Sal sat in one of the chairs, with Sal on the arm of the chair. Robby sat in the other chair.

“Here’s what we know so far,” Robby said and he had their full attention. “Rhodes and Laurent are dead.”

Reno frowned. “Dead? Nobody gave the order to off those assholes!”

“It wasn’t planned,” said Robby. “It couldn’t be helped.”

“What do you mean it couldn’t be helped?” asked Tommy.

“After they transported them over to a safe house away from your property as ordered, one of the two guards went to take a piss. While he was gone, Rhodes made a grab for the other guard’s gun. They wrestled for it, and in that wrestling Laurent was shot and killed. And they continued wrestling and Rhodes won. He shot and killed one of our guys. When the other guard returned, hearing the gunfire, he took Rhodes out before Rhodes could get off another shot. But he had it coming. He started that shit.”

Reno and Tommy weren’t happy about that outcome, but nobody was going to kill their guard and get away with it. “I was hoping he could give us more intel,” said Reno, “but apparently not.”

“What about Laurent’s brother?” asked Tommy. “Any intel on him?”

“He’s dead too,” said Robby. “They found him in his car over in Saint Germain. Bullet through the head. The authorities don’t know if it was self-inflicted or homicide. But I don’t think we need any of them. I think we got all we need now,” said Robby.

They all looked at him. “What do you mean?” asked Trina.

“The guy in that SUV with Baladerri was a big-time crook by the name of Joey Damone.” Then Robby looked at the Gabrini men. “Any of you know him?”

They all shook their heads. But Reno was puzzled. “Damone. I know that name.”

“We all know that name, Reno. The singer? Remember? Vic Damone?”

“That’s it!” Reno said excitedly. “You remember, Tommy. That cheater I tossed out of my casino.”

And suddenly Tommy remembered him. “Oh yeah! The one who was past-posting at the craps table?”

Reno nodded. “That’s the one. He was a Damone too. I remember joking about how he was giving that good name a bad name.”

“That’s what we came up with too,” said Robby.

Reno looked at him. “That guy’s related to this guy?”

“Yep. The cheater you threw out of your casino is Carl Damone. The guy in that SUV, the mastermind, is Joey Damone. They’re brothers.”

“Ah shit,” said Reno.

“He found out what your guys did to his brother and he wanted revenge. And apparently he decided the best revenge was to go for your heart.”

“My wife,” said Reno.

“Right,” said Robby.

Trina looked at Reno. “Was it that bad what your men did to his brother?”

“He didn’t pay up and he had come in my casino trying to play me for a chump. Yeah. They crippled him. It was bad.”

“That at least explains it,” said Gemma.

“Thank God,” said Grace.

“Joey Damone, or Joe Damone as he preferred to be called, made a career robbing banks. He served a lot of time, but he also made loads of money that he was able to hide from authorities. And to avenge his brother’s death, everybody that knew him told us he’d go the ends of the earth. He was out for blood.”

“And he got it,” said Trina. “Only it was his own blood.”

But Reno ran his hands through his already messy hair. Trina, like everybody else, saw his hesitation. “What is it, Reno?”

“Once again,” Reno said, “it comes down to shit I did.”

Trina frowned. “To protect your business, damn right,” she said. “You did nothing wrong. You didn’t go to his brother with the bullshit, his brother came to you. Then you took it to him.”

Sal laughed. “In my will I’m leaving my syndicate to your ass, Tree. You don’t be playing!”

And they all laughed at that. Including Reno.

But after Robby said his goodbyes – he was going over to the safe house to see for himself what went so wrong that a prisoner could overtake a guard, Sal came up with a bright idea.

“What now, Sal?”

“Let’s get out of this house and go celebrate,” Sal said. “What are we sitting up in here for? Our asses are in Paris. The night is still young. Let’s do this!”

It didn’t take pulling anybody’s teeth to get them all to agree. Even Reno was onboard. And although he should have

been convinced that what happened to Carl Damone was the reason Joey Damone sought his revenge, he wasn't convinced at all. It felt as if he was missing something. Something right before his very eyes. He just couldn't put a finger on it.

After the men changed into their Armani suits, and the ladies, whose luggage had been brought over to the chateau from the hotel, got decked down too, Reno, at the front door, laid down the law. "Everybody stay close together," he told them as they were heading out of the door. "Don't let your guard down. This shit may be over, or it may not be over. I don't want any surprises."

They all wanted to tell Reno he was overreacting, but they held their peace. Reno was apparently feeling something in his gut. And they never went against a Gabrini gut.

"We'll be on the lookout," Trina assured him.

"But before we go," said Sal, "we need to know where the fuck we're going."

"There's this nice jazz club me and the girls were going to check out before all this happened," said Trina.

But Reno interrupted her. "That'll be a no," he said. "We wanna go where your asses went."

“That’s right,” agreed Sal. “Let’s go to that same strip joint you ladies went to.”

Trina looked at Grace and Gemma. “I told y’all they were spying on us. Didn’t I tell you?”

“You said Tommy was spying on us,” Grace was quick to point out.

“Same difference,” Trina responded. “His ass can’t hold tea either. But listen, guys, you don’t want to go to the same club we went to,” Trina was trying to explain to them, but Reno and Sal wouldn’t let her.

“Oh yes we do!” said Sal. “The exact same one,” he added with a grin. “Y’all enjoyed the titties. Why can’t we enjoy some?”

“But, babe,” said Gemma, but they wouldn’t let her explain either.

“Here here!” said Reno. He was all onboard. “The strip joint it is!”

“But you don’t understand,” Gemma was about to say, but Trina cut her off.

“No, Gem, no,” said Trina. “They’re absolutely right. Let’s take them to the exact same club we went to and let them

get the royal treatment just like you got, Gem.”

They still remembered how expertly Gemma had worked that pole.

Tommy smiled. Grace had already told him all about that strip club they had gone to and the surprise inside that surprised even them when they first went. “They didn’t even have their name exposed,” Grace had told him.

Tommy explained the no sign was on purpose, as some Parisian clubs prefer the mystery of it so that guys who wanted to go in wouldn’t feel inhibited at the door. But such clubs were usually by reservation only unless a hot group came along and wanted in. Those folks got in on a door decision only. But Trina had had a reservation when they first went. This time around it would have to be a door decision. But she was happy to give the men what they craved.

“Okay,” said Trina, “if that’s where you guys really want to go.”

“We really wanna go,” said Reno.

“Really *really*,” said Sal. Then they leaned against each other and Sal whispered: “Wouldn’t mind a few tits in my face after all.” And then he and Reno fist-bumped.

“Okay,” said Trina. “If it’s where you really, really wanna go, then the strip club it is!”

“Tittie bar here we come!” said Sal as he and Reno were all but rubbing their hands together like two men preparing to roll the dice.

It took all the ladies had within them to stop themselves from falling out in laughter as they all piled into the Peugeot.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

When they arrived at the club, Sal and Reno had the same kind of reaction Grace and Gemma had to the place when they first went there.

“Where’s the name?” asked Sal.

“What kind of strip joint is this that don’t advertise?” asked Reno.

“It’s by reservation only, Ree,” said Grace.

“Or by door decision,” added Gemma. “If we’re cute enough then they’ll let us in.”

“We got Reno with us,” said Sal. “We can forget any door decision!”

Reno looked at Sal with a frown. “And you’re supposed to be some beauty king yourself?”

“Hi,” Trina said with her best smile as they made it up to the bouncer at the door. “We’re a party of six.”

“Reservation?”

“I’m afraid not.”

The bouncer seemed to nod his approval as he looked at the ladies, and he even smiled when he looked at Tommy. But he looked sideways at Sal as if he wondered if he'd start any trouble. And he literally glared-down Reno like he knew Reno was trouble. But then he motioned for them to go on in.

“Thanks,” Trina said before he changed his mind, and they hurried on in.

“Didn't I tell you?” Sal said to the group. “You saw how he was looking at Reno.”

“He was looking at your ass too,” Reno shot back. “If it wasn't for the ladies and Tommy, you wouldn't be in here either.”

Trina placed her arm in Reno's arm to get him away from Sal as she searched for a table that didn't have a Reserved sign on it. Since most of the tables were clear, they had their choice. Trina kept going toward the front, to find the best choice.

The ladies, who were the warm-up act, were still on stage, and Sal and Reno had forgotten about their tiff and were bursting at the scenes with excitement when they saw the half-naked ladies. They were going to enjoy this!

They were able to find a table in the center of the room, which wasn't an upfront great table, but it was a good one. But the Gabrinis didn't care: they were thrilled to put that ordeal with Trina behind them, and to have a night of frivolity and ease in front of them.

Even Reno seemed to settle in. "Good seats, Tree," he said as they sat down, as if it was all Trina's doing.

But after their drink orders arrived at their table, the ladies onstage were in the audience selecting two men to be what they called guest stars of the show. Trina was quick to put up her hand.

"We got two right here!" she said, and the ladies hurried over to escort them to the stage.

Reno looked at her because he would love to be a guest star of this show! "That's mighty big of ya, Tree," he said.

"You the man!" Trina said with a straight face.

"You okay with this, too, babe?" Sal asked Gemma. He was itching to get on that stage too.

"I'm as okay with it as you would be if it was me going up on that stage."

“Thanks, babe,” he said with a smile as he stood up. Then he looked at her. “I think.” Had she just told him off?

When Reno and Sal left, the ladies and Tommy all laughed.

The ladies onstage put them side by side in chairs on the stage, and then proceeded to cover their eyes with blindfolds.

“Oh man,” said Grace with a smile. “They aren’t going to even know.”

“And now,” one of the lady performers announced to the audience, “the stars of the show!” And the ladies left the stage.

Reno and Sal were grinning ear to ear. “Man, I’m gonna enjoy this shit!” Reno said to Sal.

“And our ladies can’t say a thing about it,” Sal said.

“I wish they would say something,” said Reno defiantly. “Men just wanna have fun too!” he added with a grin.

And on that note, the men came out onto the stage. Mostly big, black, gorgeous men who had the audience yelping it up as soon as they walked out.

“They’re here,” Reno said to Sal in his blindfold. “The stars are here. These are the girls that are the top strippers. These are the best of the best.”

“What are you telling me for?” complained Sal. “I know my way around a strip joint. I been a guest star before.”

Reno looked over at Sal, even though they were both blindfolded and couldn’t see a thing. “Quit lying. Who in their right mind would make you a guest star? They’re only doing it this time because my woman recommended you.”

“Fuck you, Reno,” Sal said.

And on that note, two of the men went over to Reno and Sal. As they began moving their naked bodies in front of them, one man put Reno’s hands to his breasts. Reno smiled. A chance for him to cop a feel with his wife’s permission? Yes please!

And at first it felt real good. He could feel what he considered *her* hard-ass nipple. Real hard-ass nipple, like he was turning her on! But as he felt around that nipple, it wasn’t quite as pleasing to Reno. Where was the breast? Where was the meat part? But Reno still didn’t catch on.

But Sal did. As soon as he touched that nipple he knew something wasn't right. He had never felt a woman's nipple that felt like that. He quickly removed his blindfold.

When he removed the blindfold and saw a dude standing in front of him naked as a jaybird, he quickly jumped to his feet. He was about to cuss that dude out for even thinking about it. Until he saw Reno smiling next to him. And when he saw Reno feeling all around that other man's chest like a fool, he couldn't help it. He smiled and left the stage. When he got to the table, he was falling over laughing right along with the ladies and Tommy.

But when the male stripper moved Reno's hands down to his stomach, and Reno felt those abs, he was pleased again. *Damn, she's fine*, he said to himself. *Kind of wide, but fine!* The audience was laughing it up. But none more so than those at the Gabrini table.

Then the stripper moved Reno's hands to his arms, so that he could move in closer. But when Reno felt those arms, and the veins in those arms, and how rock-hard they were, he knew he either had himself a weight-lifter or a stripper, or a dude. *A dude?* And like Sal, he was now troubled, too, and removed his blindfold.

When Reno saw that big man standing naked in front of him, he meant to move back in protest, but ended up falling backwards onto his rear. The audience went crazy with laughter.

“Go get him, Tommy, before he gets us kicked up,” Trina was saying urgently, but Tommy was falling against Grace laughing too hard to do anything. Trina, instead, had to hurry onto the stage just as Reno was getting back on his feet.

“Don’t your ass even try it,” said Trina in her sternest voice as she placed her arm in his arm. “It’s all just a little fun and you aren’t ruining these people’s night. Come on!”

Reno was surprisingly quiet as he stared down the stripper on his way off the stage. When he got to his seat, Tommy had composed himself and wasn’t laughing as hard. But Reno was glaring at Sal.

“When did you come down?”

“When I realized ain’t no lady with no tits like that.”

When Sal said those words, Tommy nearly bust out laughing again. He had to move his head behind Grace’s head to keep Reno from seeing just how funny it all was to him.

But Reno was not amused. “You knew it was a dude and you said nothing to me?”

“What I’m gonna say to you? All that feeling on those tits you was doing. You looked like you was having fun,” Sal said and Tommy and the ladies couldn’t help it. They bust out laughing again.

Reno was beet red. “When I kick all your asses we’ll see who’s laughing then!”

“Just enjoy the show,” Trina said, as she did all she could to compose herself and not think about Reno feeling on that man’s breasts, although she chuckled a couple of times.

Which caused Reno to frown again. “What’s so funny, Tree?”

“It’s a cough,” she said, and tried to cough it off.

Reno stared at her for a few seconds longer, but then they all turned their attention back onstage.

But Reno was still frowning as he watched those male strippers do their thing. “What they up there frolicking around for anyway? Where the broads at? Where the dames?”

“That’s entertainment, Reno,” said Sal. “The dames will be back. They guys are just the whatayacall it? The

intermission.”

Tommy smiled. He knew Sal was needling Reno.

Reno looked at Sal. “Intermission? I ain’t never heard of no intermission at no strip joint.”

“This is Paris,” said Sal. “They do it different here.”

“You think you’re talking to a fucking novice? I been to Paris more times than your ass ever dreamed about going. Been in my share of strip joints before too, yes, I have.” Then Reno looked back at the stage. “But I ain’t never seen this kind of shit before.”

“It’s the new wave, Reno. Get with it!”

Reno knew Sal didn’t know what he was talking about, but he held his peace. But as the guys continued their set onstage and the Gabrini women were staring them down the way the Gabrini men stared down the ladies when they were onstage, all three men were getting uncomfortable. Mainly because they knew their ladies’ original preference were those exact kind of men: big, black, and gorgeous. And that complicated jealousy that some white men held toward the black man’s reputation as the most athletic, the strongest, and the most well-hung and desirable of men around the world was

out in force too. All three men were giving their wives the side eye as their wives happily watched the show.

Trina nudged Grace and then looked over at Gemma with a smile. “Hey, Gem,” she said, “why don’t you go up there and do your thing again?”

Gemma’s heart nearly dropped to her stomach as Trina and Grace were smiling at her. She knew it was all a lark, but how could they play like that? They had to know Sal would kick her all over Paris if he found out she got on that pole during her first visit to that club.

And Sal was quick to interject. “What thing?” he asked.

“They’re just messing with me,” Gemma said, and then glared over at Trina and Grace with daggers in her eyes. Trina and Grace laughed.

But before Sal could ask more questions about any of it, the tease was over and the men on stage got down and dirty.

Although the audience went wild, including the ladies, the Gabrini men were not impressed. “Oh hell no!” said Reno.

“You wanted to come,” said Trina, “so you’re here.” She was getting tired of Reno’s sulking. “Now cut the bullshit

and sit back and enjoy the show!”

Reno and Sal had folded arms as they watched the show, although Tommy, who had grown to be quite comfortable in his own skin, found it all amusing. Until the men got off the stage and began to make their presence known at various tables.

“*They better not come this way,*” Reno and Sal were both thinking at the same time. They didn’t want to ruin the night for the ladies, and they were willing to take it like men, but they had their limits.

And the men appeared to read their thoughts because two different ones made a beeline for the Gabrini table. When they arrived at the table, they seemed to give a little extra show, at least it seemed so to Reno and Sal. They were all in their faces slinging their dicks around and trying to engage the men in some one-on-one.

Although Tommy was laughing his head off along with the ladies, Reno and Sal were not amused at all! And those were the two the men seemed to single out again and again, to the delight of their table mates and the audience too.

But when one man got so close to Reno that Reno could smell his dick, he pushed him away so hard that the man

fell over a nearby table. The second stripper, defending his co-worker, grabbed Reno to punish him, but Tommy and Sal grabbed him and he was the one punished. And then the stage cleared and all of the other naked strippers, along with the bouncers, were running straight for the Gabrini table. Dicks bouncing like balls on the run.

And the fight was on. Even some of the gay guys in the audience joined in on the Gabrini beat down.

Only they didn't realize who they were beating down and the tables turned quickly, and it was the Gabrinis doing the beat down. Even the Gabrini ladies were defending their men. But the bouncers were able to break it all up. And the Gabrinis, to cheers from the audience, were escorted out.

When they got outside, all of them looking tattered, they were grateful to be out and all in one piece.

“All that dick flying all over the place,” complained Sal.

“And they had the nerve to get all up in our faces,” complained Reno.

“*Our* faces? Was more like all up in your face, Reno,” said Tommy. “You were their favorite,” he added. And

everybody, except Reno, laughed.

“Let’s just get the fuck out of here,” Reno said, and they all hopped into the Peugeot and got away.

But as soon as they were on the long stretch back to Tommy’s chateau, they heard the sound of a bullet ricochet off of their car.

And just like that, they weren’t in Kansas anymore.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Tommy swerved wildly to avoid any additional gunfire.

“Get down!” Reno was yelling to the ladies as they ducked down while the men pulled out their weapons.

But they didn’t see any car nor anybody on that road around them.

“Where the fuck are they?” asked Reno.

“Maybe it was a rock or something,” said Sal.

“Yeah maybe,” said Reno as they continued to look around. “But it sure as hell sounded like a bullet to me.”

“Oh shit!” Tommy yelled, and then laid his feet on the gas as he blew through the intersection where a big transfer truck was flying straight toward them ready to slam into them and squash the life out of every human being inside.

But Tommy was able to speed away so fast that it just missed him. But the truck had already committed to the crash and had to hit on brakes and steer clear when there was no car to cushion it. The truck driver lost control and the truck

jackknifed as the front end went one way and the back end went the other way until it flipped over with a crash down so loud that it nearly incapacitated the eardrums of everybody in the car.

“What the fuck is going on?” Sal yelled, looking back at the now mangled truck.

“I told you this shit wasn’t over with,” yelled Reno. “I told you I still felt something was wrong!”

“Shouldn’t we go back and see who those fuckers are in that truck?” asked Trina. “We need to know who they are!”

“Tree’s right,” said Reno, trying to calm down. “We need to go back, Tommy.”

But just as Tommy was about to slow down to turn around, a car, alongside two men on a motorcycle suddenly turned the corner away from the truck wreckage and began speeding toward them.

“We got company,” Tommy said when he looked through the rearview.

“And they got hardware!” Reno yelled when he saw men lean out of the window of the car and began firing at the Peugeot.

Tommy was speeding even faster and swerving as the gunshots rang out, and Reno and Sal were hanging out of their car's windows taking their best shots, too.

“Stay down, ladies!” Sal was yelling as they shot at the oncoming vehicles.

But that motorcycle was their immediate problem. It sped away from the gunmen in the car with ease and made its way to the Peugeot in seconds.

“A bazooka?” said Sal. “What the fuck! He's got a bazooka!”

And as soon as Sal realized it, the passenger on the motorcycle aimed his bazooka at that Peugeot just as Tommy saw him taking aim too.

“Oh shit!” yelled Reno as even he knew the time for trying to take them out was over and he fell on top of Trina and Grace as Sal fell on top of Gemma.

Tommy had no choice but to sling the Peugeot off road and began a terrifying trek down a steep, dangerous ravine just as the bazooka was fired.

It barely missed their car, but it rocked it, and made their already harrowing trek down even more unstable.

The bazooka was so powerful that just from his passenger firing it, the driver of the motorcycle began losing control and the cycle's front wheel went into a death wobble that the driver couldn't control. The motorcycle began flipping over repeatedly as it threw the driver and the passenger off of the cycle and over the same ravine the Peugeot was fighting through.

But the two cyclists didn't stand a chance. One of them was thrown all the way down, until he landed, further over, face first into a tree trunk. But the other cyclist landed onto the back window of the Peugeot with such a hard thump that blood splattered as soon as he hit.

Even Reno and Sal couldn't watch the squashing of another human being, but had to refocus when the Peugeot began to travel over even rougher terrain that had them bouncing as if Tommy had lost all control.

"Tommy, are you okay?" Grace was asking him urgently.

"I'm okay," Tommy said as he fought to keep control of the wheel. But when the car hit a root that sent it airborne, the ladies began screaming in fear of their lives.

Reno and Sal had never felt such manic in the women's voices as they felt in that moment. It was as if they knew they were all going to die right there in Paris without even knowing why.

But Tommy had no time to hear anything at all. His entire body was working to regain control of that car.

“Pray!” Grace cried out and Trina and Gemma began doing just that: praying for help.

And then the car came back down on all four wheels, Tommy. When that wasn't working, he began to turn the wheels, which helped to break the car's momentum just enough for Tommy to regain control.

But as Tommy was regaining control, the car that was with the motorcycle came speeding down the same ravine right behind the Peugeot. But nobody knew it until Reno and Sal looked up and saw that the dead cyclist had fallen from the back of the car. But that was when they saw the enemy car heading right down that ravine with them.

“Their asses back again!” Reno proclaimed as he and Sal began to regain their positions to shoot.

But Tommy had a better idea. “Reno and Sal,” Tommy said, “as soon as I get around this tree, you guys jump out.”

“Jump out?” said Gemma, astonished that Tommy would suggest such a thing.

“If we’re to stop this,” Tommy said, “we’ve got to stop it now. Or we may not get another chance.” And Tommy didn’t delay. He drove around that big tree trunk and slowed just enough for Reno and Sal to jump out. And both men, understanding what Tommy was doing, jumped out before their wives could complain.

As Tommy moved further around that tree and stopped his car, Reno and Sal stopped rolling and quickly positioned themselves for the oncoming car.

“Shoot,” Reno reminded Sal, “but not to kill.”

Sal didn’t need reminding as the car approached and they aimed. They were lying on their stomachs, but they still felt they had the advantage. Because as soon as the car’s driver saw them, he attempted to turn the car around. That was when Reno and Sal began firing. Their goal: take out all four tires and disable it.

They took out all four tires, but the car's momentum could not be stopped. It kept sliding down toward the ravine. But then it came to a screeching halt when it ran into an embankment.

Reno and Sal raced to the car, sliding down themselves to get there.

But when they got there, the driver, who wore no seatbelt, was slumped over the steering wheel of the car with no airbags. Sal lifted his head. He was dead.

But it was when Reno looked into the backseat of the car and saw the man seated back there, very much alive, he was floored.

“What the fuck?” he said in sheer amazement.

Sal looked too. And when he saw who it was seated on that backseat, he was livid too. “Fuck!” he said.

Tommy and the ladies had gotten out of the Peugeot and were running to the enemy car too. Especially Trina, who ran in front of the pack. She wanted to know what this was all about. She had been the target. Was all this related?

But when she got to the now-disabled enemy car, and Reno, still in shock, stepped aside for her to see for herself,

she was as confused as he was. “Mo?” she asked. “What are you doing here?”

Tommy, Grace, and Gemma looked too. They all knew Mo Kennedy. He was the general manager of Reno’s hotel and casino and a trusted member of Reno’s team.

Reno was about to jump over that front seat and beat his ass, but Tommy and Sal held him back. “We need him alive, Reno,” Tommy said. “We need to know why.”

That was the only truth that kept Reno from climbing that seat. He backed back and Sal pulled Mo out of the car and slammed him against the door, right beside Reno and Trina, his employers.

Trina just shook her head. She couldn’t even speak. She worked so closely with Mo!

And Reno? He was still beside himself. “All this elaborate shit is your doing?” he asked him.

When Mo, looking dejected and defeated, didn’t respond, Reno grabbed him by the shirt. “Answer me motherfucker! Your ass behind all of this?”

“Yes!” Mo said angrily. “I had her kidnapped. I was the one who told them where to take her.”

“But you weren’t there?”

“Joey Damone was there,” said Mo. “I heard about what you ordered your goons to do to his brother, and I knew he’d want to participate for revenge. So I told him what happened and how he could put you in pain just like your goons hospitalized his brother. And he could do it with no fingerprints pointing to him or any of his men. All he had to do was wait at my house and then transport her to me.”

“Your house?” Trina asked. “That big-ass Moreau Manor is your house?”

“Yes,” said Mo. “I had it all planned out.” Then a sad look appeared on his face. “But it all went haywire.”

“But how did you even know Trina would be in Paris?” asked Tommy.

“I told him,” said Trina.

“You told him?” asked Sal.

“Yes, Sal. He’s our GM. He has a right to know when I’m out of town or Reno’s out of town. I always tell him if something’s up. I didn’t know he would try something like this!”

But it was Reno who was most perplexed. He hired Mo. He trusted Mo! “Why would you do something like this?” he asked him. “*Why?*”

“The audit,” he said.

Gemma and Grace both remembered Trina mentioning an audit she had to oversee when she got back from Paris.

“What about the audit?” Trina asked him.

He didn’t say.

“You heard my wife!” Reno yelled. “What about that fucking audit?”

“It would reveal too much,” Mo yelled out like a man who knew he was going down. “I usually handled the audits with the accountants for the hotel and the casino. I knew how to steer them away from certain things. But when she said she was going to handle the audits this year, and do so as soon as she got back from Paris, I knew I had to act and act quickly. So I did.”

Reno frowned. “Are you trying to tell me your ass was stealing from us? You’re telling me you stole from me?”

Mo nodded. He wasn’t proud of it.

“And it had to be a lot of dough with all the people he had to pay to assist him in his scheme,” said Sal.

“How much?” asked Reno.

Mo said nothing.

Reno grabbed him again. “How much, asshole? How much did you steal from me?!”

“Millions!” said Mo. “I don’t know how much.”

All of the Gabrinis were in a state of disbelief. Reno looked at Trina and ran his hands through his hair.

“But why did you think something like this would work?” asked an anguished Trina.

“The plan was to kidnap you, and then I take over and make certain you end up in the bottom of a river.”

They all stared at Mo as if he was stranger. They could hardly believe it.

“Once that was accomplished,” Mo said, “then I’d be back in charge of the audits, and Reno would never know his arrogant ass was losing a fortune right before his very eyes.”

It didn’t take a rocket scientist to know that Reno was about to put a hurting on Mo, which was Mo’s conclusion too.

And he knew he had to act. And he did.

He suddenly grabbed Trina and threw her down the incline, knowing that her momentum would take her over the ravine.

Reno, as Mo knew he'd do, immediately ran after Trina so fast that he was grabbing for her before anybody else could react. But Sal reacted, too, and ran after Reno and Trina as Tommy grabbed Mo.

Trina's body tumbled all the way to the edge of the ravine, and then, to everybody's shock and horror, she fell over the cliff.

She knew she was dead when she felt her body unable to stop and flew over. But then she felt Reno grabbing her hand just as she was sailing over. And he stopped her fall. But she still was in a horrible predicament. Her body was dangling halfway over, with the only thing keeping her from certain death was the catch of Reno's hand.

But as Tommy held onto Mo, he felt something keeping him from leaving Grace and Gemma.

The reason came quickly. As he was looking to see if Reno and Trina came out alright, the driver, who had faked his

death, sneakily grabbed the gun that was on the side of his seat and was ready to put a bullet first into Tommy, and then into the rest of the Gabrinis.

But Tommy was nobody's fool. He was looking at Reno and Trina, but he could also see that the "dead" driver had moved ever so slightly. Tommy was no Carmine, but even he knew dead bodies didn't move.

"He's alive!" Grace yelled when she saw movement, too, and it was just as Tommy aimed his weapon toward the driver, and just as the driver grabbed that gun and attempted to shoot first. But Tommy shot first and took him out. For real this time.

And then he quickly handed his gun to Grace. "Watch that bastard!" he said, motioning toward Mo. And then he took off toward the cliff.

Gemma pulled out her weapon, too, and she and Grace trained their guns on Mo Kennedy and that driver, too, just in case. They watched that bastard even as their hearts were pounding for Trina.

But when Tommy got to the edge of the ravine, he saw the precarious situation Trina was in. Reno was stretched out as far as he could go and was holding Trina by the catch of her

hand. Sal had grabbed hold of Reno. But they were barely hanging on.

But when Tommy grabbed hold of Sal, it was all they needed to begin pulling Trina up from the brink. But even with Tommy, and given how steep the incline was, it wasn't easy.

But to even Trina's amazement, they pulled her all the way up and out of danger. And she fell into Reno's arms.

Reno grabbed her by her cheeks. "You okay?" he asked her, staring into her eyes.

Terror was in her eyes, but she was otherwise okay.

But neither of them were okay for long. Because they both had a beatdown to handle for a man who had to know he was already going down, but wanted to go out with a bang. And as soon as they realized they were okay, they hurried over to Mo to make certain he wasn't.

Everybody stayed back as Reno and Trina put a hurting on Mo. Reno handled his upper body, and Trina handled the lower. And they punched and kicked and stomped on him. So much so that he was down on the ground attempting to cover

his body with his hands and arms, begging for mercy. But none came.

But it was Sal who broke it up. He didn't want Reno and Trina to have the death of a man they once trusted on their hands.

"Take'em to the car, Tommy," Sal said to his brother. "Get'em out of here!"

Tommy knew what Sal was going to do. He always did their dirty work. He also knew how disenchanted Sal was becoming with all of that dirty work he had to do for most of his life. That was why Tommy stepped in.

"You take'em to the car," he said to his beloved kid brother. "I'll take it from here."

Sal stared at Tommy. He was tired of the carnage, no doubt about it. And he needed some help. He nodded, and then he began escorting Reno and Trina, who were emotionally dead, to the Peugeot. Gemma followed them. But Grace wasn't leaving Tommy. They all knew and loved Mo Kennedy for years. That included Tommy.

"It's okay, Grace," Tommy said to her. "Go on to the car."

Grace stared at her husband a moment longer. In her eyes, he was always the one doing the dirty work. It started with his psychotic father all the way to when Tommy was a police captain and always had to bail out Sal during Sal's crooked cop days. But she also knew Sal fought all of Tommy's battles when they were growing up. She knew if it wasn't for Sal when Tommy was going through hell on earth, Tommy wouldn't have made it. She went to the car.

As they all piled inside, a volley of gunshots rang out that caused all of them to flinch. It was one thing to ice the bad guys. But when the bad guy was your trusted employee, a man they actually loved? That felt different.

When Tommy arrived back at the car, Trina leaned back with a sigh of relief. "Let's go home before the cops come," she said.

"To the chateau?" asked Reno.

"No. Home home," said Tree.

"Here here," echoed Grace.

"Sounds good to me too," Gemma agreed.

And every one of the men, though they would never admit it to a living soul, was thrilled to have their ladies going

back where they truly belonged: Home. With them.

EPILOGUE

“Hey, Tree.”

“Hey girl.”

“Happy Valentine’s Day.”

“Really?” Trina was not amused. “Is that what we’re doing?”

Grace laughed. “We may as well make the best of it.”

“The best of slaving in the kitchen all day?” asked Gemma. “No thank you.”

Grace knew it wasn’t going to be a roll in the hay for her either. But as they sat in Trina’s office at the PaLargio, they all knew they were just prolonging the inevitable. “We may as well get started,” said Gemma. “Grace is right.”

“I know, I know,” said Trina. “But all that planning and going all the way to Paris, just to come back home and do it the same way we’ve been doing it every single year? That shit don’t sit right with me.”

“Then let’s do something different.”

“Like what? Going to a movie and then to dinner? Or catching a show at the PaLargio? That don’t excite me either. Let’s just get it over with.”

They all stood up as if they were dreading it all and made their way to the private elevator and then up to Reno and Trina’s penthouse.

But when they got inside and made their way into the kitchen, they stopped in disbelief. “What in the world,” said Trina.

“I don’t believe it,” said Gemma.

“Wow,” said Grace.

And Reno, Sal, and Tommy stood there with the biggest smiles on their faces. “You like?”

The ladies stared at the spread of food on the countertop inside Trina’s kitchen. “What is it?” Trina asked them.

“Food! Our Valentine’s Day meal already prepared,” said Reno.

“And yes, we catered it,” admitted Sal. “But we’re just trying to be more attentive this year.”

“But what is it?” asked Gemma.

“We decided to go vegan,” said Tommy with a big smile on his face.

“Vegan?” Grace looked at Tommy. “Since when?”

“Since right now, Grace,” said Reno. “We’re serious about this.”

Grace, Trina, and Gemma walked over to the center island and looked at the food spread out in saran wrap.

“There’s squash soup,” said Reno. “We got us some spinach casserole. And here’s the topper, Tree: asparagus pie.” He smiled a grand smile. “What you think?”

Trina looked at Reno like she knew better than that. “I think you better get that shit out of my kitchen. That’s what I think. Valentine’s Day is soul food day in this household. Come on, girls, let’s show these fools how it done!”

And as the girls went into the kitchen to prepare that beloved soul food meal the men loved so much, Reno leaned against Tommy and Sal.

“I told you it’ll work,” whispered Reno. “Now pay up!” Reno had bet that if they catered an unpleasant meal that the ladies would be happy to prepare their soul food meals instead. But Tommy and Sal disagreed. They felt the ladies

would see right through Reno's scheme and eat the terrible meal anyway.

But before Tommy and Sal could get a dime out of their pockets, Trina suddenly had a bright idea. "On second thought," she said, and everybody looked at her.

"Wait a minute, Tree," said a panicking Reno.

"On second thought what, Tree?" said a hopeful Sal, who truly did not want to lose a bet to Reno in his lifetime.

"Why not!" said Trina.

"Yeah," said Grace. "Why not!"

"But what are you saying?" asked Reno.

"Right," said Gemma. "Why not!"

"But why not what?" asked a panicking Reno. He was this close to winning the bet!

"What's wrong with embracing a little change? Our men took the time to get this food up in here. We should just eat it and enjoy the night. Put on the music, Alexa," Trina said. "Let's plate the food and get this party started!"

And as the ladies opened up the various catered dishes, and as Tommy and Sal high-fived and laughed, Reno was as

dejected as could be. Winning a bet against Sal was like winning the lottery for him. And they go and ruin it by being practical? Reno was through dealing.

Until Trina went up to him. “I knew your ass was up to no good,” she said and the ladies looked at her.

“Asparagus pie. Boy bye!”

And they all laughed. Even Reno had to smile on that one.

“What are we going to do then?” asked Grace. “I, for one, am not looking forward to spinach casserole.”

“Then let’s get out of here,” said Sal. “Let’s go paint the town.”

“I know this cute little strip joint,” Trina said, and the men looked at her in horror. And it wasn’t funny to them.

Trina, reading the room accurately, took off, knowing that her life was on the line. Grace and Gemma, laughing so hard they could hardly stand up, was right behind her. And Reno, Sal, and Tommy, with Sal and Tommy laughing it up too, was behind them.

When they finally caught up with Trina, they were too busy laughing to be upset. Even Reno was laughing too.

And for the first time in memory, the ladies gladly returned to the kitchen to cook their soul food Valentine's Day dinner. And the men, for the first time ever, gladly assisted them.

Until a basketball game came on, and they abandoned them with the quickness.

The ladies watched them hurry in front of the TV, arguing even as they were trying to place bets which team who would win, who would score the most points, who would get the most rebounds and assists. The ladies shook their heads.

"Men," said Grace.

"Men," said Gemma.

"No," said Trina. "*Our* men. And don't worry. They'll make it up to us tonight. Bet that."

And the ladies, knowing it to be nothing but the truth, laughed heartily, enjoyed the view of their men happy and content, and then happily, eagerly, got back into that kitchen to not just cook, but to put their feet in it.

Visit

www.mallorymonroebooks.com

or

www.austinbrookpublishing.com

or

www.amazon.com/author/mallorymonroe

for more information on all titles.