



TIME SERVED MC



TENILLO TX

hammer

BOOK TWELVE



CEE BOWERMAN

Hammer

Time Served MC, Book 12

Cee Bowerman

CLBooks, LLC



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Cee Bowerman Master Book List

The Rojo, Texas Universe

Texas Knights MC

(completed)

Home Forever

Forever Family

Lucky Forever

Love Forever

Texas Kings MC

(completed)

Kale

Sonny

Bird

Grunt

Lout

Smokey

Tucker

Kale & Terra (Novella)

John & Mattie

Bear

Daughtry

Hank

Fain

Grady

Stoffer

Luke

Clem

Conner Brothers Construction

(completed)

Finn

Angus

Mace

Ronan

Royal

Tavin

Chess

Rojo, TX

(completed)

Rason & Eliza

Atlas & Addie

Jazmyne & Luc

Kari & Levi

Noah & Tallie

Nick & Cindy

Marcus & Reagan

The Tempests

(completed)

Wrath

Creed

Loki

Styx

Thorn

Freya

Sin

Lonestar Terrace

(in progress)

1005 Alamo Way

Cee Bowerman's Stand Alone Series

Time Served MC

(in progress)

Boss

Hook

Chef

Preacher

Captain

Bug

Santa

Kitty

Rodeo

Stamp

TS in NY

Hammer

The Four Families

(in progress)

Rico Romano

Springblood

(in progress)

One More Day - COMING APRIL 15TH, 2023!

The Donovans

(in progress)

Drink It Up

Pull It Up

Pretty It Up

Curl It Up

The Rojo, Texas Universe
In Chronological Reading Order

Home Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 1
Forever Family: Texas Knights MC, Book 2
 Kale: Texas Kings MC, Book 1
 Sonny: Texas Kings MC, Book 2
 Bird: Texas Kings MC, Book 3
 Grunt: Texas Kings MC, Book 4
 Lout: Texas Kings MC, Book 5
 Smokey: Texas Kings MC, Book 6
 Tucker: Texas Kings MC, Book 7
Finn: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 1
 Kale & Terra: a Texas Kings novella
 John & Mattie: Texas Kings MC, Book 8
Angus: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 2
 Bear: Texas Kings MC, Book 9
Lucky Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 3
 Daughtry: Texas Kings MC, Book 10
Mace: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 3
 Hank: Texas Kings MC, Book 11
 Fain: Texas Kings MC, Book 12
Love Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 4
 Rason & Eliza: Rojo, TX, Book 1
Ronan: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 4
 Grady: Texas Kings MC, Book 13
 Atlas & Addie: Rojo, TX, Book 2
Royal: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 5

Stoffer: Texas Kings MC, Book 14
Jazmyne & Lucius: Rojo, TX, Book 3
Wrath: The Tempests, Book 1
Luke: Texas Kings MC, Book 15
Tavin: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 6
Kari & Levi: Rojo, TX, Book 4
Creed: The Tempests, Book 2
Noah & Tallie: Rojo, TX, Book 5
Loki: The Tempests, Book 3
Styx: The Tempests, Book 4
Thorn: The Tempests, Book 5
Chess: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 7
Clem: Texas Kings MC, Book 16
Freya: The Tempests, Book 6
Sin: The Tempests, Book 7
Nick & Cindy: Rojo, TX, Book 6
Marcus & Reagan: Rojo, TX, Book 7

Reading Order for the Tenillo Guardians Crossover Series

Boss: Time Served MC, Book 1

Sin's Enticement: Ares Infidels MC, Book 1 by Ciara St James

Hook: Time Served MC, Book 2

Executioner's Enthrallment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 2 by Ciara St James

Chef: Time Served MC, Book 3

Pitbull's Enslavement: Ares Infidels MC, Book 3 by Ciara St James

Preacher: Time Served MC, Book 4

Omen's Entrapment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 4 by Ciara St James

Captain: Time Served MC, Book 5

Cuffs' Enchainment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 5 by Ciara St James

Bug: Time Served MC, Book 6

Rampage's Enchantment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 6 by Ciara St James

Santa: Time Served MC, Book 7

Wrecker's Ensnarement: Ares Infidels MC, Book 7 by Ciara St James

Kitty: Time Served MC, Book 8

Trident's Enjoyment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 8 by Ciara St James

Rodeo: Time Served MC, Book 9

Fang's Enlightenment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 9 by Ciara St James

Stamp: Time Served MC, Book 10

Talon's Enamorment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 10 by Ciara
St James

Time Served In New York: Time Served MC, Book 11

Ares Infidels In New York: Ares Infidels MC, Book 11 by
Ciara St. James

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

I'm excited to finally tell Hammer's story. Since his first appearance in the Time Served MC series, he's been a fun character to watch develop. Always cheerful and bursting into song, much to the dismay of a few of his MC brothers, Hammer became a favorite of readers who have been anxiously waiting for his story to play out.

When I started writing his book, I felt compelled to make him that loveable guy who randomly spouts lyrics and seems to belong on a stage somewhere. But just like anyone else, there are ups and downs in life, and sometimes a person just can't find their song. Worries, stress, and heartbreak can make the most cheerful person lose their purpose and change their behavior.

I always try to make my characters relatable, and sometimes, that means that in order to experience the highs, they have to tolerate the lows. Hammer is going to go through that, and I hope you fall even more in love with him as you take the journey with him. When you learn his history and his secrets, you might be surprised to learn he's been able to bring cheer to almost every situation.

And, just like the people around Hammer, your heart will ache for him as his story unfolds. But, as Hammer goes through the course of his story, you'll start to see the light at the end of the tunnel, and luckily, there's a song or two there.

Thank you for sticking with me through all of my characters' ups and downs. I hope that makes you love them even more.

Happy reading,

Cee

PROLOGUE

MORE THAN THIRTY YEARS AGO

The rhythmic squeak of the rocking chair was enough to lull me to sleep, but every time I started to drift off, I stopped moving and that would make the baby in my arms start to squirm again. It had taken me two hours to get him settled tonight, and I *really* needed a little peace and quiet for a while. Well, as much peace and quiet as one could find when there was a party going on in the living room at the front of the house.

When I'd gone out earlier to scour the kitchen for snacks to give the older kids before bedtime, I'd looked around at the people lounging on the furniture and the floor and recognized at least a dozen faces. Unfortunately, there were almost that many that I didn't recognize, so I knew that tonight was going to be a blowout. I didn't let that get me down, though. I grabbed the jar of peanut butter and a sleeve of crackers that I'd stashed behind the canned vegetables that no one but me ever used. After I'd filled a couple of cups with ice, I made my way through the crowd of people, nodding at the ones I recognized and ignoring the ones I didn't, to get back to the den I'd commandeered as my own suite of sorts.

Luckily, there was a small bathroom with a shower and toilet so none of us had to venture out for anything other than food. I had enough dried goods and bottled water stocked in the cabinets that lined one side of the room to last a few days, but when I heard mention of a delivery coming in tonight, I'd wanted to see who'd shown up for the party.

No one of importance, obviously, but that was just my opinion. My mom and stepfather, on the other hand, didn't see a problem with entertaining drug addicts and users because that was how they afforded all those pesky little extravagances like electricity, running water, and food. The last time I'd complained about the company my parents kept, all it had gotten me was a split lip and the stern reminder that I didn't bring in any income and should keep my opinion to myself.

I looked at the bunk beds against the far wall when I heard rustling coming from the lower bed. I laughed softly when Olivia flipped over in her sleep and smacked Veronica in the face but was glad it didn't wake her up. I'm sure it would've led to another toddler brawl, like the multitude I'd already broken up today.

Brandon, my 2-month-old sibling, squirmed against my chest as movement in the window caught my attention. I stopped rocking to lean closer and peer outside, thinking I was probably going to get another impromptu show from some couple who had gotten a little too high and decided to turn our back yard into a bedroom.

I leaned back suddenly when a shadowy figure darted from behind a bush across the yard followed by three other crouched figures, all wearing the same black clothes. I knew from experience that I had less than three minutes to get somewhere safe and away from the windows and the doors. Luckily, I'd planned for this eventuality when I chose the den as my base of operations.

I swept up Olivia and Veronica and held them tight as I darted across the den. I slid into the bathroom with the girls underneath my arm and the baby still against my chest. I kicked the door shut behind me and walked into the shower before I set the girls on their feet. I'd had the forethought to keep them wrapped in the comforter that had been covering them, so after I was settled cross-legged with my back to the glass door to block them in case it shattered, I arranged it on the tile and sat them in front of me.

"It's okay, girls. It's okay. I'm here. I'll take care of you." I was so grateful the baby was still asleep as I got the girls settled. "Let's sing a song. What do you want to hear?"

"Fufu!" Veronica said through frantic tears. Olivia nodded, and I smiled when she tried to mimic her big sister by saying, "Fufu, peeze."

I had just started singing, using my free hand to make the motions as the girls followed my lead, when there was a loud boom followed by two more that shook the house. I heard

glass shattering and people screaming along with men's voices yelling, "Get on the floor!" I kept singing and didn't stop, even when the bathroom door flew open and slammed against the wall. I was still singing when the shower door opened and a gun was pointed in my face. I saw the man's eyes over the edge of his tactical gear and watched them widen when he realized I wasn't just some asshole trying to hide from the cops.

"You gonna shoot me right in front of them or do you think you could wait a beat until I cover them up?"



"Listen, Grandpa. This isn't my first rodeo. This ride is gonna be a lot more successful than the last one."

The gray-haired man's eyebrows rose, and he snorted. "You think so?"

"I know so," I boasted, praying I was right. "You can threaten me all you want, but I'm barely 16 and obviously not a drug-dealing gun runner like my stepdad or a worthless junkie like my mom. If you were to lump me in with all those assholes you picked up at my house tonight, you *might* get a conviction that will keep me in jail for a year. Maybe two. Or, you can find another agent who's not Father Time and has an open mind and the ability to look at me without that fucking sneer you're wearing. I'll tell them every detail of the entire operation, down to and including where they hide all the good shit."

"We found all the *good shit*," the agent retorted before he leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't think you're in any position to give orders, young man, and hear me when I tell you that insulting me is just going to make things worse for you."

"You think so? You think you can give me something worse than dropping out of school because my mother refuses to use birth control and knowing that when I leave the house,

the kids will be hungry while they lay in their own filth until I get back? Or maybe you think hanging out in jail where you're gonna make sure I've got plenty to eat will be my nightmare. Hell, you'll even be forced to find me a dentist that can fix the fucking crater in my tooth. You think that's worse than having to risk a beating for stealing cash out of my mom's purse so I can buy baby formula and diapers?"

"So you admit that you've helped launder money from drug activities?"

"Fuck you, old man. That's a reach, even in your advanced age with your dwindling mental faculties. You know good and damn well that charge isn't gonna stick."

"I'm sure I can find more."

I leaned forward, my eyes boring into his, and smirked when the agent winced. "Do it."

The door to the interrogation room opened, and two more agents walked in. One of them had the air of being in charge while the other didn't look much older than me. The man across from me stood up. It was clear that he was lower on the ladder than the new guy. I wondered if the man had been watching our interaction from behind the two-way mirror.

The young man took the chair across from me as the agent in charge nodded toward the door, and both of the older men left the room.

"Wow. They went from one extreme to the other, didn't they? First I got Santa Claus, and now I have one of his elves."

The agent chuckled before he said, "I'm not much shorter than you, asshole."

"You're not much older than me either. You must be a baby interrogator. Since I'm a small fish in a big catch, they're gonna let you cut your teeth on my case, huh?"

"I find it strange that you're so fearless even though you've been in cuffs for the last three hours."

“That’s probably due to the mental damage caused by my neglectful upbringing that has led me to become callous to normal human emotions.”

“Big words for a dropout.”

“You’re not technically a dropout when the school system doesn’t know you exist, are you?”

“You haven’t gone to school since your family moved to El Paso?”

“That motherfucker is not my family, and that worthless bitch is my mother in the loosest sense of the word.”

“Do you have information that can help us with our investigation and lead to their conviction?”

“And then some.”

“Like what?”

“Can’t tell you that until you give me what I want.”

“And what do you want?”

“I want a signed contract that promises you’ll make sure that my sisters and brother will not be separated and *not* put in foster care. They need to be put up for adoption. Together.”

The agent’s brow furrowed, and he asked, “What about you?”

“Emancipation.”

“You don’t want to go to a good home with your siblings?”

I laughed bitterly. “I highly doubt you could find a family willing to take me too. Even if you did, I can guarantee I wouldn’t be a good fit. I want a clean break for them. They need to be as far away from this life as possible. I can take care of myself.”

“Don’t you have any family anywhere that would take you in?”

“If there was, don’t you think I’d have packed the kids up and gone to them already?”

“What are you going to do if you get emancipated?”

“Find a job, buy a car, and get as far away from this shithole as I can.”

“What sort of information do you have that makes you think I can get all that done for you?”

“Not to toot my own horn or anything, but you’ve been talking to me for a bit now and probably watched me go toe-to-toe with Methuselah. I pay close attention to things to stay on top of my game. I not only know the location of their stash, I know who they get it from, the routes they take on their way here, and where the bodies - a whole lot of bodies - are buried.”

“And for that, you want an adoptive family for the little ones and emancipation for yourself?”

“And I’ll obviously require immunity from prosecution and would like a new identity, if that can be arranged.”

“Boy, if you know as much as you say you do, that’s a given.



TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

I blew over the rim of my mug the waitress had just topped off as I waited for the next round of trivia to start on the television above the bar. Since I had a few minutes, I had a look around the restaurant at the other diners and made up stories for myself about where they’d come from and what had led them here tonight.

One couple was on their first date, if their nervous smiles and laughter were any indication. They’d come in separately, and I wondered if this was some sort of online match-up. We had an agent who’d just joined our post that talked about his online dating escapades all the time. After hearing his stories for a few weeks, some of the other guys had gotten on board and insisted that I needed to set up a profile. It made sense

that meeting a woman online would be a much easier way to get to know her. Maybe she wouldn't run screaming for the hills after talking to me for five minutes like my last two dates.

I heard a baby cry and looked around, curious since I hadn't seen anyone with children, and it was damn near closing time. There was no reason for an infant to ever be in this smoky restaurant, but at this time of night, they should be tucked safely in their crib. I didn't see a baby carrier or anyone holding a child of any age. When the baby cried again, I realized that the sound was coming from the swinging doors that led into the kitchen not far from my table.

"What the hell?" I muttered to myself. I heard the kitchen doors squeak as they opened and got quite a shock when a woman holding a tiny baby walked through them holding the hand of a toddler who was still unsteady on her feet. Another little girl held the toddler's other hand, and she looked around warily as they approached my table.

Without a word, the woman pulled out the chair across from mine and motioned for the older girl to climb into it. My waitress appeared with a high chair and picked up the younger girl to put her in without saying a word before she walked away. Out of habit, I pushed my water glass away so she couldn't spill it as the woman sat down next to her daughter and adjusted the baby on her shoulder.

"To what do I owe this honor?" I asked as I scanned the restaurant, wondering where the guards were stationed.

"You know who I am?"

"Of course," I scoffed. "The bigger question is, how do you know *me*?"

Gabriella Gomez, the wife of Israel Gomez who was the focus of my investigation into the Sinvalor Cartel, smiled at me before she answered, "I've been studying you, Agent Reynolds."

"Do you know as much about me as I know about you?" I asked as I slid my unfinished plate of cheese fries closer to the

girls who were sitting patiently while their mother talked to me. They looked at her for approval, and when she nodded, they each grabbed a fry and stuffed it into their mouth.

“I know that you will always have a child’s best interests in mind when you make a life-changing decision,” Gabriella said surely, her smile softening as she watched her daughters devour my food.

“What makes you think that?”

“You’ve been doing it since you weren’t much more than a child yourself.” *That* set off my Spidey-Senses, and I felt my entire body tense. “Do not let that make you wary of me, Agent Reynolds. A mother must do her research when she is making a decision about the safety of her children.”

“Most mothers study the back of a package to make sure there’s not too much sugar in something they’re feeding their children; I would think it’s pretty uncommon to investigate a government official who works for the agency that’s trying to take down her husband.”

“Too much sugar is the least of my worries, don’t you think?”

“What does my history have to do with that?”

“You are a man who likes to make deals, am I right?” I *knew* she was talking about the deal I’d made with Agent Jesse Forrester, my mentor and friend who had helped me turn my life around after my parents’ house had been raided all those years ago. When I didn’t answer, Gabriella continued, “I have a deal for you that’s much like the one you made when you were in a situation similar to mine.”

“I’m not in the market to make deals, Mrs. Gomez.”

“No, but you are in the market to make sure that three small kids find passage to a safe life where they can grow up without the worry of drugs and guns all around them.”

“Still not my area of expertise. That would be up to my superiors who I’d be happy to put you in contact with. I’m sure they can put you in witness protection, and that will

include a safe place for the four of you and even a new last name.”

“I can find a new name myself as well as a safe place to raise my children. That is not the issue, Agent Reynolds.”

“Then what do you need from me?”

“I need to disappear from this town, this state, without anyone knowing where I’ve gone, and that includes your superiors.”

“I’m not sure I can help you with that. You want a couple of bucks for a bus ticket or what?”

“I have access to plenty of money, as I’m sure you know. I need a vehicle that can’t be traced to anyone in this town so I can drive off into the sunrise and disappear forever.”

“A deal is usually beneficial to both sides.”

Mrs. Gomez reached into the diaper bag she’d hung on the chair where her daughter was sitting and pulled out three notebooks, their covers worn and the edges of the paper frayed. She set them on the table next to my water glass and rested her hand on top before she smiled at me.

“I’ll give you three minutes to skim through my journals before you have to decide if you will help me.”

“If what’s in there is enough to help bring down your husband, I can almost guarantee that my superiors will get you what you need, Mrs. Gomez.”

“And they’ll keep it under wraps so no one will be able to find me?”

“Of course.”

“If I can find out about your history, your home address, and even your blood type, what makes you think my husband doesn’t have the connections to find his wife and children, Agent Reynolds?”

I glanced at the notebooks and then back to Mrs. Gomez.
“All you want is a ride?”

“Not a ride. A car.”

“And you can’t get that on your own?”

“My in-laws have connections all over this town. If I purchase a car anywhere near here, my husband will know the make and model by lunch. If I borrow one from any of my acquaintances, he’ll kill them for helping me and then murder their family just for laughs.”

“That sounds like his MO for sure,” I said with a sneer.

“Give me your vehicle for thirty-six hours, and I’ll give you information that will make your entire career, Agent Reynolds.” Mrs. Gomez tapped her finger on top of the notebooks and slid them closer. “You have three minutes.”

I lifted the first cover and opened it to a random page. It was almost impossible not to audibly gasp when I read the words there. When I flipped to another page and saw a detailed map with a legend in the corner that listed drop-off and pick-up locations as well as burial grounds, I couldn’t stop my eyes from bulging as my eyebrows rose to my hairline in question.

I looked at Mrs. Gomez as I pulled my truck keys from my pocket, glad I kept them on a separate ring from my work keys. “I just filled the tank. You should be good to go for at least 300 miles. I’ll report it stolen when I wake up Monday morning.”

I slid the keys across the table as she pushed the notebooks closer to me. She grabbed the keys and then smiled at me.

“Will you help me take my daughter out of her chair, señor?”

“Of course.” I lifted the girl out and set her on the floor by her sister. I smiled at her when she gave me a toothy grin and reached up to tuck her hair behind her ear before I nudged her toward her mom.

“Thank you, Agent Reynolds. I’m sure we’ll meet again someday.”

“Will we?”

“Of course. I’m not one to forget my debts.”

1.

ONE YEAR AGO

PREACHER

“We found him.”

Boss’s irritated voice came through the speaker loud and clear, “Where the hell was he? Put him on the phone.”

“He’s not in any shape to talk right now, Boss,” Santa said from where he knelt at Hammer’s side. “He’s breathing, though. At least there’s that.”

“What the fuck ... Is he hurt?”

I shook my head and then remembered that Boss couldn’t see me, so I pushed the button to change the call to video. After a few seconds, Boss’s scowling face appeared on the screen and I realized he was riding on another ATV. “He’s not hurt, but he’s out of it.” I swapped the view on the phone to show him Hammer’s prone body and said, “There’s an empty bottle beside him, and he smells like a distillery.”

“But Hammer doesn’t drink.” As an afterthought, Boss added, “Thank God.”

“Unless someone dragged his big ass out into the middle of nowhere and poured it down his throat, I think he does.”

“It’s weird to see him so quiet and still,” Captain said as he went to one knee on Hammer’s other side. He put a finger on his neck and said, “He’s not dead. His pulse is strong.”

“I’d fucking hope not,” Boss barked. “We can see you guys now.”

The call disconnected just as I heard an engine in the distance. In the waning light, I could see the outline of an ATV carrying three people.

“What do you think happened to make him drink like this?”

“Shit. I don’t know, Preach. The guy’s always ... up. I’ve seen him angry, but ... Well, I guess that’s not true. As psychotic as it sounds, I’ve seen him hurt people while he sang show tunes with a giant smile, but I’ve never seen him really angry.”

“Captain’s right. Hammer’s always so chill. I didn’t think anything could bring him down,” Santa agreed.

“Apparently, it just takes a bottle of whiskey,” I pointed out sarcastically.

As the larger ATV Chef was driving with Boss and Kitty as passengers pulled up, Hammer started to stir. His eyes didn’t open, but he mumbled something I didn’t catch before they shut off the machine. Captain leaned closer and asked Hammer, “What did you say, man? Who is Huey?”

“If he starts singing a song from that 80s band, I’ll fucking shoot him,” I threatened.

Another ATV pulled up, and Stamp and Bug joined us in the circle we’d formed around Hammer. We stared at him in stunned silence when tears leaked from the corners of his eyes as he whispered, “I’m sorry, son. I’m so sorry I couldn’t save you.”

“He’s got a ... had a son?” Stamp whispered.

“Fuck,” Boss muttered, his voice not much louder than Stamp’s. “I wonder if today is the anniversary.”

“Of what?” I asked.

“His son disappeared, and they found his body in the woods a few months later.”

“Did he get lost, or was he ...”

“Hammer’s wife was ...”

Boss and I spoke at the same time, but Kitty interrupted, “Hammer was *married*?”

Boss nodded as he continued, “While Hammer was at work, the kids were home with his wife. She left the little boy

in the yard for a second while she ran in to check on the baby, and when she came back, he was gone.”

“Fuck,” Stamp hissed.

“His bicycle was in the street. It seemed like the kidnappers had run over it as they drove off. After they found the body, they realized that it hadn’t been a kidnapping after all. The boy had been hit, but instead of getting help or even just leaving the scene, the driver buried him in the woods to hide the evidence. The coroner said he was still alive when he was put in the ground.”

“That’s fucking horrible,” Kitty said quietly as he squatted near Hammer and put his hand on his shoulder.

“Did they ever find the driver?” I asked.

“A neighbor called in a tip that included the damage to the car, and the cops put out an APB. By the time they found him, Hammer was finished doing the deed that gave him his nickname.”

“What did he do?” Captain asked.

“He used a two-pound blacksmith hammer on him. When the cops arrived, the fucker was still alive. Hammer was covering him with dirt, just like he’d done to his son.”

Chef nodded slowly, understanding exactly what grief could do to a parent. After a few seconds, he asked, “That’s what landed him in prison?”

“Yep. That’s probably what’s got him all fucked up today.”



FOUR MONTHS AGO

“I’ve studied her jacket, and I’m not positive it’s Quincy, Hugh. This could be another dead end.”

Jesse Forrester, my mentor when I was with the FBI and the only person from my previous life who knew me today, had been helping me search for my wife since she disappeared less than a year into my prison sentence. When she and my children fell off the radar and couldn't be located by their handler in the WITSEC program, Jesse had traveled to the prison where I was being held to tell me himself. At first, they thought my family might have been taken by Israel Gomez to bring me out of 'hiding' so he could exact his revenge for my work to bring down the Sinvalor cartel. But after more investigation, the agents realized that wasn't the case at all.

My wife and our two daughters, Athena who was 3 and Evelyn who was almost 2, had disappeared thirteen years ago. There was no trace of them anywhere near their last known location in Kansas where they'd been relocated after my arrest and conviction for murdering the man who'd killed my 6-year-old son, Huey.

"You're slipping up, old friend. I'm not Hugh anymore," I reminded him, ignoring his warning that we might be hitting another dead end.

"Denny. Hammer. Whatever the hell your name is. You're safer than you've ever been now that we've got Israel Gomez in custody."

"'Now' being the most important word in that sentence," I teased. "You had him in custody five years ago, and we all know how that worked out."

"True. He got his freedom right around the same time you did. That's not going to happen this time."

"Sure it won't."

"Can I tell you a secret?"

"Your fetish, your business," I joked.

Jesse barked out a short laugh before he said, "I know he's not getting out because he's about three inches from death's door."

I stopped walking and looked at my old friend. "That's still three inches too far away, as far as I'm concerned."

“I feel the same way, but testicular cancer is a painful and unforgiving bitch, especially when you’ve been pickling your body with your own product for damn near thirty years.”

“Do you find it as ironic as I do that his balls are what’s finally killing him, considering they’ve been so important in his line of work? Do you think they’ll let me sing a hymn at his funeral?”

Jesse snickered and shook his head as I started to hum “Amazing Grace.” He interrupted and asked, “What are you going to do if the woman inside isn’t Quincy?”

“I’ll keep looking.”

“For how long?”

“If your kids disappeared, how long would you search for them?”

Jesse closed his eyes in understanding and nodded. He didn’t have to say anything. We both knew the answer. I would search for my kids until I found them or until I took my last breath.

“With Gomez gone, your life can go back to the way it was.”

“Even if he had kicked it before I went to prison, my life would’ve never been the same.”

“I’ve looked through every record I could get my hands on from every foster and adoption agency that exists and still haven’t found your girls, Hugh. I know you’ve done the same, and you’re good at it since you found your little brother and sisters, but at some point, you’re going to have to come to grips with the fact that you might never find your daughters.”

“I might not, but I’ll never stop. I didn’t stop until I made sure that the kids were alright in the place you found for them, and now I won’t stop until I find my girls. You know that.”

“I wouldn’t either,” Jesse admitted.

“Up until about a year ago, the thought of finding my family was all I had. Things have changed since I moved back

to Texas. I'm surrounded by people I can't imagine living without, but I'd give them all up just to have my kids back."

"That little town you're so fond of has gone through some major changes in the last year, hasn't it?"

"Everyone says change is good."

Jesse laughed darkly. "Especially when you and your friends are the one causing it, am I right?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Keep doing that good work, my friend. It might just give you guys the redemption you're looking for."

"We're not looking for anything but a safe and quiet place to live our lives."

"I guess that's why you've been so successful."

"Are you fishing for information?"

"Nope, just making an observation, pal. You keep your part of Texas clean, my family will keep their part clean, and I'll work on the rest."

"Teamwork makes the dream work, so they say."

"Who's watching the home front while you and your buddies are here in New York?"

"We've got minions holding down the fort," I said dismissively. "A few of them aren't ready to travel quite yet, so it worked out since we needed someone to stay to feed the animals and such."

"And kill the predators?"

"Still fishing?"

"I'm just making conversation." Jesse laughed before he pointed out, "I like how you say they aren't ready to travel when, in reality, their parole officers are the ones who might take issue with it."

"Uptight pricks, every damn one of 'em. When I got rid of mine, it was like I took a really healthy shit and lost 230 pounds of dead weight."

“Your opinion of law enforcement hasn’t changed since you were a kid even though you joined our ranks for a time.”

“Everyone makes rash decisions in their early twenties. It’s like a rite of passage.” Jesse’s laughter stopped abruptly as we pulled into the parking lot of the county hospital used by the nearby prison for inmates who needed advanced medical care. “Have you tried talking to her yet?”

“I have, but she was evasive. It seemed like she recognized me, but she never acknowledged it.”

“Does she know I’m coming?”

“No. I didn’t inform the warden until five minutes before I picked you up at your hotel, and I warned him to have the guards keep our visit under wraps.”

“Shock value.”

“Exactly,” Jesse said as he parked. We were quiet during the trek across the parking lot and only spoke to ask for directions as we made our way through the halls of the hospital. Soon, we were standing at the door of the room that might hold the answers to where my daughters were located. “Are you nervous?”

“Right now, it’s just another day. Ask me again in ten minutes.”

I nodded at the guard before I pushed through the door and stopped when I saw the shell of a woman laying in the bed. She was connected to the monitors beside her bed by more wires and tubes than I could count. She didn’t even look in my direction when I walked through the door. I studied her profile before I made my way around the bed and watched her eyes give me a cool up-and-down.

I hadn’t been absolutely sure just by looking at her, but the second her eyes met mine, I knew the woman in front of me was my wife. Judging by her expression of stark fear, she also knew who I was. I shot a look toward the door and nodded at Jesse. A sad look crossed his face before he let his head drop.

“Quincy,” I said as I held her gaze.

“Oh God. Hugh,” Quincy whispered as her eyes filled with tears. “How did you find me?”

“You really thought I wouldn’t?”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” she said before she started sobbing. She tried to lift her hand to wipe the tears streaming down her cheeks, but the cuffs made her helpless against them.

“Where are my girls, Quincy?”

“I’m sorry!”

I sat, propping a hip on the bed beside her, and reached up to brush hair out of her eyes. “Talk to me. Tell me what happened to them. To you.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, you keep saying that,” I mumbled as I looked at the IV pole attached to the gurney. “Are you sorry because you’ve done something that’s gonna send you to hell or because you think I’m going to hurry the trip?”

“I’m on my way without your help. I’ve been traveling that road since Huey died.”

“What have you done with my daughters, Quincy?”

“All I can tell you is that they’re safe. Just know that.”

“Whatever’s wrong with you, does it hurt?”

“It hurts so bad,” Quincy said with a sob. “I just want it to end.”

“Did you know we’re still legally married? I expected to receive divorce papers while I was inside but never did. Why’s that?” Quincy shrugged, her bony shoulders barely moving the sheet resting across her chest. “If you don’t tell me how to find my daughters, I’ll use every dime and resource I have to keep you alive and in pain until you change your mind.”

“I don’t know where they are now, I just know that they’re safe and happy. Please just let me die, Hugh.”

“I’ll judge for myself how happy they are when I find them and then spend the rest of my days making up for the time I’ve lost. But if you don’t give me everything I need to get that started, I’ll make every second of your time left on this earth more painful than the last.”

“Please, Hugh. You loved me once ...”

“That vanished forever when I found out that bastard paid you to keep quiet after he ran over our son.” I heard Jesse gasp as Quincy’s eyes bulged, and the monitor above the bed started beeping loudly.

“I’m ...”

I stood and pointed my finger at her before I threatened, “Say you’re sorry one more fucking time, and the next thing I hear from you will be screams of pain.” Quincy’s mouth snapped shut. “Where the fuck are my kids, Quincy?”

“I sold them to the wife of Israel Gomez.”

2.

TWO MONTHS AGO

PITA

“You told him about us, didn’t you?” I asked my oldest daughter, wondering if she could sense my irritation through the screen.

“Of course I told him!”

“At least you had the good sense to wait until the honeymoon,” I muttered as I looked out the window and watched my youngest daughter’s calico cat stalk a bird.

“I told him two weeks before the wedding.” My eyes snapped back to the tablet I was holding, and I stared at my daughter in shock for a few seconds and then frowned when she laughed at my reaction. “You didn’t think I’d marry him with a secret like that hanging over our heads, did you?”

“Sometimes secrets are necessary for a successful marriage. It keeps the mystery alive and the arguments few.”

“My marriage isn’t like yours was, Mami,” Juliette chided.

“If it were, you’d already be a grieving widow,” I assured her. “When I married your father, he didn’t even know my middle name.”

“Which one? You’ve got, like, five.”

“As do you, my dear,” I retorted. Sobering, I asked, “What did he say when you told him who your father was?”

“He was stunned but recovered quickly. He said that it didn’t matter where I’d come from; the only thing that mattered was that I would be beside him for the rest of our lives.”

I felt my breath catch and had to clear my throat before I could comment, “I might like him a little bit, Juliette.”

“Just a little bit?”

I pinched my thumb and finger together before I narrowed my gaze and said, “This much.” Juliette laughed, a sound that had filled my heart with joy since she was just a baby in my arms. “As long as he makes you happy, mi princesa.”

“When will you go home again?” Juliette asked. “Do you still have to wait?”

“It could be any day now, but knowing my luck, the Devil will refuse to let him in when he knocks on Hell’s door, so he’ll have to stay.”

My daughter laughed, no love in her heart for the man who had sired her. She’d watched plenty of news programs and talked to enough of our family members who were still suffering with her father in the world to have developed a strong hatred for the man. But her level of hatred was nothing compared to mine.

Luckily, Juliette and Audrey had married men with enough power and influence to protect them while at the same time, loving them with all their heart and soul. If I’d had the chance to personally choose a match for either daughter, I couldn’t have done better than the ones they’d found on their own.

The fact that both had married men who were part of the English aristocracy and worked for the government made me feel their future was secure. Of course, that kept them far away from their father and all that his lifestyle entailed. Sadly, it also kept them far away from me.

“I have to go, Mami. I’m meeting Audrey at the nail salon, and then we’re going to lunch.”

“Give her my love. Maybe call me from the salon so I can see her too.”

“Of course. Te amo, Mami.”

“Te amo con todo mi corazón, hija.”

Once we disconnected, I stood up and walked through the atrium into the dining room. I looked around, making sure that all of the shelves and cabinets were empty, glad that my

china and collectibles were safely packed away in preparation for our move back to the United States.

I wasn't sure exactly when that would be exactly, but from the information I'd received, it would happen soon. My sources told me that unless there was some sort of divine intervention - and considering just the sins I knew about, that was highly unlikely - my husband would be dead soon.

I'd been raised to believe that wishing for someone's death would put a mark on my own soul, but in light of the other transgressions I'd committed in my lifetime, some out of necessity and others because I couldn't resist, one more probably wouldn't make a difference. At least in this instance, I wasn't *helping* the man die, just waiting eagerly on the sidelines. Surely that wouldn't count as heavily in the long run.

I didn't really care either way, though. I knew I'd get much more gratification if I could have something to do with his death, but I consoled myself knowing that his end was near and every second left of his life on this earth was spent in excruciating pain and immeasurable suffering. Every time I thought about that, I got a lightness in my heart and a smile on my face.

I'd been smiling a lot more than usual lately. Enough so that my older children had asked me what trick I had up my sleeve now. They knew me too well, apparently, but I could honestly say that in this instance, the future wasn't up to me.

I called my son, and he answered just as I walked into the kitchen and picked up my pen to check the formal dining room and atrium off of my packing list.

"Hola, Mama! I was just about to call you."

I glanced at the screen and made sure Chris saw me roll my eyes before I said, "Of course you were."

"I was wondering why you hadn't already called me."

"I called you yesterday and didn't get an answer or a return call." That was fairly normal, considering my son's line of work, but I had to give him grief or he'd think something was

wrong with me. “Are you so important now that you can’t even answer when I call?”

“You don’t know.”

“What were you doing that was more important than calling your poor, lonely, forgotten mother?”

“That was a little over the top even for you, don’t you think?”

I made sure I was out of the frame before I grinned at Dena, who had just walked into the kitchen from the back stairs. Evie followed closely behind her, carrying her cat. I was happy to see she was working to protect the bird population by bringing her terror back inside.

“Mom!”

“Yes, my neglectful son,” I answered, not able to hide my grin when I leaned back to meet his eyes. The look on his face alarmed me, and I instantly sobered. “What’s wrong?”

“Turn the television to an American news channel,” Chris ordered.

Dena grabbed the remote from the counter and aimed it toward the television hanging above the fireplace on the other side of the living room. It was already on a news channel that I watched often, and I gasped when I read the banner scrolling across the bottom of the screen.

“I’ll call you back, Cristobal,” I said as I hung up. I walked closer to the television, my mind racing almost as fast as my heart, and listened as the newscaster said the words I’d been waiting to hear for almost thirty years.

“Israel Gomez, leader of the Sinvalor Cartel, died in federal custody this morning. Sources report that the organization began to crumble after his initial arrest, but he was able to breathe new life into it after his escape from prison in 2016. After years on the run, a tip came from an insider with firsthand knowledge of Gomez’s schedule, and he was apprehended while at his doctor’s office in El Paso. At the time of his arrest, Gomez was seeking treatment for the

testicular cancer that took his life just before dawn this morning.”

“Dios mío,” I whispered as I clutched my hands in front of my chest. “Gracias. Gracias.”

“Are you okay, Mami?”

I turned around and smiled at my daughters who were standing side by side, their confusion and worry evident.

“Ven aquí, mijas.” I held my arms wide to wrap them in my embrace, and they melted into me like they’d done the first night I met them. “Today is the day we’ve been waiting for, my loves.”

“You mean ...”

I took a deep breath before I leaned forward and kissed Evie’s cheek and then Dena’s. “We can finally go home.”

“We’re going back to the United States?” Evie asked with a huge grin. She clapped her hands and shimmied with excitement. “Oh, this is awesome!”

“The first thing I’m going to do is take my driving test so I can get my permit. Then I’m going to spend three days at the mall before I go to the Navy Pier and ride the ...”

“Oh, we’re not going back to Chicago this time, mí reyna.”

“New York, then?” Evie asked.

“No, we’re going to Texas.”

Dena was confused. “Texas? You mean ...?”

“Yes, mija. We’re going to be near your father. It’s finally time for you to meet him.”



HAMMER

“We got some new information that might point us to Coleman Fairchild’s hideout,” I told the men at the table. I opened the folder in front of me and pulled a sheet off the top

before I passed the stack of papers to Captain who was sitting on my right. “I went over this information with Boss earlier today, and he’s going to do his thing after I highlight the most credible information I found about the remaining Fairchilds. He’ll start ordering us around after I point out the less reliable intel and details.”

“Why give us the shady stuff if you’re not sure it’s accurate?” Preacher asked grumpily as he took a paper and passed the stack to Chef.

“There’s a grain of truth in almost every lie, so we’ll need to use our heads and piece those strands together. Something might come of it, but then again, it may be nothing. Is this going to interrupt your social time, Preacher?” Boss asked.

Hook laughed. “Because the man is *so* sociable.”

“Sociopathic, maybe,” Santa mumbled, still irritated at something Preacher had done a few days ago.

“I’m sure he’s been tested,” Bug teased. “What were the results, Preach?”

“My morals are much too high for me to be a sociopath,” Preacher argued. “Technically, all of us are psychopaths, considering what we’ve been doing for the last while. A sociopath wouldn’t work with others to clear this town of scum; they would probably just ignore it unless it directly affected them.”

“So what we’ve done to get this far *doesn’t* make us sociopathic?” Kitty asked, confused.

“No, because we’ve been ... killing in the name of ...” Hook paused and leaned forward in his chair just a fraction while he studied my face. I frowned at him and then looked back down at the paper in front of me while I waited on him to finish gathering his thoughts. I turned to look at Santa when I heard him whispering to Preacher. When I looked back at Hook, *still waiting*, his eyes were wide and his face was pale as if he’d just gotten shocked.

“What?” I asked. Hook gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head. I sighed and said, “I guess he’s having a

stroke or some shit. Anyway, the spreadsheet is sorted so that ...”

Santa interrupted me by whistling the first notes of an old nursery rhyme as he watched me intently. Finally, he stopped and mused, “It makes you wonder why the word ‘row’ means a line but it’s also the word you use when you’re on a boat ... rowing ... gently ... down the stream.”

“Are the two of you high?” I asked, looking back and forth from Santa to Hook. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“What the fuck is wrong with *you*?” Preacher barked.

“Here lately, you haven’t been yourself, Hammer ... ” Boss started.

Bug interrupted and leaned forward as if he were anticipating something big when he said, “It’s like ... a whole new world.”

It seemed like every man at the table was holding their breath as they watched me, and I had finally had enough. “Why the fuck are all of you staring at me like you’re waiting for me to explode or some shit? Do I have something on my face? Do I have a hangdown?” I ran my hand over my mouth and down my goatee before I rubbed my nose. “Is it gone? What? You guys are giving me a complex.”

“There’s nothing on your face. You’re just as ugly today as you were yesterday and the day before,” Preacher assured me. “The problem is that you’re not quite as annoying as usual, and that’s got the guys worried.”

“Whatever. I’d just like to get this shit over with and get out of here so we can get to work.”

“Everybody’s workin’ for the weekend.”

“It’s Tuesday, Stamp.” I looked over and saw that he was staring at me intently, like they all had been doing for the last few minutes. “Why are all of you acting so weird?”

“Mind control,” Preacher said with a slow nod. “I knew the government had programs like that, but I didn’t realize they’d started using them on the general population.”

“What in the flying fuck are you talking about?”

“Have you fallen lately? Bumped your head? Do you have any bruises you can’t explain? Headaches? Muscle aches? What about ...”

“Did you drink Preacher’s Kool-Aid?” I asked Hook. “I feel just fucking fine, but I’m starting to get pissed off. What the fuck are we doing here if none of you are gonna focus on the issue at hand? This is bullshit.”

“You haven’t been yourself for a while now, Hammer. We’re all starting to get a little worried.”

“Boss is right. Ever since we got back from New York, you haven’t been right,” Captain added. “Did something happen while we were there for the wedding?”

“If you need to talk ...”

“No, Boss, I don’t need to fucking talk. I’ve got work to do but instead I’m sitting here in the middle of some kumbaya let’s-talk-about-our-feelings bullshit, and it’s starting to piss me off.”

“I think we’ve done enough for tonight. Let’s look over the papers Hammer gave us and reconvene on Sunday. The ladies are at my house with dinner ready. We’ll eat as soon as I get the burgers off the grill. Let’s go and chill for a while.”

“Just remember, we tried it the easy way, Hammer. The rest is on you.”

“What the fuck are you talking about, Preacher? God, if anyone’s off their rocker, it’s you, man. I’m just fine.”

“When August says that, it means she’s anything *but* fine,” Rodeo said from the end of the table where he and the other rookies had been sitting quietly while the rest of the men grilled me. “Even the girls miss you since you haven’t even been hanging out with us like you used to.”

“Maybe I don’t feel like hanging out with all the happy couples that are being all lovey dovey and shit. Have you ever thought of that?” I barked as I pushed my chair back. “Fuck this. I’m out.”



“Hey, Hammer,” Jenn, Boss’s old lady, said as she walked around the corner of the house. When she got closer, she handed me the plate she was carrying. “I brought you some dinner.”

“Thanks,” I said as I used the half-empty bottle I was holding to motion toward the empty chair next to mine. “Have a seat. Want a drink?”

“No. I’m not much of a bourbon straight-out-of-the-bottle kind of girl.”

“Bourbon? This is whiskey.”

“I thought they were the same thing,” Jenn said as she sat and crossed her legs. “What’s the difference?”

“Bourbon is always whiskey, but whiskey isn’t always bourbon.”

“That was as clear as mud.”

“Good whiskey is like a woman,” I said knowingly.

“How’s that?” Jenn asked.

“Smoky, mysterious, full-bodied, and leaves you slightly gasping.”

“That’s prophetic, Hammer.”

“I’m a poet at heart.” I set the bottle next to my chair and lifted the covering to see what was on the plate. “You guys went all out on dinner, didn’t you?”

“A few of us like to cook.”

“One of the many reasons the men are always smiling, I’m sure.”

“You used to smile too. What happened to that?” I took a bite of the burger so I didn’t have to answer, but Jenn wasn’t deterred. “We’re worried about you, Hammer.”

“Who is?” I asked around a mouthful of food.

“All of us.”

“I don’t know why,” I said once I’d swallowed. Before I took another bite, I told her, “I’m the same guy I’ve always been.”

“Not even close.”

“Why are you here, Jenn?”

“I just came to bring you dinner.”

“You’re a shit liar. Did you volunteer for this fishing expedition, or did they take a vote?”

Jenn laughed softly before she asked, “Why can’t a woman just come check in on her friend and bring him some dinner without the third degree?”

“Hey, guys,” Matalie said as she appeared from around the corner. “Jenn, you forgot his drink.”

“Oh! How could I forget that?”

“Oh my. How did that happen?” I asked drolly as I took the glass from Matalie. I set it down before I picked up the bottle and took another swig. “I’ve already got a beverage, but thank you. Want a sip, Matalie?”

“Sure,” Matalie said as she reached for the bottle. “What are we drinking to?”

“Shattered dreams.”

“Not cryptic at all.” Matalie took a deep gulp and then blew out a breath as she shook her head. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and wheezed, “Wow. That burns.”

“You forgot his dessert,” Maylee said with a chortle as she walked up with a plate in her hands. “Oh! We’re drinking straight from the bottle now?”

“It’s whiskey, not bourbon,” Jenn informed her.

Maylee scoffed and said, “Girl, have you forgotten where I came from? I know the difference.” She grabbed the bottle

and tilted it up for a long swig before she blew out a breath. “Not the best quality, but it will do in a pinch.”

“Hammer said whiskey is like a woman,” Jenn told her.

“Until I met Enzo, I thought most men should be like whiskey,” Maylee argued.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Left in an oak barrel for at least three years.” I wasn’t expecting that answer and burst out laughing along with Jenn and Matalie. Maylee took another drink and then studied the bottle as she said, “This really isn’t half bad, Hammer. Good choice.”

It was quiet for a few seconds until I sarcastically asked, “Who’s showing up next? Should I bring out another bottle?”

“You’ve got a stockpile now?” Jenn asked.

“What else is a single guy to do when he’s surrounded by all this happily ever after?”

“Hey guys! Are we having a party?” Blue asked as she and Paula walked around the corner.

“I guess we fucking are,” I said as I leaned back and picked up the second burger from the plate. “If I’d known company was coming, I would have put on a pretty dress.”

“Wow,” Paula snarked as she perched on the end of Jenn’s lounge chair. “It’s good to see you, too, Hammer.”

“I feel like this is an ambush. Are one of you going to start asking me about my feelings now or after we start painting our nails?”

“It’s like he doesn’t know us at all.” Blue pouted and reached for the bottle. She took a drink and then made a horrible face before she blew out a breath and said, “If anything will get the conversation flowing, it would be that shit.”

“Hammer said we’re drinking to shattered dreams,” Jenn informed the women.

“Isn’t there a song about that?” Paula asked.

“Yep. Johnny Hates Jazz.”

“I’m not a fan of jazz myself,” Maylee said as she took the bottle back for another drink.

“No, that’s the name of the band. They made the Top 10 with that song, but that’s about it.”

“And why aren’t you singing it?” Blue asked.

“Haven’t felt much like singing lately.”

“We’ve noticed,” Paula said with a sigh. “What’s up with that?”

“Can’t a man have a little downtime?”

“Not when it lasts for months. We’ve been trying to pull you out of it, but you’re just so cranky, and it doesn’t seem to be getting any better,” Matalie said as she angled her chair to face me. Blue sat down next to her, and I had to stop myself from sighing and rolling my eyes. We were in for the long haul if the girls were getting comfortable. “There’s something going on with you, and we can’t tiptoe around it anymore.”

“So you decided to stage an intervention?”

“Yep.” Blue grinned. “I knew you’d see right through their plan.”

“I’ve never had one of these before, but I’ve seen them on television.”

“Good, then we can skip the part where we dramatically explain why we’re here and just get to asking you what the hell is going on.”

“I know it’s not your strong suit, Blue, but you could be a little more tactful,” Paula chided with a frown. She looked at me and smiled before she said, “We’re here if you want to talk about it, Hammer.”

“If I wanted to talk about it, I’d have come to you.”

“Is it a woman? Did someone break your heart?” Maylee asked.

“We could take care of her for you,” Blue offered.

“Or not, if it hasn’t come to that quite yet. If you’re in love with someone and she’s not reciprocating, maybe we could give you some advice,” Matalie suggested.

“Or if you’re just lonely, I’m sure we know someone we can set you up with,” Jenn offered. “Boss just hired a really nice ...”

“Oh hell no,” I said as I reached for the bottle that was sitting on the patio near my feet. “I’m not playing the dating game. I’m too old for that bullshit.”

“If you’re not willing to date, then that means it’s a woman from your past that’s giving you heartache.”

“Maylee’s right, and I’ll again remind you that we can take care of her for you.”

Jenn sighed. “What Blue is trying to say in her own psychotic way is that we’re worried about you and want to do whatever we can to make you happy again.”

“Can you bring people back from the dead?”

“The woman you loved died?”

“No, my son died, and when that happened, the love I had for the woman in my life died too.”

“Did she kill him?” Blue whispered in horror.

“I’m with Blue. We can take care of the problem. No doubt about it,” Paula said adamantly.

“Were you married?”

“I was. I thought she was the perfect woman for me, but I was wrong.”

“Marriages are like pancakes,” Jenn said before she took the bottle out of my hand and passed it back to Maylee. “Most of the time, the first one doesn’t really turn out.”

“Isn’t that the truth?” Paula waited for Maylee to take a drink and then reached out to take the bottle so she could have another too. “Mine turned out to be a total dick.”

I was just drunk enough to compare my ex to Paula's when I asked, "But did your ex kill your firstborn?" There was silence until I laughed bitterly. "Looks like I win this round! What's my prize?"

"Is your ex still alive?" Paula asked.

"Do you want her to be dead?" Blue added. "We could make that happen."

"I'm happy to say that she's finally dead. I saw her when we were in New York."

"So, *that's* why you've been different," Matalie whispered. She reached for the bottle and took a swig before she said, "Totally understandable."

"Firstborn? That means there were more, right?" Blue asked.

"Two, but she sold them, so there's that."

"What the *fuck*?" Jenn hissed.

"You can't drop a bomb like that and not explain what happened," Maylee chided. "It might make you feel better, Hammer. You never know. It could help you find your singing voice again."

"Preacher might kill me for saying this, but I miss having you burst into song," Blue admitted. "Maybe talking about things will lighten your load."

"Here," Matalie said as she handed me the bottle. "Chug some of this and then tell us all about it."

"And then we'll paint our nails and do each other's hair?"

"Sure," Paula said with a grin. "I'll go get the polish if that's what it takes."

"I guess we should get this out of the way first," I said before I took another swig of whiskey. "My name's not really Denny."

Paula's nose wrinkled as if she'd smelled something bad, and she asked, "Your name's Denny? How did I not know that?"

I laughed at the look on her face and said, “My real name is Hugh Reynolds, but when I went into witness protection, it was changed to Denny Grey. That’s probably the only reason I’m still alive today. When I got sent to prison, it was under my WITSEC name. The cartel didn’t know how to find me.”

“The cartel?”

“Yep. I really pissed them off when I was a fed,” I said and then chuckled as I watched every woman’s jaw hit the ground simultaneously. I wiped my eyes after my laughing jag and said, “I wish I could record this moment because none of the guys will ever believe I got all of you quiet at the same time.”

“You were a fed? I liked you, Hammer. Why’d you have to tell us that?” Blue whined. “That’s just wrong.”

Matalie scoffed. “I’m sure prison beat that out of him. Otherwise, we’d have realized something was wrong with him by now.”

Maylee put her hand up to stop the women from saying anything else before she pointed out, “We’re getting off track, ladies. Hammer, you’re going to have to start at the beginning.”

“Well, it all started when my mother and father met and fell in love.” When the women groaned, I grinned and said, “Okay, maybe not that far back.”

“Please,” Blue said drolly.

“I started working for the DEA when I was 21. I met Quincy, the woman I married, when I was 28. She was only 20 then.”

“Red flag number one,” Blue muttered.

“Don’t I know it,” I agreed. “I met her during a job. I know, I know. Red flag number two.”

“Was she a dealer?” Matalie asked.

“Informant,” I replied. “She came from a shit background just like I did, and I thought that was a good thing because we

would have a deeper understanding of one another, you know?”

“I’m guessing that’s not how it worked out,” Jenn said after a few seconds of silence.

“Everything was fine at first. She smoked bud on occasion, but considering the drugs I dealt with on a daily basis, I didn’t see that as a problem. Then she was in a car accident, and they prescribed her some pills. It all went downhill from there.”

“Oh no,” Matalie said as her hand came to her heart. “And the kids?”

“We had our son first, then our daughter, Athena, four years later. Quincy was pregnant with Evelyn when things went haywire at work and we had to go into witness protection. I was on the radar of a man named Israel Gomez, the head of the Sinvalor Cartel, so they put us in protective custody until they were able to bring him to America for his trial.”

“You were working his case so he came after you?” Paula asked.

“No. I helped his wife and kids escape, and in exchange, she gave me information about his operation that I shared with my superiors. It was for purely personal reasons that Gomez wanted to find me.”

“He didn’t ever find you, but did he find her?”

“As far as I know, he never did, but she didn’t completely disappear. She showed up a few years later.”

“Back up,” Blue ordered. “At this point, you have three kids and a wife that pops pills. They changed your name to Denny, and this is where I’m confused - how did you end up in prison?”

“Quincy couldn’t handle the pressure of being away from everyone she knew. She started doctor shopping in the area, but I had no idea. I was trying to start my life over with a new career while she stayed home with the kids. I didn’t pick up on a lot of things I should have. When the doctors in the area

clued in to what she was doing, she had to outsource and got herself a dealer. By then, I was aware that she had a problem, I just didn't know how *big* of a problem."

"Was she high when she killed your son?" Maylee asked.

"Her dealer did it. He didn't see Huey riding his bicycle behind his car, and he backed over him. That part, I believe, was purely an accident."

"So, she *didn't* kill him?"

"He didn't die after he got hit by the car, but they didn't call nine one one. The dealer wasn't going to bring the heat down on himself, so he convinced Quincy to let him take my son with him in exchange for whatever she wanted which turned into a constant supply of narcotics." I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes, the tears on the women's sympathetic faces almost too much to bear. It was freeing to talk about what had happened, so I kept going. "She told the cops the same story she'd told me - that she ran inside the house for something to do with the baby, and when she came out, Huey was gone. For months, we thought he'd been kidnapped. The cops and feds scoured the countryside, and I was right there with them. A man hiking with his kids found the grave where the dealer had buried my son. The coroner determined he was still alive when he was buried, and it turned into a murder investigation."

"That's horrible," Maylee said softly before she took the bottle out of my hand and leaned her head back for a long drink. "I can't even imagine what you must have been feeling."

"How did you find out she'd had something to do with it?"

"I didn't figure that out until much later. A tip came in about a vehicle that had damage around the time of my son's disappearance, and they put out an APB on the dealer. I recognized his picture and knew exactly where to find him. That's how I got my nickname."

"You killed him with a hammer?" Jenn asked.

“No. I broke almost all of his bones with a hammer before I buried him alive just like he’d buried my son.”

“Good for you!” Paula cheered at the same time Blue said, “Hell yeah!”

“Cops showed up while I was burying him and arrested me for attempted murder.”

“Shit,” I heard Matalie mutter. In a louder voice, she said, “Doesn’t it just irritate the shit out of you when the bad guy won’t just die like he’s supposed to?”

I lifted my head to grin at her but let my head fall back when my chair started spinning. Maybe I’d had too much to drink already, but there was still some in the bottle, so I wasn’t finished just yet.

“I went to prison but was still on course to testify against Gomez, so they kept Quincy and the girls in protective custody.”

“If you were that important to the case, couldn’t the feds have gotten you off that charge?” Matalie asked.

“If the guy I damn near beat to death hadn’t been the county sheriff’s son, they probably could have.”

“I can see how that might put a crimp in things,” Blue snarked.

“I’d been in for about a year when I got word that Quincy had fallen off the radar. Her handler lost track of her, and she disappeared without a trace. A while later, I got word through the grapevine that an inmate in my unit had been boasting that he knew my son’s killer. I used every bit of influence I’d gathered inside to get some time alone with him. That’s when I found out that Quincy had traded my son’s life for drugs.”

“Oh, Hammer, I’m so sorry,” Jenn said with tears filling her eyes.

I felt a hand touch my knee and opened my eyes to see that Maylee had reached out to give me comfort as tears streamed down her cheeks. All of the women were emotional now, and while it hurt to see them sad, it somehow made me feel like I

could breathe a little easier knowing they held my secret so close to their hearts.

“Quincy was gone, and so were my daughters. I was behind bars with no way to find them. Gomez was found and incarcerated without my testimony, but he escaped right before my release.”

“Are you still in witness protection?” Matalie asked.

“No. There’s no need. Especially now that he’s dead.”

“And you didn’t find Quincy until we were in New York?”

“An old friend of mine tracked her down and took me to see her. She was serving a ten-year sentence for distribution while dying of cancer in a hospital in upstate New York. I confirmed that she’d had something to do with my son’s death and asked her where our daughters were.” I blew out a breath before I said, “She told me that she sold them to Israel Gomez’s wife.”

“The one you helped get away?” Jenn asked loudly.

“Same one. She reappeared long enough to take my girls for some reason and then she vanished again.”

“But why?” Maylee asked.

“If I ever find her, that’s on my list of questions to ask.”

“Why was she in contact with your wife? Would she have given your daughters to her husband?”

“I have no idea, but there’s no way she would have done that,” I assured them. “I could tell the second I met her that she was a good mom to her own kids. There’s no way she’d sell out two innocent little girls like that.”

“What did she do with your daughters?” Blue asked.

“That’s the million dollar question, isn’t it?”

3.

PRESENT DAY

HAMMER

I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye and looked up to see Captain standing in the doorway of my office. He leaned against the doorframe and asked, “How are you doing, man?”

“I’m just peachy. How about you?”

“I’m going to meet Boss and the guys at The Hangout for lunch. Want to ride over with me or are you in your truck?”

“I’m on my bike.”

“Well? Do you want to come eat with us or not?”

“I guess,” I said as I pushed my chair back.

“Don’t get too fucking excited about it. Shit.”

I shook my head as I walked toward him. “Sorry, man. I thought I had a lead, but it didn’t pan out.”

“Fairchild?”

“No, my girls.”

“Dead end?”

“You could say that. The house they were living in just a few months ago is empty, and needless to say, there’s no forwarding address.”

“Want to take a road trip and interview the neighbors or ...”

“Do you have a passport?”

“I don’t. Most countries don’t want me to visit for some reason. Where were they living?”

“Singapore.”

“Oh. That’s more of a trip than I was expecting. And there’s no indication as to where they were going?”

I waited for Captain to lock the door behind him and then we walked around the building to the parking area. “No clues, just word that it was a planned move, not anything sudden. That’s different than some of the other places they’ve stayed.”

“Like other countries?”

“Yeah. I’ve got some help from an associate who does quite a bit of international work and knows a lot more people than I do. One thing we’ve noticed about everyone they interview around Gabriella Gomez is that she garners a solid loyalty from everyone that works for her.”

“Are they afraid of her?”

“That’s what’s interesting, especially considering her background. There’s no fear, just respect.”

“From what I gather about her husband, that wasn’t how he did things.”

“Oh no. He was all about public displays of power. If someone crossed him, he’d hunt them down and massacre their family in the front yard of their home so all the neighbors could see what would happen if they pissed him off. She’s got people in her corner that actually care about her and her kids.”

“And your kids, right?”

“She’s had them since Athena was 3 and Evelyn was almost 2. At first, I was worried that she’d taken them for her husband, but now that I’ve gotten more information, I’m not sure of her endgame. I do know that the girls have attended some of the best schools in the world, depending on where they lived at the time, and from what little we know, she treats them like her own children. At this point, the woman is the only mother they’ve ever known. The night I met her, I could tell that she’d do anything for her kids. Hell, she went crossways with a cartel kingpin whose reach spanned the globe just to get her kids to safety.”

“That’s the very definition of a mama bear.”

“I know.”

“What are you going to do when you find her? She *did* steal your kids.”

“She bought them from an addict whose next fix was more important than the precious humans she made.”

“And she’s kept them away from you, why?”

“I don’t have an answer for that.”

“Does it piss you off?”

“Yeah.”

“How much exactly?”

“A whole fucking lot,” I said angrily. “You don’t think it should?”

Captain put his hands up in a complacent gesture and said, “I’m taking your temperature here. I’m trying to feel you out to see what you might do and how we can either prevent it or help.”

“We?”

“I’ve got a mouse in my pocket,” Captain said sarcastically. “What the fuck, asking a question like that? Me. The guys. The ladies. The club. Our family. What can we do to help make you happy and keep you out of prison at the same time?”

“What the fuck am I going to prison for?”

“If this woman was standing in front of you right now, would you hug her or choke her?”

“I don’t hurt women.”

“Okay, let me rephrase the question. If she was here, would you hug her or call the coven and tell them to gather their shovels for a job?”

I burst out laughing at the image of my friends’ crazy women brandishing pitchforks and shovels as they argued over their course of attack. “When have they ever gotten rid of their own trash? I must have missed that one.”

“Now that you mention it, I don’t think they ever have. Damn.”

The look of surprise on Captain’s face had me laughing again. He finally shook his head and said, “They do something, we come running to do the heavy lifting.”

“Isn’t that how it’s supposed to be?”

Captain smiled as he threw his leg over the seat and straddled his motorcycle. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Movement near the back of the building diverted my attention, and I studied the truck parked at the back of the lot over Captain’s shoulder. “You got anything worth stealing in that truck?”

Captain turned to look as he dismounted his bike and stood beside me. I nodded toward the back of the truck, and Captain took that route as I walked around the hood. I stopped short when I spotted two young women huddled together, one of them with her eyes closed as her head lolled to the side and the other holding her as tears streamed down her face.

“What the fuck?” I whispered as I dropped down to one knee and reached my hand out toward the unconscious girl. The one who was crying slapped my hand away as her face transformed from sadness to rage.

“Get back!”

“Sweetie, your friend needs help,” I said softly as I put my hand up again. “I’m just gonna check her pulse. Captain, call nine one one.”

“No!” the girl screamed. “No policía! Necesito encontrar ... Merde! I have someone who will help us, but I am not sure if ... What’s your name?”

“Are you okay, sweetheart?” Captain asked as he stepped around the girl to stand at the other’s feet. I looked at them, bare and covered in cuts; her little pink toenails crusted with dirt and dried blood. “Are you dizzy?”

“De quoi parlez-vous?” she snapped, this time speaking French. As if she weren’t aware her vocabulary was country-

hopping, she asked in English, “What does that have to do with anything? Please put the phone away, señor. No puedo hablar a la policía. Necesito ... Shit! I need to find someone ... Can you tell me your name?”

“You seem confused,” I explained, trying to place the girl’s accent. She was fluent in three languages, but none of them fit the lilt in her voice as she spoke English.

“Are you confused? I asked *you* a question,” she snapped. Captain snorted and started laughing. I shot him a glare before I looked back at the young woman. “Henkilöllisyystodistus?”

“Shit! She’s slurring her words,” Captain hissed as he dropped down beside her.

“Dammit! English, Evie!” the girl whispered as she shook her head as if to clear it. “Let me see your papers. Your ... What’s the word? Identificación ... um ...”

“You want my ID?” I asked.

“Yes. Please. Let me ...” The girl let out a sob before she whispered, “What do I do? Who can I trust? Dena!” She shook the unconscious girl by the shoulder and then let her head fall forward before she sobbed, “I don’t know what to do.”

“Do you know how to shoot a gun?”

The girl sucked in a breath before she nodded. Her eyes got wide when I lifted the cuff of my jeans and pulled out a snub-nosed .38. I turned it so that the grip was in her direction and said, “It’s loaded. Now you won’t feel so powerless, right?”

She took the gun and pushed the lever to release the cylinder before she spun it and snapped it back into place. She kept it aimed at the ground for the few seconds it took her to check the ammunition. It was clear that she didn’t just know how to shoot a gun, she was quite comfortable with one in her hand.

“What the fuck?” Captain mumbled under his breath as he looked at me with wide eyes. “Why did you give her a gun?”

Why the hell are you *carrying* a gun and pulling it out in the bright light of day? Do you want to go back to prison?"

"You were in prison?"

"We're not going to hurt you, sweetheart, we just want to help. Why can't we call the cops? Obviously, you're in danger."

"I can't trust them. One of them helped take us," the girl whispered as she wiped the tears from her cheeks. Her voice got higher and more frantic as she explained, "He pulled Mama over and said she was speeding, but then the other men ... They pulled us out of the car and ... I don't know where Smudge is, and they've still got Mama. She was tied to the chair and ... My head hurts so bad, mister. I just need you to help me find the man I'm looking for."

"Who is he, honey?" I asked softly, wishing she'd let me comfort her or do something ... anything to help. "I'll find him for you, but we've gotta get an ambulance here to ..."

"Hugh Reynolds and Denny Grey. Those are his names."

I had to put my hand out to brace myself against the truck, my mind reeling as I asked the question I already knew the answer to, "Who are you?"

"I'm his daughter."

"Fuck me," I heard Captain whisper.

"Evelyn?" I asked as I studied the young woman's face.

"Mama changed it to Evie last time. Evelyn's my real name, but no one knows that. Well, I guess you do."

"Come on, sweetie," Captain said, pulling me out of my dazed shock as he reached into his pocket and pulled out keys. He hit the button on the fob as he looked down at the girl. "Let me help you into the truck while Hammer ... your dad ... carries your sister."

"Let him help you," I ordered as I reached for the unconscious girl. My heart started racing when I realized this young woman was my little Athena, almost all grown-up. To Captain, I said, "Call Frankie and Paula. Tell them to clear

everyone out. We're bringing them to the clinic, and they're worried for their safety."

"I'll call Boss too," Captain said as he helped Evelyn stand. She winced, and I realized her feet were just as injured as Athena's. Captain saw the same thing and swept her into his arms. As he got her settled in the back seat, I rested my hand on Athena's forehead, wondering why she felt so cold even though her brow was clammy.

"Athena," I whispered as I put my hand on her cheek. "Wake up. Open your eyes for me."

"Mama," Athena whispered. "Help."

"I'll help your mom, baby, but we've got to get you to a doctor first." I scooped the frail young woman into my arms and stood. Captain was on his phone beside the open truck door, a shell-shocked look on his face that probably mirrored my own. I got in as I said, "I'll sit in the back and hold her while you drive."

"We're coming to you right now. Can you call Frankie? Call Boss too. Shit. Call 'em all. This is big, and Hammer's gonna need our help." Captain hung up as I got into the truck, being extra careful not to jostle the girl too much. Evelyn slid closer to her sister and reached for her hand as she adjusted her feet over her lap. "Paula's calling everyone right now. She'll be waiting for us at the clinic."

"Good."

"Are you okay, man?"

"Is it possible to be heartbroken, terrified, and elated at the same time?"

"From the look on your face, I guess it might be ."



I stood off to the side in the exam room, watching helplessly as Frankie and Paula assessed my daughters, all the

while giving directions to the other women who were here to help.

“She’s so dehydrated, I can’t ... There it is!” Paula cheered as she finally inserted the IV into the crook of Athena’s arm.

Jenn, who was standing on the other side of the exam table, watched the monitor in her hand and said, “This can’t be right.”

“What does it say?” Frankie asked as she studied Athena’s feet.

“61. Do you want me to take it again?”

“That explains a lot. Do the same with the other girl while I get some fluids into this one,” Paula ordered. She looked over at the other table and asked Evelyn, “Sweetie, when was the last time you two ate?”

Evelyn let her head fall to the side so she could look at her sister. Tears filled her eyes when she explained, “Dena’s weird about food and didn’t want to eat or drink anything, so she gave it to me. Our mom said she had to try, but she slipped her food to me anyway.”

Jenn was rubbing an alcohol swab over the tip of Evelyn’s finger as she said, “What a sweet big sister. Since she gave her food to you, that gave you enough energy to save both of you.”

“What are you doing?” Evelyn asked warily as Jenn opened a fresh lancet to poke her finger. “No needles! No, no, no,” Evelyn said as she tried to sit up.

Blue was standing on her other side and rested her hand on her shoulder to keep her still. “Awww, come on! That’s a piddly little needle compared to everything else you’ve got going on.”

“She’s gonna poke me with it!”

“Let’s do a comparison,” Blue suggested as she looked over at Jenn and gave her a slight nod. “She’s going to poke your finger, and I bet it hurts less than this.”

Blue pinched Evelyn's arm, and she let out a shout, never realizing that Jenn had poked her finger at the same time. Once Jenn had the drop of blood she needed, she told Paula, "She's at 79."

"That was mean!"

Blue winked at her. "But you didn't feel her poke your finger, did you?"

Frankie laughed. "Your bedside manner sucks ass, Blue, but that doesn't surprise me at all."

"Another line of work I should avoid," Blue said in agreement.

"Customer service is still the top spot," Matalie said as she washed her hands at the nearby sink. "Any type of caretaker should also be avoided at all costs."

"Honey, I bet those cuts on your feet hurt," Paula said as she held out a tiny cup of red liquid. "Take this. It will make you feel better."

"At least it's not a shot," Evelyn mumbled before she drained the cup and handed it back to Paula. "I'm not getting an IV like Dena, am I?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, alright?" Paula asked. "Can you sit up and drink a little for me?"

"So, you don't have to give me an IV?"

"Exactly," Paula agreed as Brea handed Evelyn a bottle of Gatorade.

"I'll help you, babe," Brea said as Blue lifted her to a sitting position. Brea held the bottle up to Evelyn's mouth, and she drank greedily until Brea pulled it away. "Not too much at first. Let's take it slow."

"What's going on?" Boss said as he walked up next to me. I glanced up and saw Wrecker, Preacher, and Chef just outside the door before Hook walked in and went straight to the sink to wash up. "Are these really your kids, man?"

“Oh no!” Evelyn whispered as she swung her legs over the edge of the table. She hopped down and gasped at the pain in her feet before she started shaking Athena’s shoulder. “Sister, we’ve got to go.”

“Get back up here, baby,” Brea said as she reached for Evelyn’s hand.

“Dena, wake up!” Evelyn said frantically as she looked from Boss to the door. She looked at me with terror in her eyes, and I realized that she was afraid of Boss because she’d seen the badge embroidered on his shirt. “Please, Dena!”

“Where the fuck did she get a gun?” Blue asked, alarm in her voice as she reached over the table and plucked the gun out Evelyn’s waistband before she could get to it. “What the hell?”

Evelyn didn’t seem to notice that Blue had taken it and blinked a few times before she shook her head. She started weaving, and I darted forward and caught her underneath her arms before she fell.

“That was quicker than I anticipated,” Paula said as she patted the exam table where Evelyn had been laying. “Put her right here and let me get that IV started.”

“I guess that wasn’t Tylenol,” I said as I gently laid Evelyn on the table.

Brea covered her with a sheet and tucked it around her hips before she reached up and brushed Evelyn’s hair out of her face. “I can see you in both of them.”

“We’re going to need some time alone with them when they wake up, Hammer,” Frankie said as she rubbed her thumb over the bruises on Athena’s wrist. “We’ll have some questions to ask, and it might be easier for them to talk without a man in the room.”

“Do you think ... Did someone ... Can you see if ...” I stammered.

“We’re not going to examine them without their permission. We’ve got plenty to do before they wake up, so we’ll deal with those questions later,” Paula said firmly as she

nudged me back over toward where Boss was still standing. “Boss, take him outside and let him have the meltdown I can feel coming. We’ll get the girls cleaned up and let you know the second one starts to come around.”

“I’ll stay ...”

“You will go,” Paula said firmly as she pointed toward the door. “I don’t even know half of what’s going on right now, but I do know that seeing your girls is one of your biggest dreams. Your mind would be reeling even if they weren’t in this condition. You need to get your head on straight before they wake up so you can be calm and supportive.”

“Besides, you need to go talk to the guys about finding whoever put these bruises on them,” Blue said as she adjusted the blanket over Athena’s legs. “Find the bastards and make them hurt until they’re dead.”

“And then we’ll bring them back to life so you can do it all over again,” Frankie promised.

I couldn’t mistake the fires of rage in the women’s eyes and knew my brothers would feel the same way. Blue was right. I needed to give the guys a heads-up and tell them the few details I’d been able to drag out of Evelyn on the drive to the compound.

My emotions were all over the place right now - anger, relief, fear, disbelief, elation. I wasn’t thinking rationally, but I knew that Captain would fill in any details I might miss. It was important to keep Boss and the other guys up to date on what we knew so they could start searching for Gabriella Gomez.

I didn’t feel the slightest hesitation at the thought of rescuing Gabriella. When I first found out that Quincy had given my daughters to her, I was filled with blinding rage. How had she connected with my wife in the first place? Why would she take my children away?

Was she working with her husband, Israel, to plot revenge against me for the information I’d given the feds? That was doubtful considering the details I’d told them came straight

from her in the first place. I could remember the look on her face when she talked about her hatred for Israel Gomez. I knew she wouldn't do anything to help him unless she was backed into a corner and her children's safety hung in the balance. That didn't explain why she'd taken Evelyn and Athena, though. Maybe she'd gotten information that Israel knew how to find them, so she swept them away before he had the chance.

The possibilities were endless. I'd never know the true reason unless I asked her. I made it my mission to find her so I could do just that. I now had a completely different motivation, though.

It was obvious from the worry Evelyn had for Gabriella that she loved her very much. What little she'd said in the truck on the way here gave me more than enough insight into what had happened to my daughters.

Gabriella Gomez had sacrificed herself to help my girls escape to safety after arming them with street smarts and the ability to defend themselves while giving them information on who they could trust. Evelyn had been insistent that the only reason they'd come back to the States was so that Gabriella could reunite what was left of my family. They were on their way to my office when they were pulled over for what seemed like a routine traffic stop. Unfortunately the three of them had been taken hostage just a few miles outside of Tenillo.

Now that my girls were safe here, surrounded by the friends that I considered family, I could concentrate on finding Gabriella and rescuing her. I wasn't just doing it to make my girls happy. No, I was going to rescue Gabriella Gomez because she'd loved and protected my daughters, raising them as her own for the last twelve years.

I might share their DNA and be their father by blood, but Gabriella was their parent in every way that counted. I owed it to her to bring her to safety and make sure that whoever had hurt her and my girls was brought to justice.

And it wasn't going to be the kind of justice I sought when I had a badge. No, it was going to be the type of justice that

my brothers and I were getting very good at meting out. And this time, rather than let Chef melt them from the inside out or let Bug burn their bodies to a crisp, I'd show my daughter's captors just how I got my nickname.

4.

HAMMER

“Are your girls okay?” Kitty asked as soon as I stepped into the room. The men were gathered in Hook’s kitchen, waiting for me to join them so we could go over what little information we had and form a plan.

“They’re dehydrated and very weak,” I explained. “In the car, Evelyn asked what day it was and said they’d been there for a long time. I’ve been racking my brain trying to remember exactly what she said but ...”

“I knew that neither of us were firing on all cylinders, so I recorded the drive over,” Captain said as he pulled his phone out and pushed a few buttons. He laid it on the table and there was silence as we listened to the truck door slam shut and then the engine start up. I closed my eyes and remembered the drive over as I listened to Captain’s recording.

“Where are you taking us?” Evelyn asked.

“We’re going to my friend Hook’s house. His old lady, Paula, is a doctor. So is her friend Frankie. They’re going to take care of you.”

“At your friend’s house?”

“Yeah. He’s got a clinic in the back. That’s where they’re waiting on us.”

“Good. You can’t take us to the hospital. The police will find out, and then that man will take us away again.”

“Tell us about the man who took you, sweetheart,” Captain ordered from the front seat. “What color was his uniform? What did he look like?”

“His shirt was brown and his pants were tan. He was wearing cowboy boots and had a gold ring on his pinkie,” Evelyn explained as she touched a small mark beside her eyebrow. “It was sharp when he hit me.”

“He hit you there?” I asked, studying where the injury had healed into a scar as she rubbed it with her dirty finger. Her nails were ragged and torn with dirt crusted underneath.

“Yeah. I tried to run, but he caught me. When I started screaming, he backhanded me so I would be quiet. It hurt so bad, and there was blood everywhere.”

“How long ago did he take you?” I asked.

“What day is it?”

Athena stirred in my arms as Captain told Evelyn today’s date and asked her what was the last day she remembered before they were taken. I adjusted her on my lap and held her close to my chest as I brushed the hair away from her face. Her face was pale, and both girls had dark circles underneath their eyes.

“That was three weeks ago,” Captain said, drawing my attention back to Evelyn. “What kind of car were they in?”

“It was a black SUV. They tied us up and put us on the floor behind the back seat.”

“Do you remember seeing anything while you were in the back? Any signs or landmarks?”

“We passed a big place, and I saw an ambulance turning into the parking lot. I think it was a hospital and ...”

“Was that on the driver’s side or passenger side?” I asked her.

“Passenger. We were on the highway, I think. There was a big sign with store names on the driver’s side. I think it was a mall. Then we went past a bunch of fields, and there was a gate with a guard. He waved when the man driving pulled up, but we didn’t stop. The streets curved, and the houses were really big with lots of trees. We pulled into a garage but had to go down a hill to get there. The room they kept us in had small windows close to the ceiling. There was a long hall with a big room at

the end where they took us sometimes. Mama was in the room next to us, and we could talk through the vent, but the only time we saw her was in the big room. They took us there before we escaped. She was tied to ...” Evelyn started sobbing, and I pulled her closer. She melted into my chest and clutched at my shirt while she sobbed. I glanced into the rearview mirror and saw Captain grimace before the look on his face turned murderous, most likely as deadly as the expression on my own.

“How did you get away, honey?” I asked.

“There were men working outside that were making a lot of noise. It sounded like a chainsaw or something big. We had been talking to Mama through the vent, and she said that we had to run the next time they took her. She made us promise to get away and find you. She made us leave her there.”

“What did you do once you went outside?”

“There was a truck with lots of grass and leaves in it. We dug down into it and hid until the truck left.”

“Did the truck have a name on it? A logo? What color was it?” Captain asked.

“The truck was white with a big sticker on the side that had a tree with a tire swing. I don’t remember the name.”

“Okay. I can work with that,” I assured her. “Then what happened?”

“We moved for a little while, but once it stopped again, I peeked out and saw we were in a drive-thru. Dena and I got out of the trailer and ran away as fast as we could. She remembered seeing your office on the map when Mama showed us, so she knew how to get there, but she kept falling down,” Evelyn said through her tears. “She said she was dizzy and too tired to keep going, but I made her. She fell down, and I hid her behind the truck. I was trying to be brave and come inside to find you but ...”

“You were very brave, Evelyn. So very brave.”

“Mama said we would always be stronger together, and I kept telling Dena that, but she’s so sick! I’m so glad we found you, Dad.”

“We’re gonna get both of you fixed right up, sweetheart,” Captain said, realizing I was too choked up to speak.

“We have to find my mom. Please, will you try to ...”

“I will,” I promised. “I won’t stop until I find her.”

“The bad men will be there with her.”

“I’m sure they will.”

“What will you do to them?”

“All you need to know is that I’m going to do everything I can to find Gabriella.”

“Her name is Pita now.”

“Okay. I’m going to find Pita and bring her to you.”

“Kill them all.”

“What?”

“She never screamed or cried but her voice ... I could tell that she was in pain when she talked to us through the vent.” Evelyn leaned back a fraction so she could look into my eyes before she whispered, “They hurt her. They hurt us. Will you make them pay for that?”

“I will, sweetheart. I promise.”

“Mama said we could trust you. I’m glad she was right.”

“Shit,” Preacher whispered before he ran his hands over his face. “They’ve been there for three fucking weeks? Why? What does that woman have that they want?”

“They’re torturing her for information,” Captain answered. “That’s the only thing it could be.”

“And she’s still alive? That means she hasn’t given them anything in three weeks. What kind of woman is this?” Santa asked.

“I’m not gonna lie. I’d break,” Kitty admitted. “There’s no way in hell I could last through three weeks of torture unless ...”

“Unless what?” Fish asked when Kitty’s voice trailed off.

“Unless you were protecting one of your children,” Rowdy answered. “I could withstand anything as long as it kept my kids safe. At least, I’d like to think I could.”

“You’ve been searching for her for years, Hammer. What do you know about her history?”

“Everything,” I said. I shrugged and admitted, “Okay, probably not everything but enough to know that she had it rough before she left Israel Gomez. Really rough.”

“I watched a documentary about him, and he was one twisted son of a bitch,” Preacher said with a grimace. “I can’t imagine what it was like being married to him. What does a woman see in a man like that anyway?”

“Her father was one of his associates, a high-ranking official in the government who had more money than morals. As an act of good faith, he gave his most prized possession to Gomez at the beginning of their partnership.”

“He gave him his *daughter*?” Bug asked in outrage.

“She was barely 15. Six years later, their first child was born, and she was forced to marry him.” I waved my hand toward Preacher as I shook my head and explained, “I watched that documentary, too, and they didn’t even scratch the surface. He wasn’t just twisted, he was evil and sadistic. My guess is that whatever torture the men who kidnapped my girls and Gabriella ... Pita ... are dishing out is nothing compared to what she lived through with Gomez.”

“Evelyn said Pita never screamed or cried,” Boss reminded us.

“That’s one helluva strong woman.”

“You’re right, Preacher. I just hope she can hold out a little longer.”

“We’ll find her,” Boss assured me. He leaned forward and pointed at Rowdy. “Do you recognize her description of that company logo?”

“Maybe,” Rowdy hedged. “There are two possibilities.”

“Write them down. Stamp, Kitty, and Chef take one, and I’ll take the other with Bug and Santa. We’ll find the owner and get a roster of the crews, what they drive, and try to find out where they were today. Rowdy, Fish, and Chewie, while we’re doing that, I want you to go get trucks from Yardbird Construction and split up a list of the high-end neighborhoods in town past the mall and hospital that match the general area she described. Cruise around and scope out houses that fit the description she gave us in case we don’t get anywhere with the company owners. Preacher, do your thing online, and call us if you get any information. We’ll meet back here when we have something solid.” Boss sighed and reached over to squeeze my shoulder. “Go back and be with your girls, Hammer. We’ll keep you in the loop. Captain, go with him and keep him settled. If the girls give you any more details when they wake up, let me know.”

“If you find her ...”

“We won’t do anything without you there,” Boss promised. “Leave this shit to us for now, and we’ll get in touch when we know something.”



I heard the squeak of shoes in the hallway, so I wasn’t surprised when the door opened. The light in the hall formed a halo around the person, and I could tell it was Frankie, here to check on the girls before she went to work for the day.

She stopped beside the bed and smiled when she saw that the girls were snuggled up together. She shook her head as she tried to untangle the wires and tubes attached to them.

“Evelyn woke up and insisted on getting in bed with Athena,” I said softly so I didn’t wake them.

“I’m a firm believer that human touch helps the healing process,” Frankie said as she brushed Athena’s hair back from her face. “You see it in newborn twins whose stats will start to steeply decline when they’re separated. Are they twins?”

“Irish twins,” I explained. “They are eleven months apart.”

Frankie stared at the monitors for a few seconds before she looked at me and smiled. “Their numbers are much better already. That has a lot to do with what we’re pumping into them, but I bet being next to each other for some good quality sleep in a place where they feel safe and protected is helping almost as much.”

“Why hasn’t Athena woken up yet? That worries me.”

“She was extremely dehydrated, and from what Evie said ...”

“I forget that I’m supposed to call them different names now.”

“Stop forgetting. They have a lot on their mind and need to be reassured that they’re somewhere that people understand them. The first step toward that is recognizing their identity.”

“Dena and Evie. Got it.”

“They’re suffering from exhaustion, dehydration, and malnourishment. Evie was in slightly better shape, but she explained that was because Dena refused to eat and barely drank anything.”

“She’s always been very particular about her food, even when she was a baby. If the bottle wasn’t just the right temperature, she wouldn’t drink it.” I laughed softly at the memory before I explained, “I used to call her Goldilocks. Everything had to be just right, or she’d turn her nose up at it.”

“Her color has already improved,” Frankie said as she studied Athena ... no, Dena’s face. She looked at me as she

said, “We’ll keep her on the IV for a day or two and start her on clear liquids when she wakes up.”

“Broth? Is that what I smell?”

Frankie nodded. “Jenn used some of the bones Hook got from the butcher for Tonya and started a healthy bone broth last night. It should be finished soon, but Blue brought over some she canned last fall in case we need some before that batch is done.”

“I heard them out there together after you left last night.”

“Paula made a bunch of homemade pasta and a huge vat of sauce. As soon as they’re able to tolerate it, she’s gonna fatten them up like an old-school Italian mom. Pandora brought over some of the girls’ clothes for them to wear for now, and Maylee showed up with a basket full of hair things and various bath and body products.”

“Did Brea go home?”

“No. She’s sleeping on the couch.”

“I told her they’d be fine in here with me.”

“And they are. We’ve got a schedule set up so the ladies can help, and since Paula will be with them all day while I’m at work, Brea wanted to make sure she got plenty of sleep.”

“Thanks, Frankie. I don’t know how I can ever repay ...”

“You can just stop right there, Hammer. You’re one of Santa’s brothers, and that makes you our family too. This is what families do for each other. Today, the girls will pop in and out, doing what they can. August already talked to Captain’s mom about watching the kids for a while so she can come over with Matalie and help the girls shower and get their hair clean before they work on their nails. Jenn made broth for them to start with, but she’s probably already baked twenty pounds of treats for them to eat after they are feeling better. Maylee and Pandora are taking her girls on a shopping spree to get them clothes, and Bernadette and Sis are using the information Evie gave them about where they were taken to try and find her cat. They’ve already printed flyers and posted information all over social media. When Santa got home just

a few hours ago, he said the guys were taking Tenillo apart piece by piece trying to find where they're holding the woman."

"Thank you, Frankie."

"You haven't been yourself since the wedding. I hope that you'll get your singing voice back now that you've found your girls," Frankie said earnestly.

"You're probably the *only* one that wishes for that," I said sheepishly.

"Your lack of ... enthusiasm, for lack of a better word, feels wrong. Imagine what our world would be like if Preacher wasn't actively searching for conspiracies or Bug wasn't imagining setting something on fire. It just doesn't feel right."

"I'm sorry I've upset the balance of the universe."

"I have a feeling you'll feel much lighter once we find Pita and get all three of them healthy."

"I already feel much more settled."

"Good. I've got to go now, but Paula will be here and the others will be in and out, so you're in good hands."

"Okay. Thanks, Frankie."

Frankie smiled and then touched Dena's forehead before she rested her hand on Evie's. She gave me a little wave before she turned and walked out the door, closing it behind her.

"You like to sing?" Evie asked in a whisper, her voice rough from sleep.

"I do."

"Will you sing me a song?"

"What do you want to hear?"

"You pick," Evie said before she shifted to get even closer to her sister's side. "I trust you."

My heart swelled and tears filled my eyes at those words. For the first time in months, I opened my mouth and let the words flow, singing softly so it would comfort the girls as they recovered from their ordeal.

“There were days, lonely days, when the world wouldn’t throw me a crumb. But I kept on believing that this day would come. And this love is like nothing I have ever known. Take my hand, love. I’m taking you home ...”

HAMMER

“Her description of the tire swing on the logo was a bust, and we’ve figured out that landscapers aren’t the most imaginative folks - almost every company has a tree in their logo. *However*, there is one company that has a contract with the HOA at the new development west of the country club. Their logo ...” Preacher stopped short and sighed as he closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “You don’t give a shit about the logo. I’ll shut up now.”

“Oh fuck. He’s dying,” Captain said in mock alarm. “Why didn’t anyone tell me? There are plans to make and venues to schedule. I’ve gotta find a polka band to play at the wake.”

Preacher flipped Captain off with both hands, his expression murderous and only getting darker as I laughed along with the other men.

“Listen, fucker,” Preacher started but was interrupted by Boss.

“Cut the foreplay, boys. The two of you can make out behind the barn later. We’ve got things to do right now. Rodeo, what did you and the guys find?”

“Preacher’s info about that new development was spot-on. Several of the houses are built with either a basement garage or a split-level lower floor. I talked to a few of the guys on the construction crews, and they said that they’d worked on four different houses with garages and multiple rooms underground, and all of them had a large bonus room in the basement.”

“That explains the room with tiny windows that Evelyn ... Evie described when she was explaining where they were kept. And she mentioned a big room where they tied Gabriele ... Shit. Pita. I’ve gotta get that straight.”

“That will work itself out,” Stamp said reassuringly. “There’s been a lot of new information to process on top of all this other shit you’ve got going on.”

“What did you find out about the other kids?” Boss asked Preacher.

“The daughters are both living in Europe, married to high-profile spouses heavily involved with the government. The son ... He’s harder to trace. The few details Evie mentioned to the women as they were being treated haven’t panned out.”

“How so?” I asked.

“They said he teaches at UCLA, but he’s only 25. Their youngest professor is a math prodigy that started his college career at 9 and became a professor at 18. That ain’t our boy,” Preacher explained.

“Okay, let’s think this through. If he is affiliated with UCLA, he’s probably a student. He might work there in some capacity but ...”

“What are teacher aides called in college?” Bug asked.

“They’re teaching assistants or TAs for short. They help professors while they are getting their degree,” Chef explained. “If he exaggerated his job description to his little sisters, they might believe he *is* a professor.”

“I found a listing of employees for the college, pared it down to males in that general age group, and couldn’t find him. He could be a student, though. I’m still working that angle.”

“Why don’t they know how to get in touch with him?” Santa asked out of the blue. “I get that most people don’t have people’s phone numbers memorized these days, but they should still have other alternatives.”

“Yeah, I don’t know any of your numbers,” I said with a shrug.

“I’m talking about other ways of reaching him. There’s fifty kinds of social media, and you want me to believe that two teenage girls don’t use at least a few? And the same goes

for a guy in his mid-twenties. Even if they can't contact him by phone, they could talk to him through one of those apps."

I shook my head. "They said that they're not allowed to call him. He has to call them. Pita calls him without fail at the same time every week but doesn't contact him any other time."

Boss stared at me intensely for a few seconds before he said, "He's undercover. Think about the informants and undercover agents you knew back in the day, Hammer. You couldn't just call them whenever because you might interrupt something and spook their suspect."

"You agreed on a time with a phone that couldn't be traced and never missed that call," Captain added. "That theory actually makes a lot of sense."

"They lived overseas for the majority of the girls' lives. Do you think he's an international spy or some shit?" Preacher asked.

"You're missing a big possibility, boys," Kitty argued, ignoring Preacher's question. "Maybe he's not so much the next James Bond as he is his dad's protegee."

There was silence as I shook my head. "She gave up everything to get her kids out of that life."

"He's young, Hammer. He might very well love his mama, but he's probably not going to obey her every rule," Captain argued.

"Maybe he's the black sheep, and that's why the girls aren't allowed to contact him," Stamp suggested. "Mom would want to check on her baby boy but wouldn't want her girls to get close, right?"

"I just can't see it," I disagreed.

"You should ask Evie and Dena," Preacher suggested. "Blue said they're not like Kitty's girls and know a lot more than girls their age should."

"Did your old lady call my daughters stupid?"

Preacher rolled his eyes at Kitty and sighed. “No, Kitty. She did nothing of the sort. She could just tell that his girls were more worldly than yours. Probably something to do with the younger one blabbering in umpteen different languages as she was floating into outer space on the meds Frankie gave her.”

“They’ve lived all over the place. It makes sense that they’d know more than just English,” I muttered. “How would the boy know his father since it’s obvious she was intent on keeping her children away from him?”

“He’s not a boy anymore,” Rodeo argued since he was the youngest of our group other than the new prospect. “He’s 25, right? How old does a person have to be to get hired on as a fed?”

“So, we jumped from international spy to federal agent?”

“Hear me out,” Rodeo replied. “Let’s say he understands what his mom went through and has a taste for vengeance. What’s the best way to get revenge against a drug kingpin? You work for the feds to take him down any way you can.”

“That would help explain the undercover theory,” Preacher agreed.

“Okay, we’re getting sidetracked,” Boss redirected. “We have to find the woman first. Everything else is irrelevant.”

“I just can’t work out why they’re holding her,” Chef admitted, ignoring Boss’s attempt to get us to focus. “She’s new in town, has a different name than before, and her asshole husband is dead, so it’s not his people that have her.”

“I want to know where she got the means to live all over the world for the last few years,” I told them. “The night I helped her escape, she said she had everything she needed to get her as far away as possible, so I assumed she’d stolen a wad from her husband.”

“She probably did,” Boss agreed.

“Maybe whoever has her was working for him and wants the money back,” Kitty suggested.

“Or maybe she knows a lot more than I gave her credit for the night we met.”

Boss looked confused for a second before he asked, “Like what? It’s been years since she ran. What information would anyone think is relevant now?”

“Her name.” We all looked at Santa, and he shrugged. “Some wannabe kingpin could use her to get in with the cartel. She probably knows where bodies are buried and has intel on all the big players.”

“And you said her father works for the government,” Preacher reminded me. “What if she’s being held over his head somehow?”

“It could be anything. Right now, we just need to concentrate on finding her,” Boss said, putting everyone back on track. “Let’s start with the information Rodeo found and get eyes on those properties. Kitty and Santa, I’m counting on you to act as our prowlers.”

“We’ll go as soon as it gets dark,” Kitty interrupted.

Santa nodded his agreement before Rodeo volunteered, “I’ll go with you as a lookout.”

“I want to thank you guys for this. I know that it’s not your job to ...”

“Just shut the hell up,” Preacher snapped. “I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but I liked you better when you sang instead of blabbering on about our jobs. If one of us needed something, you’d be first in line to help. Don’t make it weird when we do the same thing.”

“Eloquent as ever,” Captain mumbled.

“As disturbing as it may be, I agree with Preacher. Shut up and go to your girls. We’ll keep you updated on what we find and make sure you’re with us for the killing spree,” Boss said as he pushed his chair back.

“Who are you going to kill?” a soft voice asked from behind me. All eyes shot to the doorway as I flew out of my chair at the sight of my oldest daughter standing there.

“It’s just a figure of speech, sweetheart,” Stamp said dismissively.

“I hope not.”

I was stunned but a little proud of her words. I walked closer to her as I said, “I’m glad you’re awake, Athena ... Dena. Sorry.”

“Did I sleep for a long time?”

“You’ve been here since yesterday around noon,” I explained. “How do you feel?”

Dena burst out laughing and then shook her head. “I’m not right yet, but I feel better than I have in weeks.”

“Stop growling at me, bitch. I know what the clock says, and you’ll get your food when I’m damn good and ready to give it to you!” Paula yelled as she walked out of the bedroom toward the kitchen. She pointed at Hook as she passed and growled, “Your cat is a needy bitch, and I’m about done with her. Why can’t we have a normal cat?”

“She’s awake,” Hook said, ignoring Paula’s rant.

Paula’s entire demeanor changed as she stopped short and turned toward where I stood with Dena. “Finally! I thought we were going to have to rename you Sleeping Beauty. How do you feel, honey?”

“I’m weak,” Dena admitted. She touched her forehead and added, “I have a headache.”

“You took out your IV?” Paula asked as she walked our way.

“I knew this wasn’t a hospital, so I thought ... well ... I was going to find my sister and run.”

“It’s a hospital of sorts,” Paula hedged.

“Paula’s a doctor, but you’re right. This isn’t a hospital, it’s a veterinary clinic. Evelyn ... Evie insisted that it was too dangerous to go to a hospital, so I brought you here. Paula and our friend Frankie took care of you with help from some of the other women.”

“I remember hearing arguing and a lot of cussing and ... a man was singing. Was that a dream?”

“No, that really happened. Evie asked me to sing a song to help her sleep.”

“Where *is* my sister?”

“She’s having a nice long soak in my bathtub,” Paula told her. There was a loud roar from the bedroom that prompted Paula to yell over her shoulder, “Shut your damn mouth or you can wait on me all day, you hangry brat!”

“Was that a ...” Dena’s eyes got wide, and she took a step back. “No way!”

“That’s not quite as dramatic as your sister’s reaction,” Paula said with a giggle. “That girl could make a sailor blush.”

“My headache must be worse than I thought. I’ve seen spots before, but I’ve never had a hallucination.”

“You get migraines?”

“Usually once a month or so,” Dena admitted, her eyes getting even wider when Tonya, Hook and Paula’s tiger, appeared and sat next to Paula’s foot and leaned against her leg, knocking the smaller woman off-balance. Her voice went up a few octaves when she realized that the big cat wasn’t a hallucination. “That’s a real tiger, isn’t it? Holy shit.”

I took Dena’s arm when she started to sway and suggested, “Let’s get you back to bed, sweetheart.”

“I don’t want to lay down anymore,” Dena responded, her eyes never leaving the cat. Paula, even though she was irritated with Tonya, had rested her hand on the cat’s head and was scratching between her eyes. Tonya made a huffing sound through her nostrils over and over again, and I knew from experience that was her way of greeting someone or giving approval of something she liked. “I want to see my sister.”

“I’ll take you to her. Just let me get this damn cat some food before she starts grumbling again,” Paula said before she let out a tortured sigh. “Why I can’t have a normal cat like

everyone else is beyond me. This one's broken, and I'm not sure how to fix her."

Paula walked off, and when Tonya realized she was about to get her lunch, she rushed after her, leaving Dena and I standing in silence.

"Do you know who I am?" I asked.

Dena nodded. "Mama showed us pictures so we'd recognize you if we ever got to meet."

"I don't know whether to shake your hand or give you a hug." I laughed uncomfortably and Dena smiled. "I'm glad you're feeling better. Do you want something to eat?"

Dena looked around the room, her gaze passing over the silent men who were seated at the bar and around the table, before she studied the kitchen. Finally, she nodded, "Yes, please. I think my stomach grumbling is what woke me up. Something smells delicious."

"Jenn made broth. Your sister said you haven't been eating, so you'll need simple things for a few days until your stomach adjusts."

"Is Jenn your wife?"

"No. She's Boss's wife," I said as I pointed toward him. Boss lifted his hand and nodded at Dena as the rest of the men smiled at her.

"Who are they?" Dena whispered.

"They're my brothers," I explained simply.

"I thought you only had one brother who was adopted when he was a baby."

I leaned back and stared at the young woman in shock. "How did you ... How did Gabriella ..."

"Mama always made sure she had more information than anyone else. She said that knowledge is the greatest weapon in a person's arsenal." Dena's eyes filled with tears and she whispered, "I have to find her."

“We’re looking for her, sweetheart,” I replied. Dena shuffled closer, and I rested my hand on her shoulder as I said, “We’ll find her.”

“And then you’ll kill the men who took us?” I cleared my throat, trying to come up with a suitable lie or redirection, but Dena’s bright smile made everything else fall away. “You don’t have to do that, you know. If Mama gets a chance, she’ll take care of it herself. But she needs help right now. They hurt her.”

“I know, baby. We’ll help her.”

“Come sit down and have a cup of broth, Dena,” Paula ordered from the kitchen as she set a mug down in front of the chair where I’d been sitting. “Let me introduce you to the guys who’ll be helping your dad.”

Dena bit her lip and then quietly said, “I heard you say you’d stay here to watch over us, but we can take care of ourselves. Will you go find our mom?”

“I will.”

“Thanks,” Dena whispered before she put her arms around my waist. “I’ve been dreaming about meeting you since I was a little girl, but I was always worried that you wouldn’t know me.”

“I never stopped looking for you,” I admitted as I wrapped my arms around her, being careful not to touch the bruises I knew were underneath the long T-shirt she was wearing.

“Mama kept us away until she thought it was safe, but they found us anyway,” Dena told me. “She knew that they were watching you.”

“What?”

Dena leaned back to look at me, but her arms stayed around my waist. “Mama’s monster finally died, so we thought it would be okay to come back to Texas. She didn’t think that the men tracking you for him would care after he died, so she brought us here to meet you.”

“There were people watching me?”

“Yes. Israel figured out who we were a few years ago and knew that Mama would want to reunite us, so he had you followed.”

“By who?”

“A man named Cyrus.”

“Cyrus Fairchild is dead.”

“But his children aren’t. I guess Mama should have been more worried about them since they’re the ones that took us.”

“What?” I asked, my voice harsh. I heard movement and mumbling around the room and knew that my brothers had overheard.

“The man’s name is Coleman, and he’s really a bad person, but his sister is worse. She wasn’t there, but he talked to her on the phone while he ... while he had the other men hurt Mama. I’m afraid they’ll kill her since we escaped, but she insisted that we find you.”

“Coleman Fairchild is the one that kidnapped you?”

“Yes.”

“What other details do you remember about the house?”

“The basement room we were in faced east. I watched the sunrise every morning. There was a bell tower off in the distance, but I never heard it ring. When I faced the window it was to the left, so northeast of the house, I guess. There was a dog that barked all the time, but it sounded like the noise was coming from a few houses away. Does any of that help?”

I turned when I heard a chair scrape against the floor and found Rodeo standing with a stunned look on his face. “I know which house it is.”

“Let’s go,” Boss said as he got up.

The other men started standing, too, and I looked down at my daughter. Before I had a chance to ask if she’d be okay, she smiled and stepped back. “Please find my mama ... Dad.”

“I’ll bring her back to you as soon as I can.”

6.

PITA

The teakettle started to whistle just as I slid the omelet onto my plate. The ingredients on hand were very scant, but I'd made do with less before. Luckily, I discovered an onion sprouting in the pantry and even let out an excited yelp when I spotted a can of chopped green chiles on the shelf above it. I had to resist the urge to throw away the cheese I found in the refrigerator because there was no other option to be had. On a regular day, I wouldn't consider adding that trash to my food, but exceptions had to be made in such extreme circumstances.

"I'd sell a kidney for a few slices of Gruyère," I mumbled as I dunked the stale tea bag into the mug I'd scoured clean along with the pan I used to cook my omelet and a chipped plate I'd found in the cabinet. I laughed softly before I said, "Of course, it wouldn't be *my* kidney on the auction block."

I set my breakfast and mug of tea in front of the only empty chair at the table and then politely excused myself to run to the restroom while my tea steeped.

I washed my hands at the bathroom sink and took a few minutes to study my reflection. Those men had done quite a number on my face, and my body was covered in bruises and scrapes.

I leaned closer to the mirror and inspected the cut at my hairline. I winced when I realized it would require stitches soon or the scarring would require a more in-depth procedure later. I'd resisted visiting a plastic surgeon for cosmetic reasons so far and had only been once to repair the injuries my husband inflicted on me years ago. If I didn't find a doctor with a delicate touch soon, I'd have to make an exception and get some work done. There was a difference between aging gracefully and walking around with a five-inch scar across your forehead.

I took a few minutes to search through the cabinets and linen closet and finally found bandages and a sheet that would be suitable for a sling. If I wrapped the fabric tightly enough, it would do for a wrist brace too. I looked for a few more things in the closet that might work and then turned off the bathroom light and made my way back downstairs toward the kitchen with my findings in my arms.

I made a quick stop in the laundry room where I swapped my torn clothes from the washer to the dryer and put the linens in to clean them before use. I was ready for breakfast.

On my way back into the kitchen, I stopped in front of a bookshelf and scanned the titles until one of my favorite books from the early nineties caught my eye. With a soft exclamation of surprise, I pulled it off the shelf and carried it with me.

Once I had the book propped up at the perfect angle so that I could read while I ate, I unfolded the napkin that I'd found sealed with some plastic silverware and settled it over my lap. Ready to dig into my breakfast while I was transported back to the Old West, I said a quick prayer of hope that my daughters had found safety and shelter along with a word of thanks for the food I was about to eat and my good fortune of the last twenty-four hours before I opened my eyes and smiled at the others seated around the table.

“There’s almost nothing as soothing as a warm mug of tea and a good book, don’t you agree?”



HAMMER

“The neighboring houses are empty,” Stamp said as he took off the ball cap he was wearing that identified him as an employee of the local cable company and tossed it into the back seat. He stuck the clipboard he’d been carrying between the seat and the console and lifted the handheld radio that Boss had given us before we left his house. “All clear.”

“No movement in the front,” Fish answered.

“It took three darts, but the security guy is drooling on his desk calendar,” Soda informed us from his lookout position at the guard shack.

“East is ready,” Kitty said.

Santa answered, “West is ready.”

“Move to the front, boys,” Boss ordered.

I put the truck in gear and drove sedately to the end of the block before I made a left and parked behind Boss and Chef’s junker. We’d *borrowed* a few cars and trucks from the city impound lot that Soda managed, and we were all wearing non-descript clothes that would make any passerby assume we were part of a landscaping team or construction crew.

“Ready at the back,” Bug said over the radio.

“Hold,” Boss said before the rear passenger door of the truck in front of us opened. Rodeo got out and looked up and down the street before he walked up the sidewalk toward the house. He glanced over his shoulder, and a second later, Boss’s voice came over the radio. “Move in.”

Rodeo rang the doorbell and then took a few steps back so the person inside could see him through the peephole. After a few seconds, he rang the bell again.

“Uh, Boss ... we have a problem.”

“Spit it out, Bug.”

“There’s blood everywhere, but no one’s in the basement level.”

Santa’s whisper came through the speaker, “Upstairs is empty.”

“I heard a woman cough. Sounds like she’s in the kitchen,” Kitty said quietly. “No sign of anyone else, but there’s a blood trail down the hallway.”

“Chef’s gonna come through the front,” Boss said as the other doors of the truck in front of us opened. “You’ll hear him, I’m sure.”

“That’s a go,” Hook said from the back seat.

When we got out of the truck, it took every ounce of self-control I possessed to calmly walk up the sidewalk behind Boss. Just as Chef stepped onto the porch, Rodeo reached out and twisted the doorknob using the hem of his shirt. When it swung open, Chef shook his head, but Boss took the lead and lifted his gun up in front of him before he rushed inside.

I was right behind him and slammed into his back when he stopped in the middle of the hallway.

“What the fuck?” Boss exclaimed.

Holding my gun at chest level I came up beside him and gasped when I took in the occupants of the dining room to our left.

“Gentlemen,” Gabriella Gomez said as she laid a semi-automatic rifle down on the table next to her plate. “Close the door behind you, please. I’m waiting for someone, but he might get spooked if he sees a group of strangers holding handguns in his foyer.”

“Uh ...” Boss stammered. “What the ... I don’t ...”

When Boss looked at me absolutely aghast, it took all I had not to laugh.

“That’s ... Wow,” Hook muttered as he stood on the other side of Boss.

“They’re all alive,” Pita said with a shrug as she lifted her mug. She took a sip and then moved her book away from the man’s head that was holding it up. “Well, this one might not be, but the rest are.”

“Who ... How ...” Boss stammered.

“Let’s move to the kitchen before we make introductions. I’d really like another cup of tea. Would anyone else? There are a few more mugs, but I must say that the tea selection is sorely lacking.”

Gabriella stood and pushed her chair in before she picked up her plate and mug and turned to walk into the kitchen. She was wearing a loose T-shirt that fit her like a gown, hanging

almost to her knees, leaving her shapely calves exposed and showing that they were covered in cuts and bruises. I saw her wince when she moved her left arm, but then Bug, Preacher, Santa, Captain, and Kitty appeared in the doorway across the room and diverted my attention. Their eyes got wide when they saw the men seated around the table.

“Holy shit. Did she do this?” Chef whispered from behind me.

“This one’s not dead but damn close,” Preacher said as he walked over to the table, taking care to step around the pools of blood gathered at the base of each chair. He reached out and put his finger on the prone man’s neck before he admitted, “As terrifying as this is, I think we just met my old lady’s new best friend.”

“My sister’s gonna *love* her,” Santa agreed.

“I think she may be Paula’s spirit animal,” Hook said softly as he walked closer to one of the chairs and leaned down to inspect the man sitting in it. “She can’t ever meet the coven. That would be a recipe for an apocalyptic disaster the world would never recover from.”

“How the hell did she get them all ... arranged like that?” Rodeo asked under his breath.

Other than the seat Gabriella had been in when we arrived, there were seven other chairs around the table. Six of the chairs were set up back-to-back and held men with varying degrees of injury to their faces. They were each bleeding profusely from at least one major wound somewhere on their body and tied together with electrical cords at the mouth, neck, chest, wrists, and waist. They were positioned so that if one man moved at all, the man tied to him would be pulled against the back of his chair.

A few of the men were unconscious and at least three had tears streaming down their cheeks with blood and snot caked around their noses. I heard one man sob and glanced over in time to see him try to lift his arm. The man tied behind him groaned as his arm was pulled back at an odd angle, and he resisted, forcing the other man to drop his hand again.

The man laying on the table was the only one not tied to another, but even if he had been conscious, he wouldn't have been able to move since his hands had knives stuck through them, pinning them to the table.

"I don't even know what to say right now," Captain admitted as he studied the 'tools' organized along the end of the table by size. There was a metal pipe, nine handguns, six knives, a pair of brass knuckles, four screwdrivers, and my personal favorite, a hammer.

"Well that's a first," Preacher declared as he stepped away from the table and leaned over to assess another unconscious man.

I didn't even think about it when I started but didn't stop when everyone stared at me in shock. *"I remember when, I remember when I lost my mind, crazy girl, don't you know that I love you? Have I told you lately that I love you like crazy, girl?"*

"Well, fuck!"

Captain glanced over at Preacher after his exclamation. He nodded as he said, "It's even worse. Hammer's making his own remixes now."

Preacher leaned his head back to stare at the ceiling as he vowed, "That's it. I'm gonna ask that woman if she'll kill me next."

I ignored their bitching and walked around the table into the kitchen with my eyes on the woman. I walked around the long island and came to stand beside her where she stood at the sink washing dishes. I could tell that she was uncomfortable when she looked up and asked, "You won't tell my girls about this, will you?"

"Of course not. The discussion about how my girls became your girls is gonna happen soon, but at no time am I ever going to mention your ... abilities. Right now, I need to know what went down here."

"I assume that Dena and Evie told you we were abducted during a traffic stop?"

“They did.”

“And is your police chief friend taking care of that problem?”

“I am,” Boss assured her.

Pita side-eyed him before she sniffed and looked back at me. “I guess we’ll see.”

“Traffic stop. Kidnapping,” I replied, rather than let Boss interject to defend his honor after that obvious diss. I looked over at him and had to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from smiling when I saw that Boss was standing next to Chef with his mouth hanging open at her flippant dismissal. “Tell us how *this*,” I waved my hand toward the dining room, “came about and who you’re waiting for.”

“I was able to convince one of the guards to work for me rather than the man who hasn’t paid them in two weeks. He made sure my girls were able to get away and then slipped me two knives so I could defend myself.”

“Okay,” I said when she didn’t immediately keep talking. I tilted my head and stared at her with wide eyes until I finally lost my patience and pressed. “And?”

“I was able to get the upper hand,” Gabriella said with a shrug that caused her to wince again. “What more is there to say?”

I heard men stammering behind me, and once I was able to form a coherent sentence, I asked, “Did they sit down and let you tie them up? Every damn one of them is twice your size!”

“Of course they didn’t. I will admit that it was a challenge, but I’m a very driven woman when I’ve been wronged.”

“You don’t say,” I heard Preacher mumble from somewhere behind us.

“Where’s the guy that helped you?” Captain asked.

“He’s resting on the table.”

I felt my eyes bulge as I looked at the men behind me. All of them were as shocked as I was at her description, and I saw Kitty mouth to Santa, “What the fuck?”

“You killed him too?”

“He’s not dead.”

“Okay! Details. Shit! If he helped you, why did you turn him into a voodoo doll?”

“Just because I was able to buy his loyalty didn’t mean he deserved forgiveness for his wrongdoings,” Pita said primly as she brushed her hair over her shoulder. The teakettle started whistling, prompting her to turn around and ask, “Who would like tea?”

“I’ll have some,” Rodeo answered with a shrug.

“I don’t have any milk other than a few of the little cartons like they furnish at the convenience store, but I’m happy to make you a cup.”

“Thank you,” Rodeo said politely. I heard a slap and then Rodeo hissed. I knew that one of the men had smacked him when he asked, “What? It’s rude to say no when your hostess offers refreshment.”

“Oh good lord,” Preacher grumbled. He sighed and asked, “Do you happen to have any coffee?”

Gabriella turned back towards us with a mug in each hand and said, “There are coffee grounds in the cabinet, if that’s what you want to call them. As horrible as their tea selection is, it’s the lesser of two evils compared to the vacuum-packed atrocity above the coffee maker.”

“Okay,” I heard Boss snap before he slapped his hand on the counter in front of him. “I’m about to lose my shit here. Dealing with all of you is like herding cats, so I should be used to this, but I’m not going to sit and have a fucking tea party when there are seven men bleeding out in the next room.”

“Make that six. I think the guy with the chest wound just kicked it,” Hook corrected helpfully.

“It’s unfortunate that he chose to attempt an evasive maneuver. It caused me to unintentionally get his heart. I was afraid he’d expire before I could get the information I needed, but we were able to make it happen,” Gabriella assured Hook with a nod. Her face brightened when she added, “He was very forthcoming.”

“I’m sure he was,” Santa replied before he looked over his shoulder at the other men in the room. “And the rest?”

“A few of them were extremely helpful. I got as much information as I could, but their station in the grand scheme of things was very limiting. However, I took notes to make sure that I didn’t lose any important details during the excitement. I’d be happy to share my findings with you if your crew is willing to help me inflict vengeance against the man and woman who orchestrated our abduction.”

“This is giving me an aneurysm. I can feel it coming,” Boss moaned as he leaned forward and rubbed his forehead. “She took notes. I just ...”

“Written notes?” Captain asked.

“Of course. The notebook is in front of my chair at the dining room table. I didn’t want to lose any of the specifics. I’m not quite feeling like myself yet, but with a few substantial meals and some much-needed rest, I’ll be fine.”

“Are you not even going to ask about your kids?” Stamp asked.

“I taught my children to think on their feet. They don’t buckle under pressure, they thrive. I had no doubt that they’d find their father, and if they weren’t able to do that, they’d find another solution. Of course I’m worried about them, but your arrival proved that they did what they needed to do to survive. I’m sure they’re anxiously awaiting our reunion as am I. It will take us some time to recover from our ordeal, but when we do, we’ll be better for it.”

“Ordeal?” Bug asked.

Chef leaned forward and studied Gabriella’s face before he looked at us and asked, “Does anyone else feel like we’re

talking to royalty, or is it just me?" Chef asked.

"I apologize if I sound ... odd. I'm out of sorts, and when I'm uncomfortable, I tend to revert to the manners the nuns drilled into us in grammar school."

"Aww," Preacher whispered as he walked around the bar to Gabriella's side. "It's okay, ma'am. We're all friends here, and there's no reason to be uncomfortable. Let me help you to a chair where you can relax while we decide how to handle the situation going forward. It's all going to be okay. We'll take care of you."

Gabriella let Preacher take her elbow and lead her to a stool. He helped her get settled before he grabbed her mug and set it down in front of her. Preacher slid the other mug across the bar toward Rodeo who grabbed it right before it fell off the counter, swearing under his breath as the hot tea splashed on his hand.

As Preacher gently patted Gabriella's shoulder, Santa asked, "What's happening right now?"

"I'm not sure, but it's terrifying," Kitty murmured as he backed away from the bar. In a normal tone, he stammered, "I'm gonna go ... watch the ... something ... somewhere else."

"Me too," Bug said as he turned to follow Kitty. As they walked down the hall, I heard him ask, "Are we all having the same hallucination, or did Preacher really just turn into Rhett Butler?"

I ignored my friends and studied Gabriella. Her face was pale around the myriad of bruises, cuts, and scrapes. One of her eyes was so swollen that I had to wonder if she could even see out of it, and the gash near her hairline was in desperate need of stitches. There were bruises and cuts up and down her arms and gashes where she'd been bound at the wrists.

Even with all of her injuries, she held her proud posture as she smiled sweetly at Preacher, and then I felt my heart flip when she directed that smile toward me.

"We need to get you out of here," I asserted.

“I sent Frankie a message. She’ll be at Paula’s within the hour,” Santa informed us.

Rodeo took another sip of his tea and smiled at Gabriella before he said, “Thank you for the tea, ma’am. Would you mind telling us who you’re waiting on?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Boss blow out a breath and tip his head back to stare at the ceiling. He was a man of action, gruff most of the time unless he was communicating with his old lady. This little tea party Gabriella had insisted on hosting was about to make him go nuclear.

“I’d like to have a few minutes alone with his sister, but I know that’s not going to be possible, so I’m waiting on Coleman Fairchild to come back. I’d like to ... speak to him.”

Captain glanced over at the dining room before he shrugged and played along, “Is this his house? Is that why you think he’ll be coming soon?”

“He’s been here off and on in the last few weeks. I believe this is his home or one of them. There are clothes upstairs that are too expensive for those brutes,” Gabriella said, motioning toward the bound men. “And I used his Netflix account to relax with a movie during my bath last night.”

Preacher perked up before he asked, “Are there any other apps on the television he might be logged into? Amazon, maybe?”

“Yes, that was one of the choices.”

“I’m gonna take a look and see if I can’t hack his account to see where his shit gets delivered,” Preacher said as he turned toward the door.

Boss’s scowl turned into a grin. “Good call, Preach!”

Gabriella sighed when one of the men in the other room moaned loudly. “If there’s anything you’d like to ask those men, now would be the time. I’ve got to make a plan to dispose of them soon. They’re beginning to smell.”

“Is that box van you borrowed full of stuff?” Boss asked Rodeo.

“No, it’s cleared out.”

Boss looked into the dining room and grinned. “Back it up to the garage, and we’ll just put them in like they are since she did everything but top them with fancy bows.”

“You’d like to take them with you?”

Boss cleared his throat and nodded before he said, “Yes, please.”

“That would be wonderful. I wasn’t sure how to proceed. I’m feeling worse by the minute and ...” Gabriella blinked and shook her head as she started to lose her balance.

I jumped into action and caught her gently. “We need to get her to Paula and Frankie.”

Boss pulled his keys out of his pocket and tossed them toward Rodeo. “Bring my truck around so we can load her up, then take Hammer’s truck to pick up Soda and the other guys and bring them back here. Hook, come with us in case she needs something before we get to your place.”

Preacher, who was standing on Gabriella’s other side, stared down at her in concern. “That is one strong woman. She entertained us like we were at a garden party while she was likely in horrible pain the whole time.”

“I think something’s wrong on her left side, something with her arm or ribs,” Hook explained.

I nodded in agreement. “Considering what we *can* see, I can’t even imagine what’s under her clothes.”

“Be careful when you pick her up,” Preacher ordered. “The poor thing’s been through hell.”

“He does have a soft spot for the psychos, doesn’t he?” Santa reflected.

“He’s living with your sister,” Chef reminded him.

“I know. She’s who I was talking about.”

PITA

I laid perfectly still, relying on the years of practice I'd had when living with my husband to make him think I wasn't awake and aware when I was anything but. There were women's voices around me, and for some reason, that scared me worse than being surrounded by the strange men that had joined me for tea earlier. How much earlier had that been? A few minutes or a few hours? The last thing I remembered was a sharp pain in my arm before the edges of my vision blurred as I looked up at Hugh.

It was hard to follow the different conversations around the room, but I got the idea that these women were sisters or friends as close as sisters from their banter and good-natured bickering.

"I'm just saying that if a polar bear and a tiger got into a fight, I think the polar bear would win. And don't give me that bullshit about it being implausible, Paula. It's hypothetical and beside the point."

"Oh, Blue, my simple little friend. Sometimes talking to you is painful, but I'll play along today." The woman let out a dramatic sigh before she continued, "The tiger is smaller than the bear, therefore she'd be quicker and more agile in a fight. The polar bear is a big, bumbling idiot, and the tiger would run circles around her, kind of like I do with you."

Another woman interceded to keep the peace and said, "I can feel a catfight coming on, so I feel like I should remind the two of you to keep it clean."

"Now, Jenn," another woman chided. "Where's the fun in that?"

"Maylee's right," the polar bear defender agreed. "If the little person wants to insult me, let her. She's got to get her wins somehow."

“I will cut you off at the knees and then we’ll be the same height, bitch.”

“Do you think that she’s having dreams about polar bears and tigers because of this?” another woman asked.

“That would be so fucked up, wouldn’t it?” asked the voice I now knew as Blue.

Paula’s voice chimed in, “Talk about a hallucination from hell.”

A different voice said, “One time I was ... Well, let’s just say I had ingested substances that are not quite legal or healthy, and I had a hallucination about a penguin ...”

As the women talked, I heard a sink, and the sound of paper ripping let me know that the woman or women who’d just washed were drying their hands. Their voices got closer, and I felt someone’s soft touch on my forehead as body heat warmed my side. A warm washcloth started at my upper arm and gently scrubbed down to my left hand as another started on my right.

“The bruises are horrible,” a woman muttered. “Obviously, she was bound by cuffs or zip ties that were painfully tight. It looks like there’s some infection on this side.”

“This side too.”

“I’m gonna clean up this gash on her forehead, but I need Frankie to stitch it up since it’s on her face. She went to a training program a few months ago that taught her some new techniques to minimize scarring. Maybe she can do something to help this heal nicely.”

“The underside of her arm is ...”

I groaned involuntarily when the woman holding my left hand lifted my arm to look at the underside, causing a lightning strike of pain to shoot from my shoulder to my fingertips.

“Shit. Sorry,” the polar bear defender hissed as she lowered my arm tenderly.

“You’re awake,” the tiger woman said softly when I opened my eyes just a crack to assess my surroundings. “I’m Paula.”

“Hello,” I croaked.

“I’ll get her some water,” a younger voice said from somewhere near the head of the bed.

“Are my girls here?”

“They’re sleeping in my room. I thought I’d let them rest together while we got you cleaned up and then get them for you when you’re feeling a little better.”

“Good. I don’t want them to see me like this.” I slowly bent my arm so that my hand was laying on my chest, giving my shoulder a little relief from the pain. “Can I sit up?”

“Let me help you,” the polar bear woman said as she leaned closer. She slipped her hand underneath my shoulders and slowly raised me to a sitting position as someone else adjusted pillows behind me. “I’m Blue. Nice to meet ya.” I looked around at the other women just as Blue was nice enough to introduce them. “That’s Brea, Maylee, Bernadette, and Jenn. Sis just went to get you some water and is probably telling the guys you’re awake.”

“Your left side is badly bruised, and I’m worried you might have damage to your ribs,” Paula said, all business now that the introductions had been made.

“My ribs are bruised but not broken. The pain is from my shoulder,” I disclosed as I looked around the room curiously. It had the smell of disinfectant like a hospital but there was something off about the different machines and decor I didn’t understand until I saw a poster diagramming the canine digestive system on the far wall. My surroundings almost explained the tiger and polar bear conversation, but I was still a bit confused. “Am I at a veterinarian hospital?”

“Yes, but we rarely use this room for animals since the guys seem to get hurt so often,” Paula explained.

“Her old man is a vet. You probably met him earlier. Lots of muscles and built like a tree trunk? His face looks

perpetually sad and beaten because he's accepted that he's stuck living with a psycho for the rest of his life," Blue explained.

"She's projecting Preacher's demeanor onto Hook," Paula retorted. "My man always has a satisfied smile on his face."

"Now you're describing my Bug," Maylee, the woman with an elegant updo and flawless makeup, said from the chair she'd taken next to Bernadette, the lady with the New York accent.

"Who are all of you?"

"I'm Paula, that's ..."

"No. I remember your names. I'm just wondering why you're here with me right now."

"Oh! Our men were with Hammer when he found you. They brought you back here for us to check you out and get you cleaned up before you see your daughters again," Bernadette explained.

Brea, the woman on my right, said, "This is Paula and Hook's place, but we all live right around here. Blue and I live down the road, but we're still within walking distance. Everyone else lives on the compound, so that means they're always up in each other's business."

"I got some Gatorade instead of water," a young woman said as she walked into the room. She smiled brightly and offered, "Hi, I'm Sis."

"She's Brea's daughter," Blue explained.

"I really need a restroom," I said as I tried to twist my body so I could put my feet on the floor.

"Would you like to shower while you're in there or wait until I check out your shoulder?"

"*Can* you fix my shoulder?"

Paula grimaced and then nodded. "If it's dislocated, I can ..."

"That's what's wrong with it," I assured her.

“How do you know?”

“Marriage taught me a lot of things, including how to assess my own injuries.”

“Same, girl,” Paula mumbled as she helped Blue slowly lift my legs and turn me so that I was sitting on the side of the exam table. “I’ll help you walk to the restroom and then I’ll put that shoulder back in place when you’re done. Once you’re ready, you can shower, and then we’ll start assessing your wounds for infection and bandaging everything.”

“And then I can see my girls?”

“Of course. They need you as much as you need them.”

Blue smiled as she lifted her hand up so I could let her help me down off the table. “And just for the record, I’ve talked to your girls, babe. I’m pretty sure there’s not much that can frazzle them. You’ve raised some really solid kids.”



HAMMER

“I’ve gotta hand it to her, she takes excellent notes,” Captain said as he studied the paper in front of him.

Boss was leaning on the counter with another paper in his hand and agreed, “Very detailed, but the notes in the margins are a little ... off-putting.”

“What do they say?”

“Well, apparently one of the men kept calling out for a woman named Carla, so she wrote the name down along with whatever information she could glean about the family situation. I’m not sure if she planned on tracking them all down or what.”

“Like to kill them or something? Would she do that?” Rodeo asked from the couch.

Preacher smacked his hand against Rodeo’s chest before he defended Gabriella, something he’d been doing a lot of

since we met her a few hours ago. “You act like she’s a monster. I’m sure she was probably just collecting information to use against him later.”

“Revenge,” Kitty mused.

“She did keep track of Hammer and his family for years after he helped her, so maybe her practice of keeping records isn’t totally nefarious,” Chef argued.

“I think the situation between me and Gabriella is different than the reason she had for collecting information from those men.”

“I’m still stunned that she took written notes.”

“I’m not,” I replied to Boss. “When I met with her to help her escape her husband, she gave me notebooks full of information she’d gathered about him and his organization. There were hundreds of pages that listed everything from allergies his men had to his bathroom habits. The woman is *very* thorough.” I thought for a second and then asked, “Where did Fish go?” I asked, trying not to think about all the information Gabriella had gathered about Quincy and my family over the years.

“Pop has a prospect for us. The guys went to get him so Hook can put him to work cleaning shit up around here,” Boss explained. He grinned before he added, “*Actual* shit.”

“Good! I’m glad we got a new guy. I need my bike detailed, and Blue wants part of the garden tilled.”

“I can’t believe you’re going to let her use your section of land as a fucking farm,” Bug complained.

“I’m all for it,” Stamp argued. “I told her I would help as much as I can. I can’t wait to cook with some fresh produce. I’ve got a video series planned on preserving and ...”

“Blah blah blah. I want some okra fried up with onions and potatoes. I’m willing to do whatever she asks so I can have that. Maybe some fried zucchini too.”

“All those fresh tomatoes,” Stamp said dreamily. “I can do so much with fresh tomatoes.”

“Can we kill some people first?” I asked, trying to get the men back on track. “I’d like to go have a talk with our guests and see what else we can glean from them before we go hunting for the bastard that kidnapped my girls and gave them all those bruises.”

“My guess is that the men we’ve got cooling at the clubhouse had more to do with the bruises than he did, but I get where you’re going with that.”

I nodded at Preacher and then agreed, “You’re right, and I might feel a little better once I kill all of them, but getting my hands on Fairchild is what I really want.”

“Soda and Chewie are camped out at the house waiting to see if he shows up again,” Boss explained. “We’ll take turns staying over there for a few days just in case. The rest of us will deal with the trash and then start tracking down that fucker.”

“Hook should be finished with his emergency any minute and then we’ll be able to head over and start the wet work,” Boss assured me.

“I think I’ll go see how much longer he’ll be,” I said as I stood and took off for the exam room where the women were helping Gabriella. I stopped at the closed door and listened for voices. When I didn’t hear any, I tapped softly before I opened it just a crack and leaned to the side just enough to glance around the room. When I saw that Gabriella was alone, I stepped inside. Her eyes opened, and I smiled at her. “You already look like you feel better.”

“A hot shower can cure almost any ailment, and being pampered by a group of crazed mother hens doesn’t hurt either.”

“Crazed maybe, but mother hens? They’ve been called a lot of things, but I’ve never heard that description. I’m glad they took you under their wings, so to speak.”

“I was referring to how they feel about you. They were very nice and polite, but I could tell they were all dying to ask me a million questions. A few of them were subtly

considering tying me to a chair and doing to me what I did to my captors.”

“They have some of the same curiosities I do, I’m sure.”

“You want to know why I took your daughters away.”

“You got my biggest question right on the first guess.”

“How could I not?”

“I don’t know. How did you happen to find Quincy, and why would you offer to buy them from her?”

“I made sure to always know where you were in case you ever needed my help. I meant it when I said I never forget a debt. I owed you my life and more importantly the lives of my children. I was intent on repaying you the only way I knew how.”

“By taking my children out of the country and not letting me know if they were alive or dead?” I asked, getting angry now.

“You were locked away, but I did everything I could to make sure you were safe. I got word that your wife’s addiction had escalated, and she was neglecting the children. I went myself to check on them and found them living in a hovel with people I wouldn’t trust to care for a plant, let alone a child. I had two options at the time - kill her and take the children or leave her without her girls in the hopes that would give her the motivation to get clean so she could take them back.”

“You disappeared with them.”

“I spoke with her once a year, either in person or by phone, and made sure she always knew how to get in touch with me.”

“And she never did?”

Gabriella laughed bitterly. “She called often, but it wasn’t to talk to my girls.”

“She wanted money.”

“She did.”

“Did you ever give her any?”

“Other than the first time? No. I wouldn’t be part of her decline. I assured her that the girls were thriving and surrounded by love in the hopes that she’d be able to turn herself around, but I refused to feed her addiction by opening my pocketbook to her.”

“She’s in New York now.”

“I know. Her decisions caught up with her, and she’s been in custody for quite some time.”

“How did you keep track of me after I went into witness protection?”

“Money is the best source of information, and unfortunately, there are many greedy people in the government who were more than happy to let me line their pockets.”

“Where did you get all that money?”

Gabriella smiled mysteriously and said, “Magic.”

“Don’t bullshit me, Gabriella. Have my kids been living off of drug money for the last thirteen years?”

Gabriella’s expression went from relaxed to angry in a flash. “I am more than a drug dealer’s wife, Hugh Reynolds and we’ll get along much better if you keep that in mind.”

“What else am I supposed to think? You couldn’t even get a vehicle to make your escape, but you’ve lived in God knows how many countries since then in houses that famous musicians and actors aspire to own. I’ve seen pictures of the places where you’ve raised my daughters and ...”

“*My daughters!*” Gabriella whisper-shouted. “Those girls became mine the second I took them out of that rat-infested hell your wife called home. It’s not your business how I got the money to raise them because they’ve been *my children* longer than you ever knew them in the first place.”

Gabriella had managed to pull herself up to a sitting position during her tirade and swiveled around to let her legs drop over the side of the bed. She glared at me and pointed

her finger as she finished, “They’re my daughters, and you will not ever take them from me!”

I realized that she’d completely misunderstood my intentions and put my hands up in front of me as I shook my head. “I would never even consider that. The life you’ve given them is more than I could have dreamed they’d have and more than I could have ever given them. The fact that you have raised them and loved them as your own makes you their mom, Gabriella, and I’d never try to deny that.”

“My name is Pita now.”

“And I haven’t been Hugh in years. Call me Hammer.”

Gabriella ... Pita gave an indelicate snort and shook her head. “I will not call you by that ridiculous name.”

“Denny.”

“Is that what you’d like me to call you?”

“I guess.”

“What would you rather I call you?”

Without thinking, I blurted out the plan I’d been working on to give me a chance to have a relationship with my daughters without going to war with the only mother they’d ever known. “Husband.”

“Hook’s back, man,” Bug said from the doorway.

Paula breezed past him and smiled at Pita. “I think your girls are starting to stir. Want me to help you to my bedroom so you can surprise them?”

“Oh yes, please!” Pita said with an excited smile.

HAMMER

I walked around the corner of the wellhouse in the center of the compound my brothers and I used as our clubhouse and was surprised to see a man I didn't recognize leaning against the wall near the cellar door that served as our entrance.

I nodded at him and started to walk past but he pushed away from the wall and got in front of me.

“And where do you think you're going?”

I laughed softly before I answered, “To hell if I don't change my ways.” I started to walk around him, knowing this must be the new prospect Pop had urged Boss to take on. I didn't have it in me to be pleasant right now because there were men in the room below that needed my attention. All of my attention. And then they needed to die.

The younger man stepped in front of me again and poked my chest before he said, “I asked you a question, boy.”

I burst out laughing and stopped, not because he'd forced me to but because I really wanted to see how this would play out.

“Poke me with that finger again, and you'll be picking your nose with your elbow for the rest of your days.”

The idiot poked my chest not once, but three times. Before he could so much as blink, I grabbed his finger and twisted it, forcing him to spin around so I could yank his arm up behind his back. I felt the bones in his finger snap like a brittle twig, and the guy let out a sharp yelp of pain as he tried to resist my hold.

“I warned you, son,” I said as I slammed the man face first into the cinder block wall.

“What the fuck did you do now, Ryder?” Soda asked as he and Fish walked around the other end of the building toward

us.

“This fucker ...” The man, Ryder, whimpered when I twisted his finger just a bit more before he finished, “Sorry! I’m sorry! I was guarding the door, and he just walked up and assaulted me!”

“Sure he did. Out of the clear fucking blue, he rushed you, and now he’s got you tied into a knot. I’m sure that’s exactly how it happened,” Fish said sarcastically. “Let me guess, Hammer, he ran his mouth, and you couldn’t help yourself?”

“He poked me in the chest.”

“I was guarding the door and he ...”

“You’re supposed to be over at Boss’s shoveling chicken shit, dumbass. I said I wanted you to stay over there and shut the fuck up so no one would want to kill you, and you couldn’t even accomplish that.” Soda sighed and shook his head. “This does not bode well for you, boy. It’s gonna suck trying to shovel shit with a broken arm.”

“It’s just his finger so far, but I’m thinking of working my way up to his neck,” I admitted.

“He’s already gone crossways with Preacher *and* Hook. I’m sure one of them might want in on that.” Fish tilted his head as he studied the guy before he admitted, “He almost didn’t make it this far. I wanted to choke him out on the drive over.”

The new guy squirmed to get away as he said, “Let me go and fight me like a man, asshole.”

“See? He just doesn’t know when to shut up. Preacher threatened to cut his tongue out earlier when he started spewing bullshit about his bike.”

Soda agreed, “Yep. Almost killed him. All this fucker was supposed to do was clean the damn thing, but then he started tinkering with something. Preacher damn near took his head clean off.”

“I was just ...”

I pulled the guy away from the wall a few inches and then slammed him back against it before I said, “Hush. The grownups are talking.” The man whined, and I looked over at Fish and Soda before I asked, “So, what you’re telling me is that if I rip his head off and use it like a soccer ball, Preacher might like to play a game or two with me?”

Fish agreed, “No doubt. Hook too. He mentioned something about reporting the inhumane conditions he’s got Tonya living in to some online conservation rescue group.”

“Oh shit. Hook won’t be the one to kill him if something happens to Tonya. Paula will gut him and leave him for the coyotes if he fucks with her cat.” I considered it for a second and decided that was a show I might like to watch, so I asked, “Do you have anything I can tie him up with? I don’t want him creeping around here and putting his nose in business that doesn’t pertain to him.”

Fish went to one knee and pulled up the hem of his jeans to reach into the top of his boot. He pulled out a bundle of zip ties held together with a rubber band and held them out to me after he stood again. Soda and I stared at him in shock and he asked, “What? It’s good to be prepared. These things come in handy for all sorts of situations.”

“Do you tie people up often?” I asked.

“Usually only when they ask me to,” Fish said with an exaggerated wink. Soda pretended to gag as he took the zip ties from him. Fish nodded toward the man I still held against the wall and said, “We’ll get numbnuts tied up if you want to go inside. I know the guys are waiting for you to start the meeting.”

I stepped back and let the man go but was ready when he spun around and took a swing at me. I dropped him with one hit to the jaw, and we watched him crumble to the ground in a dead faint.

“Good one.”

“That’s his signature move,” Soda told him. “Don’t ever spar with him. It’s almost as bad as getting in the ring with

Hook.”

“Good to know.”

“Well, gentlemen, I feel the urge to burst into song. I hate to do that without Preacher in the audience, so I’m going inside.” The guys didn’t say anything as I walked around them to get to the cellar doors. I glanced over as I walked down the steps to go underground and saw Soda use his boot to flip the guy onto his face as Fish knelt down to tie him up. “Don’t enjoy yourself too much, guys. This fucker’s gonna be our prospect, and that means we’ve got plenty of time to jack with him.”

“He’s not gonna live that long,” Soda muttered.

Fish winced before he explained, “He had flowers delivered to Sis at the shop today.”

“Oh. Well, in that case, have fun!” I pulled the door shut above me and then made my way down the stairs and into the room. I looked around and saw that someone had moved the table against the wall and Stamp, Bug, Kitty, and Santa were sitting on it as they looked down at their phones. Boss was standing with Hook and Captain at the bar while Preacher watched Chef stir a pot on the small camp stove they had set up on the counter by the sink.

Feeling lighter than I had in months now that I knew my daughters were safe and I’d have them near me for the rest of my life, I threw my arms out dramatically and burst into song, *“Tonight I’m gonna have myself a real good time. I feel alive! And the world, I’ll turn it inside out, yeah, and floating around in ecstasy ...”*

“He’s back,” Santa sang as I let my voice trail off. It was hard to hear him over Preacher’s grumbling, but the rest of the men were smiling at me. Well, not all of them. The ones tied to the chairs in the center of the room were in quite a bit of distress, if they were even conscious. It looked like at least one of them might already be dead.

“It’s about time you got here,” Boss said as he walked my way. “We were starting to get antsy because that one over

there smells and I'm getting hungry."

"Jenn's baking with Kitty's girls, and he's anxious to go test out her recipes," Captain explained.

"I had to get Pita and my kids settled," I explained. "Then I ran into some dipshit who poked his finger in my chest and tried to stop me from coming inside."

"Please tell me you cut his finger off," Preacher said with an evil grin.

"It's still attached to him, I just broke it. The guys are tying him up right now, and I must say they are enjoying it more than they probably should."

"You haven't had the joy of talking to the guy for any length of time, or you'd understand," Hook said with a glare aimed at the door. "Fucker's taking his life into his hands just by opening his mouth."

"He got his fucking tools out like he was going to adjust the timing on my bike," Preacher complained. "I don't know who the fuck he thinks he is, but that's just ... well, that's a killin' offense where I'm from."

"There are more problems than just his mouth," Chewie said from the chair he had tipped back against the wall. "I'm pretty sure it's a requirement to be able to ride a motorcycle if you're going to join a motorcycle gang."

"It's a club, dipshit!"

"I know, Boss, I'm just repeating what Ryder called it."

"Isn't it ironic that his name is Ryder, and he doesn't know how to ride?" Santa asked.

"Fucker doesn't know anything about bikes either! Said he was going to adjust the timing on mine to the gauge that he read about in some manual," Preacher complained. "Who the fuck does that?"

"The dealership?" Kitty asked sarcastically.

"My Blue likes the way my bike purrs, so I'm leaving it just the way it is."

“As you should,” I agreed.

“Dead guy over there is starting to stink up the place, and when I left my house, it smelled like a beautiful woman and a fresh batch of cookies. I’d rather be there, so let’s get started, gentlemen. We’ll deal with the know-it-all tomorrow. Maybe the next day.”

“Why is he even here? Isn’t there some sort of system in place to weed out the dipshits?” Captain asked. He looked over at Preacher and winced. “Maybe not.”

“Pop insisted that we take him on, and I have a feeling it’s because he didn’t want him around anymore,” Boss admitted. “At the rate he’s going, he’s not going to be of any use to us other than manual labor.”

“I have a feeling the guys are gonna put those zip ties on tight. I’m not sure he’ll even have hands by tomorrow.”

Preacher looked over at me and grinned. “No hands means he won’t touch my fucking motorcycle again, and I am perfectly okay with that!”



“Are you comfortable?” Denny whispered from the doorway.

“I’m more comfortable than I’ve been in a month,” I admitted in a soft voice so as not to disturb the girls. “However, I need to get up to use the bathroom, but I’m not sure how to do that without waking them.”

“You can’t crawl over?” I shook my head, and Denny winced when he glanced at the sling that held my arm immobile. “I’ve got an idea.”

I raised an eyebrow and lifted my head to see what he was planning when he tugged the sheets and blanket loose from the foot of the bed. I couldn’t hold back a gasp when his warm hands wrapped around my ankles and then had to bite back a

laugh when he started slowly pulling me toward him. Within just a few seconds, I was trapped underneath the comforter, wondering at the thought process of this crazy man, but then the blanket lifted and he grinned at me as he reached out and took my hand.

Once I was standing in front of him, he laughed softly and reached up to smooth my hair. “You look like you just touched a live wire.”

“I’m sure my wild hair is the least of my flaws right now.”

“I don’t see any flaws,” Denny lied. The look on my face made him chuckle and he explained, “I see bruises and cuts that make me want to go on another killing spree. They show that you’re the strongest person I’ve ever met to have gotten past the pain they caused you and have still come out on top.”

I took a second to analyze what Denny had just let slip. *Another* killing spree, meaning that the men who’d held me and my daughters captive were not of this earth anymore. I was perfectly okay with that thought.

“I would have tried to escape sooner, but I was waiting for just the right opportunity,” I explained as Denny tugged me out of the bedroom into the hall. I waited until he pulled the door shut behind us before I tried to pull my hand away. He wouldn’t let it go and led me toward the living room of his immaculate house. I took another opportunity to look around the space and was again amazed at the minimal decor and clean lines. Everything was white. The walls, furniture, even the rug was white. “Where are we going?”

“We didn’t get to finish our conversation earlier.”

I tugged at my hand again, but he squeezed it instead of letting it go. He used his other hand to open one of the French doors on the back wall and then pulled me outside behind him. There was a large fire burning in a simple brick fire pit at the center of a group of patio furniture. I felt the heat coming off of it in waves as we got closer.

“It’s cool out, but the fire should keep you warm,” Denny explained after he stopped beside a chaise lounge. He nudged

me closer to the chair, and once I'd sat down, he tenderly lifted my legs and twisted me around, urging me to lean back before he covered me with a crocheted throw, the only thing I'd seen around with any color at all. He tucked it around my legs and under my feet before he adjusted it at the top, his fingers brushing my breasts as he pulled the cover up closer to my chin. Once he was finished, the only part of me uncovered was my head. I felt tears fill my eyes at his acts of kindness and caring.

The different relationships I'd had with men over the years flashed through my mind. I realized that I had never been quite so cared for by a man. I had dated off and on in the years since I left my husband but had always chosen men who were aloof and made it easy for me to keep my distance, only using them for companionship and occasional sexual release.

It was disturbing how such a simple kindness from this gruff man could bring up such emotions. I took a deep breath and blinked a few times to keep the tears from spilling over.

"I'm sorry! Did I hurt you?"

"No! Not at all," I assured him, not willing to share my thoughts with Denny. He was a stranger to me but only physically. I'd been following his life from a distance for years, since before I'd even met him in person, but I realized now that I didn't know him at all.

Because of his childhood and professional reputation, I had wrongly assumed that he would be distanced and detached. That opinion changed the night I met him at the restaurant in south Texas. The smile he'd offered to my children before he shared his food with them was genuine and full of care and attention. It had blown my preconceived notions away.

I realized after observing his failed marriage and the devotion he'd shown to the woman who didn't deserve an ounce of it that he was even more complex than I'd imagined. The reports I'd received after his children were born depicted a man who was devoted to his son and spent countless hours playing in the yard, first teaching him to throw and then to bat. The pictures of him smiling with the team of young boys

that made up the T-ball team he coached with another father were some that I'd kept close over the years, even sharing them with my daughters when they asked about their father.

I had to admit that I'd admired all of the pictures I'd been sent of Hugh Reynolds - now Denny Grey. From the first time I'd spoken to him in person, the man had been in my thoughts. Everything from his rugged handsomeness to his gravelly voice stayed with me. Occasionally, I'd imagine what it would be like to have him beside me while I cheered on the sidelines for one of my children during their games or next to me on the edge of the bed while I worried over a sleeping child who wasn't feeling well.

Other times, more often than I'd rather admit, I imagined him talking to me while I was alone in my bedroom. His gruff voice whispering in my ear was enough to take me right to the edge, and when I imagined his hands on my body, I was finished. Spectacularly wrecked, just from my imagination. I'd always believed it was just that - imagination. But now, after having spent the last twenty-four hours near him, I realized it wasn't my imagination at all. This man was everything I'd dreamed of and more.

I'd followed Denny's progression through life from the day we first met, happy that he'd found someone to love even though I grieved that I'd never find a man who was as honest and forthright. I cried tears of joy when I found out that his wife had given birth to a son, knowing he'd love that boy to distraction. I knew that his daughters, who were born a few years later, would grow up to be well-loved little princesses that would be just as doted on as the prince of the family.

When I heard that his son had been taken, I was overcome with fear and rage, not only on the boy's behalf but on Denny's. I had used several of my resources to help in the search and my heart was broken when the boy's body was found. I was filled with pride at how he'd handled his son's killer and then sorrow when he was convicted and sent to prison. Watching his wife's downward spiral was painful even from a distance. When things got so bad that she started

neglecting her daughters even more than she had before, I couldn't help but step in.

Hugh Reynolds - Denny - had saved my children. Saving his was the least I could do in return. The fact that I'd been harboring a crush on the man all these years had nothing to do with the love I had for *my* girls. No matter how much I respected him, or wanted him, he'd never take them away from me. He might be a worthy opponent if we had to go toe to toe, but after years of living with my monster of a husband and then years on my own, I'd become a much more formidable opponent than most people could imagine.

I wanted Denny Grey - Hammer, as ridiculous as that name was - and I'd have him, but not at the expense of the family I'd created.

“What are you thinking about right now?”

Without even thinking about it I said, “You won't take my girls away from me, Denny. They won't let you, and neither will I.”

“I wouldn't even try, Pita. I'll admit that when I first found out you'd ... Quincy had ... Shit.” Denny took a deep breath and shook his head as he sat in the chair next to mine. “It didn't take long for me to realize that they'd be okay with you. I remembered how you were with your own children that night we met and knew you'd take care of my daughters.”

“They became my daughters the second I held them in my arms.”

“I know that now, and you're right. They'd never let me take them away from you. The thing is, I'd never try. I could see how worried they were about you but also, how much faith they had that you'd make it through this. They were so strong, both of them. They kept their heads and made their escape, never stopping until they got to where they were going. I have no doubt that if I hadn't walked outside when I did that Evie would have come inside and done what she needed to help her sister and to help you.”

“I knew that Israel would never stop looking for me, and if he did somehow catch me, they’d need to be ready to react within a second, just like my other three children. From the beginning, I taught them to rely on themselves and not just each other. I gave them all the tools they’d need to survive if we became separated for some reason.”

“I handed Evie my pistol to make her feel safe. I knew that would give her the strength to be brave.”

“Evie is an expert mark, and Dena is almost just as good. We’ve been training with firearms since they were five along with many other forms of self-defense.”

“Many?”

“My ... Our daughters have excelled in martial arts. Evie is a rokudan in Judo and Dena is a sabeom in Taekwondo.”

“That sounds impressive, but I’m not sure what any of it means.”

“Evie is a white belt in judo and Dena is a sixth level dan, an instructor in Taekwondo.”

“Damn. Evie’s almost a black belt, and Dena’s good enough to teach?”

“The white belt is one of the highest ranks in judo. She’s an eleventh dan,” I informed him with a smile, proud of my children and their accomplishments.

Denny tilted his head and asked, “Did you take classes with them?”

“Of course. I can’t expect excellence from them unless I’m willing to put in the work myself.”

“With all that training, I guess your size really wouldn’t matter if you had a mind to kick my ass.”

“I will admit that if you go up against us in hand-to-hand combat, the odds wouldn’t be in your favor.”

“If you three are such badasses, then how come you couldn’t get away from those men sooner?”

“No amount of martial arts experience can stop a bullet.”

“Valid point. But it helped you subdue them?”

“Possibly,” I said with a sly grin before I added, “It was at least enough to help me get the upper hand until I could confiscate their weapons.”

“You’re a little badass.”

I could have kicked myself for the giggle that escaped at his praise, but I covered it by saying, “Thank you.”

“Aren’t you going to ask what I meant earlier before the girls interrupted our conversation?”

“I assume that you have some sort of aphasia.”

“Aphasia? Did you just imply that I have brain damage?” Denny laughed when I shrugged, and then he replied, “You’re right that I didn’t mean for it to come out that way, but I did mean what I said. I’m not going to try to take the girls away from you, but I’m not going to let them leave my side either. I guess that means you’re stuck with me too.”

I furrowed my brow as I shook my head. “Being in a co-parenting situation doesn’t equate to marriage.”

“I want the girls to have my last name. I don’t know the details of how you’ve changed their identities, but a guaranteed way to make that happen is to get married and I’ll legally adopt them.”

“You have thought this through.”

“I haven’t been thinking of anything else since I sat there watching them sleep that first night.”

“There must be easier ways to go about it rather than having a marriage in name only.”

“Who said that’s all it would be?”



HAMMER

While I waited patiently for the refusal I knew must be coming, I watched the different emotions play over Pita's face.

At first there was shock, then confusion, and finally, she came to some sort of conclusion and asked, "You want to have a *real* marriage?"

"Of course I do, just not right this second."

"So, you have a schedule to get to that point? What if something or someone interrupts your timeline? You could meet an attractive woman tomorrow and fall in love. What will that mean for our situation?"

"I already met a very attractive woman. The falling in love will come sooner rather than later, if I had to guess."

"If you already met her, then why would you suggest that we get married?"

I waited for a second for her to realize that *she* was the woman I was referencing, but the realization never came, so I quietly said, "It's you, Pita. You're the woman I'm captivated by, and luckily, that just makes this situation better."

"Me?" I laughed softly as I nodded and then waited for her to say something. Instead, she self-consciously reached up and tenderly touched the stitches on her forehead and the swelling around her discolored eye before she said, "How could you think I'm attractive? I'm ... I've never ... *Really?*"

"Yes. I was drawn to you the first time we met, and the attraction just got more intense when I realized how intelligent you are while having the qualities of a fierce mama bear. You've been through so much in your life and managed to come out on top. That perseverance and grit is sexy in and of itself. Of course, I think we should focus on finding the bastard that orchestrated your kidnapping and arrange for his slow and painful death before we start dating."

"Dating?"

"We've got to get to know each other and what better way to do that than to date each other? Isn't that usually what people do?"

“Is it? I’m not sure we have time for that. There’s a price on my head, and I have to figure out how to make sure my girls are safe from that before I ...”

“*What?*”

“You didn’t find that out when you interviewed the men?”

“They didn’t really have much information other than what you’d already put in your notes.”

“And you’ve disposed of them in a fitting way, I assume?”

“What would you consider fitting?”

“I’d like them to be torn limb from limb with pieces of their bodies scattered to the four corners of the earth.”

“That didn’t really fit on the agenda, but would it make you feel better to know that they’re being turned into pig shit as we speak?” Pita burst out laughing, and I grinned.

“I’m not sure I’ve ever known anyone that has a sounder of feral hogs.”

“A sounder?”

“That’s what their family group is called. I assume they’re a family since keeping a group of boars together would cause nothing but ...”

“How do you know all that? You’re a city girl.”

“Even a city girl should have diverse knowledge and options,” Pita said primly.

“In most cases, I’m all about options, but in this particular case, I hope you realize that sticking with me is the best one.”

“Would we live here with you?”

“Yes. If this house isn’t ...”

“Your home is beautiful, but with the addition of three people, two of them being loud and boisterous young women full of life and color, your house won’t stay the way you seem to prefer.”

“How do you think I prefer it?”

“Very clean. Almost sterile.”

“I’ll admit that I do like things in order, but I’m willing to bend if you are.”

“I think that moving in three women is doing more than bending, Denny. I’m afraid it might very well break you.”

“You’ll find that I’m a pretty resilient man, Pita.”

“For your sake, I hope that’s true.”

HAMMER

“What’s going on at your house?” Kitty asked as soon as I was close enough so that he didn’t have to yell, disturbing the little guy napping in the shade nearby while Kitty worked on his bike.

“Which ring of the circus are you asking about?” Kitty’s laughter rang out and startled the cat that was meandering across the grass toward the house. “Don’t laugh at me, man. Call your kids home, and tell them it’s okay to bring mine back with them. I haven’t had a second’s peace in at least a week. All day long, they’ve been chattering and squealing.”

“They just moved in two days ago, and it’s not even ten o’clock in the morning, Hammer.”

“It’s only been a few hours?”

Kitty laughed again before he suggested, “Let’s make a deal. If they’re all at your house, you can come hang out in my garage and vice versa.”

“Done. Even if I’m not there, you’re welcome to come in and make yourself at home.”

Kitty raised one eyebrow before he reminded me, “That’s not usually your way.”

“What do you mean?”

“You rarely invite us over, and when you do, we have to stay outside.”

“No you don’t.”

“Your entire house is white, man. We can’t go over there because ...” Kitty swept his hand down from his chest to his boots and smirked.

“I like a clean house,” I said with a shrug. “White is simple. You know when it’s dirty.”

“What I want to know is how that woman got everything in motion so fast.”

“What do you mean?”

“How did she arrange for them to deliver those shipping containers and hire movers on such short notice?”

“I have no idea. I’m learning not to question how she gets things done because when I do, her answers just irritate the shit out of me.”

Kitty laughed. “Welcome to the world of relationships, my friend. I’ll ask Pandora a question, and she’ll give me an answer that makes no fucking sense and then wonder why I look so dumbfounded.”

“I asked Pita how she got so much money over the years and why she has a price on her head, and her answers were magic and her sparkling personality.”

“Those aren’t answers, they’re evasions.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“Pandora came up with a pretty good question this morning.”

“What’s that?”

“Do her older kids know she’s moving in with you?”

“I guess?”

“I would assume she’s already told them, but that leads to the other questions of her son’s identity and profession. She’s the only one that would have those answers.”

“I asked her, and she said, and this is a direct quote, ‘He blesses the world with his handsome face and charming demeanor just like my other children.’”

“The woman is a vault, that’s for sure.”

“If this is going to work out, she’s going ...”

“If what’s going to work out?”

“Us. Me and Pita.”

Kitty's eyes got wide, and he stared at me for a few seconds before he pulled his phone out and looked at the screen. He typed something out and then looked back up at me before he asked, "You're talking about getting together with this woman?"

"Her name is Pita now."

"Got it. The question remains, though."

"I'm going to marry her."

"You've lost your fucking mind."

"Probably."

"I knew you were moving her in, but I thought that was just to help the girls adjust. I had no idea it was so you could marry her!"

"Why is that a problem?"

"She won't even tell you what her kid does for a living. She kidnapped your kids, man!"

"She didn't kidnap them, Kitty. She gave them a better life than I could have when I was locked up. I hate to think about what might have happened to them if they'd stayed with Quincy."

"I'll give her that much, but why didn't she come forward when you got out?"

"I asked her that yesterday, and she said she was worried I wouldn't be the same man when I got out of prison. She also said that Gomez had me on his radar, probably because he knew that the information we had on him had to have come from her. When she found out he was dying, she started making plans to come back to the States, but then this came up."

I heard footsteps on the gravel behind me and turned to find Preacher and Chef walking up the drive.

Kitty cleared his throat before he said, "I sent out an SOS when I found out you were planning on marrying her, but now that you've explained ..."

“I was going to get in touch with you today anyway,” Preacher interrupted when he stopped in front of me. “I figured out where she’s getting her money.”

“Please tell me it’s not drug money.”

“No. Well, in a roundabout way, but she’s not taking it directly from the source,” Preacher hedged.

“What does that mean?”

“She’s been blackmailing people. Scratch that. She’s been blackmailing *important* people, especially some in the Mexican government.”

“No shit?” I asked in shock.

“Most notably, she’s been extorting her father for *years*. She’s obtained millions and millions of dollars by going after him and his cronies. They’re all snakes who are banking off the drug trade, and she’s been taking big fat stacks of their money.”

“She said she had a price on her head,” I told my friends.

“That would explain why.”

“Preacher’s right. How many politicians want her dead besides her dear old dad?” Chef asked.

“How is she getting the intel?” Kitty asked. “She’s been all over the world, not mingling with those gutter rats.”

“She’s got an ally somewhere. Probably more than one,” Preacher explained. “There’s no other way she’d be able to find dirt on so many officials. I have a theory about that.”

“Of course you do,” Kitty teased.

“Well fuck you then. I’ll keep it to myself.”

“Come on, Preach. I’m all ears,” I said, trying to encourage him to open up.

“One of the men she’s been blackmailing lost his wife last year.”

“And?” Chef asked.

“When I say ‘lost his wife,’ I don’t mean she died. She disappeared without a trace. Poof. Just gone.”

“What does that have to do with Pita?” Kitty asked.

“Three days after his wife disappeared, an exposé was printed in the largest newspaper in the country detailing all of this man’s crimes. He was arrested and killed in prison days later. His wife reappeared a few weeks after that and said she’d never been missing at all. She’d been on a retreat or some shit and was as surprised as everyone else at the revelation of her husband’s crooked ways. Then she set about burning his reputation even further to the ground and using that as her platform for change. She won in a landslide election, and now she runs their little corner of the world.”

“No shit?” Chef asked. “She planned her husband’s downfall?”

“I traced her to the same country Pita was in during that time. I think she hid out with Pita while the fireworks died down, and then she swept in and started things fresh. She’s overthrowing the government from her own living room.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” I argued. “One time could be a coincidence.”

“That was the fifth woman who disappeared right before their husband’s entire life got flushed down the toilet and he ended up dead.”

“Okay, that’s not a coincidence.”

“Nope. And the fact that all five are now either high-ranking members of the government or leading massive companies with ties to the government isn’t by chance either.”

“She’s got her own crazy coven.” I was stunned and felt an emotion I almost didn’t recognize. Pride. That tiny woman was organizing a coup from wherever she was in the world with insiders who were part of her plan the entire time. “She’s a fucking genius.”

“She’s a woman on a mission, and anyone with half a brain knows not to fuck with that,” Preacher said firmly. “I know that when Blue gets something set in her mind, nothing will

deter her, including me. If she wanted to take over a country, I have no doubt she could do it, especially if the other women were backing her.”

“If there’s a bounty on her, then that means someone knows what she’s doing.”

“Her father is very invested in the drug trade. Rumor has it that he wants her back so he can barter her knowledge and sell her off to the highest bidder wanting to take over the pipeline,” Preacher explained.

“How do you find this shit out?” Kitty asked in awe.

“I’m not the only conspiracy theorist out there, my friend. A lot of it is bullshit, but there’s a grain of truth in most everything, no matter how outlandish it may seem on the surface. You’ve just got to learn how to find that grain so you can build on it.”

“Why was Fairchild so interested in her?”

“I don’t think it’s Coleman. I think it’s the oldest kid - the daughter. I think she’s running shit, and her brother is the errand boy. If he gets the information from Pita, then he’s got a leg up on his sister to be able to overthrow her and step into her role. He’ll have Pita’s contacts and information to enable himself to set up a pipeline using the resources she mapped out.”

I thought about that for a second until Chef asked, “Do you think she gave him anything?”

“If she had, she probably wouldn’t be alive today,” I mused. “He held her for three weeks, and she didn’t break.”

“Damn,” Chef and Kitty said at the same time.

“She’s a powerhouse, that’s for damn sure. No wonder your daughters are so strong-willed. They get it from their mama.” I smiled at Preacher and nodded in agreement. “I think a man like you could do much worse than hooking his star to a woman like that.”

“A man like me?” I asked.

“You’re obviously certifiable, and Pita might be able to reign in your crazy. If she can, we’ll all be forever in her debt.”

“You’ve got a crush on me, don’t you, Preacher?”

“Fuck off.”

“I’m going back to the chaos of my house now,” I said as I turned and headed in that direction. “Y’all have a great day.”

“Our women invaded your house twenty minutes ago,” Chef informed me. “Have fun with that.”

“Shit.”



PITA

“Mama! We have company!” Dena yelled. I heard women’s voices along with the girls who had come over earlier to see my daughters and wondered who was here. As I got closer to the living room, I realized there were quite a few women inside the house ... My house.

That was something I was having a problem rationalizing. Denny wanted this to become our home, which meant that it wouldn’t be a temporary living situation like we’d had for the last few years. I was excited to unpack some of the decor I’d collected in my travels and find a permanent place for each item.

I had pottery I’d collected over the years, art that I enjoyed but had to keep in storage because I was afraid to move it over and over, and knickknacks that each of my children had created as they grew up. I had always made sure that our homes were comfortable, but we all knew that each one was transitional.

Of course, some of the temporary housing had lasted for a year or two, but most were for six months or so until we moved on for one reason or another. However, Denny insisted that this was where we’d stay, and that he and his friends

would be able to keep us safe so we didn't have to move again.

When I'd gone out at dawn to drink my coffee on the patio, I'd found Denny already outside. We sat in companionable silence for quite some time as we watched the sun rise, and then the houses around us started to wake up.

When a rooster crowed in the distance, Denny explained that it was Jennifer's pet rooster and then exaggerated his size until I almost believed that the bird stood knee-high and could take down a grown man. He also told me about her menagerie of animals that included a skunk, a pair of llamas, two miniature donkeys, and her newest acquisitions - a couple of miniature cows that he insisted my daughters and I would instantly fall in love with.

Considering that the day before, I'd seen a full-grown tiger lounging on his friend's couch, it wasn't a stretch to consider his other friends might also have unique pets, but miniature cows and a giant rooster? That might be going too far. And what kind of person kept a skunk in their house? Obviously someone who names her rooster Ed Earl and her llamas after rock musicians.

All of the women I'd met so far had been perfectly pleasant, but I could tell they were holding back. They didn't *like* me, they were tolerating me. I had a feeling that as soon as they were unleashed from whatever restraint they were under, I'd be in for quite an interrogation.

Years ago, I'd researched the group that Denny joined when he was released from prison and had added more information to that roster as each man fell in love and started families. They were very diverse, not just in looks but in backgrounds too.

Convicted felons, a Las Vegas madam, a millionaire business woman, two women from mafia families, and another whose family was part of a shameful and greedy religious empire made up the majority. There were a few with not quite such an illustrious history and the younger women who probably hadn't lived long enough to rack up the experience of

the others, but considering the company they kept, were probably right on track to join the ranks.

Denny had referred to them as the crazy coven and insisted they weren't into witchcraft, but it was clear by the look on his face that he wasn't convinced of that. Over the course of my life, I'd dealt with men and women who were well-skilled at the art of hiding their emotions behind a mask they wore for the world. The women that I'd met over the last few days hadn't mastered that art.

They'd been pleasant enough, but I could tell they were assessing me as a threat and devising ways to dispose of my body if I brought problems to their comfortable lifestyle or did something to hurt their friend.

It would probably shock them to their core if they could read my thoughts about Denny Grey. The only nefarious things I had planned for the man would take place in the bedroom, and I could guarantee he'd be a willing participant. I'd never imagined there was a chance for us, but his words and behavior over the last few days had proven otherwise.

Denny Grey wanted me in the same way I wanted him - naked and moaning - and I couldn't wait. It might muddy the waters between us, considering he still insisted that we marry so he could share custody of the girls, but I also wasn't sure how much time I would have left if certain individuals had their way.

And if I was going to die, I'd rather do it as a satisfied woman with a smile than the woman who had names for her vibrators. Of course, those names were ones that Denny had used over the years - mostly in his previous life as an undercover agent - but still, they had names. I knew that was a sad testament to my dating and sex life.

"Good morning," I greeted the women as I walked into the living room.

"Hi, Pita!" Jenn said brightly. She seemed to be the nicest of them. I couldn't imagine what she had in common with the rest. My first assessment of the woman was that she had been swept up into their craziness when she fell in love with the

leader of the club that Denny belonged to, and she probably hadn't done anything illegal in her life. Bernadette, August, Sis, and Pandora were the same way - women who had fallen in with a crowd that was potentially much more than they'd bargained for. I was sure that very few of them had any idea what the men in their group were capable of, or some of the women for that matter.

A few of the women who had served time were much more assessing in their interactions with me. Even though they tried to hide it, I could see that they didn't trust me and would be more than willing to bump me off if I hurt their friend. I respected that and appreciated it on Denny's behalf.

Blue, Brea, and Matalie had all been incarcerated, and you could sense a hardness in them that the rest of the women lacked. Except for Maylee. As a Las Vegas madam, I could imagine that she'd seen and experienced things that would make any of the others shudder. Oddly enough, I was the most wary of her.

"We've got a surprise for you," Bernadette said from the doorway. "It's sort of ... Well, it's a little more than we bargained for but ... Just come look."

I was curious about what kind of gifts they were bringing, and I walked over to the doorway right behind my girls.

Both of them squealed with delight when they saw Sis, August, Matalie, and Paula standing on our front porch, each with a calico cat in their arms.

"We didn't know which one might be yours, so we brought all of the calicos we could find," Sis explained. "They're all about the same age and ..."

Evie walked over to Paula and pulled the cat out of her arms. She held him close to her chest as tears streamed down her face. "Smudge! I thought I'd never see you again!" The cat snuggled up to the only person she'd ever even pretended to tolerate and instantly started purring. Evie spun around and exclaimed through her sobs, "Mama! They found Smudge!"

“I see that, sweetheart,” I murmured as I got closer. I ran my hand over the cat’s fur and then used my thumb to wipe the tears off Evie’s cheeks. “I know you were worried you’d never find him.”

“Thank you so much!” Evie wailed as she turned back to the women, three of whom were still holding cats.

“We were hoping one of these was hers,” Blue explained from beside me.

“What will you do with the other three?” Dena asked.

“Hook will find homes for them. We got them from shelters in the area and really don’t want to take them back,” Paula explained. “I wonder if Tonya would like a friend?”

“You mean an afternoon snack?” Blue asked.

“Possibly,” Paula mumbled as she stroked the cat in her arms. “I’m going to ask Hook what he thinks.”

“Can we have one?” the youngest of the sisters who’d befriended my girls asked. “Please?”

“I don’t know, Hannah. The three of you are gone so much and ...”

“I don’t want the others to go to the shelter, Mama,” Evie said as she dried the rest of the happy tears from her face. “Can we keep them until Mr. Hook finds them a good home?”

“Your father might not ...”

“You honestly think that man could say no to either of them at this point?” Blue asked sarcastically. “If all they want is to bring home four cats, then he’s lucky. If I were them, I’d be asking for ...”

“Please don’t help her come up with ideas,” I requested softly before I took a deep breath, trying to think of a way to get out of this without making Denny the bad guy or ending up with four cats in my living space.

“Please, Mama? We’ve been through so much in the last few weeks. I think having new pets to take our minds off of the trauma ...” Evie’s voice trailed off when my eyes met

hers. When she saw the look on my face, she asked, “Was that too much? It was worth a shot, right?”

“I think she warrants a win just for the attempt,” Brea said with a chuckle. “That was a five-star performance.”

“At least,” Blue agreed. “She deserves some sort of prize.”

“You two are not helping.”

“We’re not trying to,” Blue admitted with a shrug.

“We’re not taking a cat home,” Pandora said firmly. “Maylee, what about Boo? Doesn’t she need a cat?”

“She’s got stables full of horses and a barn crawling with cats. She can do without a housecat,” Maylee said firmly.

“I’m not taking in a pet. I already deal with way too much poop,” August said as she shook her head. “None of them are coming to my house.”

“I’m allergic,” Blue blurted.

“You are not allergic,” Brea argued. “Just admit that you’re not a cat person.”

“I’m not a people person either, yet all of you still insist on talking to me.”

Brea flipped her off as I laughed along with the rest of the women.

“Mom? Come on. We’ll just foster them just until Hook finds them a home,” Dena assured me. I knew that was not what would happen. My girls would become attached, and I’d end up as the lady with endless litter box problems and cat hair issues. “Please, Mama?”

“There she goes,” Maylee whispered. She nudged Dena’s arm with hers and instructed, “Just a little more, but be delicate about it, sweetheart.”

“I promise that we’ll take care of them. You’ll never have to look at the litter box, and we’ll even use our allowance to buy cat food, won’t we, Evie?” Evie nodded eagerly, her eyes

excited because she could see that Dena's arguments were getting to me. "Please, Mama?"

"We'll have to clear it with your father first, and they can only stay until we find them a permanent home."

"Okay! We'll help Hook find the perfect place for each of them. And maybe we can see if he has a dog that needs a home, too, just to get the cats adjusted to having other pets around."

"Don't push me, mija," I said softly. "We'll have to go to the store and buy supplies ..."

"We brought everything you'll need," Paula assured me. "It's all in the back of Sis's truck."

"This is so exciting!" Evie proclaimed, Smudge still clutched tightly to her chest.

"Go help them gather everything up," Pandora ordered her daughters.

It was chaos as the younger women sprang into action, four still holding cats as they carried in bags of food, litter, and litter boxes.

"How much do I owe you?" I asked Paula.

"Nothing," Paula said with a broad grin. "Consider it a welcome to the family gift."

"Denny said you were a sweetheart, but I have a feeling he lied," I muttered as I held Paula's gaze. She smiled even brighter, and the other women laughed.

"You're such a sucker," Blue teased. "They're gonna turn on the charm, and the next thing you know, Hammer's gonna have a menagerie just like Jenn."

"Hook told me that there's a man a few towns over that wants to sell his ..."

I slashed my hand in the air and interrupted Jennifer, "Absolutely not! I've heard about your zoo. I'll buy them season passes to visit, but I will not have a skunk in my house."

“I wasn’t a big fan of the idea myself, but Elvira’s grown on me. She still hates my guts because I stole her man, but it’s getting better.” Jenn pointed at Pandora and said, “She’s got monkeys.”

“Oh dios mio,” I whispered as I shook my head, terrified that this craziness might be contagious and I really would end up with a three-ring circus of animals.

“It’s like *Jumanji* around here,” Blue said with a grin. “I’ve got two sweet puppies, and I’m content with that.”

“I’ve got more than two but that’s all I need,” Brea agreed.

“Blue’s puppies weigh a hundred pounds each, and Brea’s got a pothead dog who sprints around the dining room table until she passes out from exhaustion. The woman even has a hedgehog who’s got a crush on her possum,” Paula informed me with a smile. “Don’t let them bullshit you. They’ve got their own issues.”

“I’ve just got toddlers that are a species all their own and a puppy that thinks the furniture is his personal chew toy selection. Speaking of the girls, I’m going to pick them up from their grandparents’ house,” August said before she gave Matalie a hug and waved in my direction.

“I’ll come with you,” Sis offered.

“I have to go to work today. I’ve got a big case this week and need to make sure I’m prepared,” Matalie explained before she said her goodbyes and started toward her house across the field.

“I’ll walk with you. I’ve got a video chat with a producer in an hour and need to make sure I’m not covered in cat hair,” Bernadette said as she took off behind Matalie. She waved over her shoulder at us before she called out, “Be nice, ladies! Remember what it was like to be the new girl!”

“I’m always nice,” Blue argued but couldn’t hold her serious expression for long before she started giggling. “Okay, that’s a lie. I always go into a situation *planning* to be nice, but it rarely ever works out that way.”

“That’s how all the best laid plans seem to shake out, huh?” I asked rhetorically. I assessed the women around me and asked, “Is this the part where you warn me about what’s going to happen if I break your friend’s heart, and then I laugh because there’s nothing you could imagine dishing out that could be worse than being married to my dead husband?”

“Something like that, yeah,” Paula said with a blank expression. “Although, being women, we’re much more imaginative than men can even dream of being.”

“I agree,” I conceded. “I can think of a million painful ways to end someone’s life and not even half of them include bloodshed.”

“You and I need to be friends,” Paula said as she walked over and hooked her arm through mine. “Now, show us how you plan on decorating this blank canvas that Hammer calls home.”

“Please tell me you’ll be doing something that has some color,” Brea begged.

“I haven’t seen a place this boring since I left prison,” Blue agreed.

“You’re going to welcome me into your bunch that easily?”

“Well, you’ve already got a foot in the door from what we’ve heard from the guys. Tying the men back to back in those chairs was pure fucking genius. I wish I could have seen it in person,” Paula said cheerfully.

“I liked the fact that you stabbed a few of them with a screwdriver. That’s a highly underrated tool, in my opinion,” Blue mused.

Brea disagreed, “You can never go wrong with a bat, and it does much more lasting damage. A stab wound heals quicker than a broken bone.”

“Poison is the best. There’s so much less mess,” Maylee argued.

“I like the idea of stabbing them with a screwdriver and then putting poison in the wound, especially if it burns,” Jenn chimed in cheerfully. “What do you prefer, Pita?”

I let Paula lead me into the house as I listened to the women expound their favorite ways to kill someone and realized that I might very well be in more danger now than I had been when I was a captive.

I decided to roll with it since I could easily defend myself in a physical confrontation and answered, “I like to take their money and leave them with mounds of debt as they sift through the ashes of their lives I’ve burned down.”

“Oh, she’s our people,” Paula said with a sweet smile.

“I almost want to hug her. Almost,” Blue said with a grin. “Welcome to the family, Pita. It’s going to be quite an adventure, I’m sure.”

“You’re not going to tie me to a chair and interrogate me about why I took Denny’s children?”

“We already know why you did it,” Jenn said with a shrug. “We heard how everything came about the night they found you. There’s no sense in rehashing it.”

“And there’s really no sense in warning you about what’s going to happen if you fuck him over. I’m fairly sure that you already know most of our history,” Brea chimed in.

“Good point,” Blue agreed. “I guess that takes care of that conversation, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose it does.”

“Good! Welcome to the family.”

10.

HAMMER

“Where did Preacher come up with this address?” I asked Boss as I got off my motorcycle.

He looked around the empty parking lot and shrugged before he said, “The asshole had something delivered here yesterday.”

“Are the guys meeting us there or is it just me and you?”

Boss chuckled before he said, “Fish has been camped out in the neighbors’ tree that looks over the front and back yard for the last two hours, and Kitty’s waiting for our signal to come in through the back if no one answers our knock.”

“So we’re going in soft for some reason?”

“Sin and Omen are going to walk up and knock. If they get an answer, they’ll wave us in.”

“Why don’t we just kick the door in and storm the place?”

“The delivery was diapers and baby wipes.”

“Shit. He’s hiding out with a kid? What kind of person has a woman tortured in one house while he hides out in another?”

“I think you just answered your own question with the mention of torture.”

“Well, at least we’ve never tortured a woman.” Boss winced so I had to ask, “Have we?”

Boss seesawed his hand back and forth. “Not technically. Sort of.”

“What?”

“Santa stabbed a woman in the thigh, and then Bug burned the building down around her, but they had kidnapped Blue, so we were all a little tense.”

“That’s understandable.”

“The other women have all been killed by ... well, the women.”

“Do tell.”

“Jenn got one bitch in the barn, Blue suffocated another so Preacher didn’t have to, and Maylee stabbed one in the neck with a hairpin. That one was a Fairchild, actually. The other two were just bit players who made bad decisions that led to their untimely demise.”

“So basically, we leave the women to the women and the men to us.”

“Not necessarily. Paula took a few out, and Blue shot one while Brea beat another guy half to death. I think that’s about all, though.” Boss looked thoughtful for a second and then said, “Oh! I almost forgot about the ones in New York.”

“They’re racking up quite the body count, aren’t they?”

“And Pita fits right in.”

“I hope she can fit in with them on a regular day without any action to speak of.”

“What do you mean?”

“The women don’t stop by to see her like they do with each other, and she’s already been living at my house for a week. It’s starting to hurt my feelings.”

“What does Pita think about it?”

“She hasn’t mentioned anything, but I’m sure she’s seen them walking from one house to the other. Do you think I should ...”

Boss abruptly pulled his phone out of his pocket as he held up a hand, signaling for me to be quiet. He put his phone back in his pocket and said, “Kitty’s going in the back. We’ll meet Sin and Omen inside.” We started up the alley again, and Boss asked, “Were you going to ask if there’s something you could do to help Pita integrate in with the women?”

“I was.”

“You need to figure out what they have in common and come at it from that angle. They all have their ways of bonding with the new girl and just haven’t found the right approach with Pita yet.”

“Say again?”

“Well, I’d imagine that she’s gotten to know Pandora better than anyone else because their girls are thick as thieves now, but she needs something that will help her blend in with all of them at once. It wasn’t a problem for Jenn and Paula because they knew each other before they met us. Same with Brea and Blue. Matalie came in with Captain’s unknown daughter, August, and she was no stranger to the prison system. Of course, Maylee had Boo, and no one can resist that girl. Pandora’s sex shop helped break the ice for her and move things along, and Frankie came as part of a package deal with Paula. Bernadette, well, she was part of the wedding, and they all got to know each other on the phone before they met in person. If all else fails, I’ll have Jenn ask her to help with a new recipe or something, and we’ll bring them together that way.”

“Jenn would do that for me?”

“She’d do that for *me*, but only if she doesn’t already dislike her. If she does, there’s no masking that. My old lady has a very expressive face that makes it hard for her to hide her feelings at times.”

I burst out laughing. “That’s a fucking understatement!”

“The girls are worried about you. You’re better, but you’re still not yourself.”

“I’m happier than I’ve been in years, brother. I’m not sure what makes you think I’m not.”

“I can’t believe I’m about to bring this up but ...” Boss shook his head and let out a dramatic sigh before he asked, “Why don’t you sing anymore?”

“Hell, I don’t know.”

“Well, it’s worrying the ladies.”

“Is it worrying the ladies or are *you* worried about me, Boss?”

“I’d rather rip your throat out than listen to you taunt Preacher and Captain with your show tunes.”

“You didn’t say no, so I guess there’s that.”

“Take it however you want, my friend, but I will shoot you if you don’t make my old lady stop fretting.”

“How will that help?”

“I don’t know, but I’ve been resisting for years. This might be my only opportunity.”

“That’s good to know. I’ll try and find my voice again. I don’t really want a bullet to the head.”

“I’d only go for your leg. I don’t want to kill you, I just want you to understand I’m serious.”

“Let’s consider the threat of a bullet enough of a warning, okay?”

“We’ll see.”

Once we were near the back gate of the house’s yard, Fish pushed it open and held it for us to enter. Boss asked, “There isn’t anyone inside?”

“Nope. Kitty made a sweep of the place and then let Sin and Omen in through the front. They’re waiting on you. I’m on point back here, and Chewie’s in the front somewhere.”

“Are there any cameras?”

“None that Kitty could find.”

“Fairchild probably doesn’t want any record of his comings and goings,” I suggested.

Boss just nodded his agreement, and we set off across the yard toward the modest house. This one was much smaller than the one where we’d found Pita, and I wondered if it even belonged to Coleman Fairchild. The information Preacher had found with the tax office didn’t list his name but the name of a woman who had died several years ago. Apparently, the will

was still in probate, so there was no telling who actually owns the house at this point.

When we walked into the kitchen through the sliding door, I found Omen going through the refrigerator and Sin standing in the middle of the living room.

“Hey guys,” Boss said in greeting.

Omen nodded our way and held up a jar of baby food before he set it back on the shelf and shut the refrigerator door. “This is the only one I can find. There aren’t any other signs of a baby in here.”

“I can see there was a playpen set up over here in the corner, but it’s nowhere to be found,” Sin explained as we joined him in the living room.

“The bedrooms are empty,” Kitty said from the front door where he was crouched, collecting mail from the floor. He sifted through it as he stood up and said, “Looks like they’ve been gone for a few days, so I’m not sure what happened to the delivery yesterday.”

“There are some boxes at the end of the porch,” Omen said as he looked out the window. “They’re big enough for a pack or two of diapers, but then again, I ordered some earbuds and a new pocket knife and got a box big enough to ship a body in, so that’s not saying much.”

“They left all the electronics, so I’d guess they’re either out of town for a short stay or they’ve got an entirely new set-up at another location,” Sin suggested.

“I’ve got some credit card bills here in a woman’s name,” Kitty said as he kept sifting through the mail. “A golfing magazine and a gossip rag too. I’m just spitballing, but I’d say that the golf mag is for Fairchild.”

“Women golf too,” Sin argued.

“The golf shoes in the hall closet are a men’s size 12, so I’d guess this one doesn’t.”

“What is there to read about golf?” Boss asked. “I played golf with you guys, but I couldn’t write an article about it.”

“Because none of us remember it. We were skunked.”

“Kitty’s right. There was some alcohol involved,” Omen reminded us.

“What do we do now?” I asked. “All their shit is gone, so there’s no sense in waiting on them.”

“I installed motion sensor cameras in this room and the kitchen. It will send an alert to my phone the second there’s movement, and I’ll call in the cavalry. I did the same thing at that other house too,” Kitty explained. “Haven’t seen any movement there. Hopefully we’ll get a hit here.”

“I guess that’s all we can do,” Boss said as he looked around the room again. “Thanks for joining us, gentlemen.”

“Want to join us at the clubhouse for a beer or two?” Sin asked.

“I think I might,” Boss agreed. “I’m going to swing by and see Jenn at work, and then I’ll meet up with you.”

“I’m out. Pandora’s home with the girls, and I promised Hannah we could practice some night driving.”

“I’m with Kitty. I’ve got to head home.”

“I heard about your new guests. Congratulations on finding your kids, man,” Omen said as he slapped me on the back. “That must feel good.”

“You have no idea, my friend.”



PITA

I finished unloading the dishwasher and looked out the window in time to see a figure pass by. Acting on instinct, I dropped down so I was below the line of the counter and duckwalked over to the cabinet where I’d hidden a weapon. I pulled out the box of freeze-dried kale and palmed the gun before I slipped the extra magazine into my back pocket. I

was about to round the corner and scurry into the living room when I heard women's voices on the front porch.

The doorbell rang and then someone knocked a few times for good measure, and I let out a relieved sigh. I stood and dropped the gun to my side before I walked across the living room and threw the door open to greet my guests.

"Hey, bitch!" Blue said with a grin. As she walked past me into the house, she said, "You're being invaded. Paula brought snacks."

"I did not! This is my emotional support cheese. I don't have to share it with people."

"Well, *I* brought snacks," Jenn said, rolling her eyes as she walked past me. "And since you've got your support cheese, you don't need brownies."

Blue put her hand up in time to catch the package of cheese that Paula had thrown her way, and without missing a beat, pulled out a cube and popped it into her mouth.

"Are they the *good* brownies?"

"I made them, so obviously, they're the very best," Jenn retorted.

"You know what I mean, hag."

"You brought pot brownies as a housewarming gift? Barbarians," Maylee scoffed as she walked in with a woman I didn't recognize. She handed me a bottle of bourbon and shook her head. "Whenever you're ready to crack that open, give me a call."

"I'm ready now," I retorted.

"I brought wine, if you'd rather," the stranger said as she handed me a bottle of red. "I'm Frankie, Santa's wife."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." I looked down and gasped. "This is my favorite! When my daughters and I lived in Italy a few years ago, I visited the winery and met the ..." Frankie laughed, and I suddenly put the pieces together. I'd had this woman investigated and knew that her last name was Romano and that she was connected to the mafia in New York, but I'd

never associated her with the winery in Italy. “This is your family’s wine.”

“It is. I’ve got more at home if we make it through this bottle.”

“I’ve got a bottle of my own in the kitchen,” I said cheerfully, happy to find something I could talk about with at least one of the ladies.

“Booze, pot brownies, and a bunch of homicidal women. What could possibly go wrong?” Bernadette asked.

“I’m not going to get injured this time, and Paula better not climb any trees.”

Jenn laughed at the expression on my face. “Don’t worry, Pita. We’re much more low-key than we were in the old days.”

“That incident was barely a year ago,” Maylee deadpanned. “Don’t let them fool you. They’ll lead you down the wrong path, and next thing you know, you’ll have a four-day hangover.”

“Four days is nothing. It took me a week to recover from New York,” Blue admitted. “I’m never doing that again.”

“You all went to New York together?”

Frankie hooked her arm in mine and grinned. “Show me to the wine glasses, and we’ll tell you all about my wedding.”



HAMMER

The second I shut off my motorcycle, I heard women’s laughter coming from the patio. I walked around the house, and what I saw when I got around the corner stopped me in my tracks.

Pita was standing between Blue and Jenn, and they were all bent forward with their hands on their knees trying to ... I

wasn't sure what they were trying to do, but it was making the rest of the women laugh uproariously.

“No no no! You've got to make them clap!” Maylee called out.

“Make what clap?” Blue asked in confusion.

“Your ass cheeks.”

Blue stood up and turned around with one hand on her hip as she informed the group, “My ass cheeks jiggle, wiggle, and bounce. They do not clap.”

“Preach, girlfriend!” Jenn shouted, causing another round of loud laughter.

“Restart the song so we can keep trying,” Pita ordered. Music started playing, and I recognized a song that had been popular a few months ago.

The rest of the women got up, most of them holding drinks, and started dancing. I realized that the women who'd been standing earlier had been trying unsuccessfully to twerk. Now all the women were dancing, some better than others, as Cardi B rapped.

I silently pulled my phone out and started to record. I stopped the video after a few seconds and sent it to the men whose women were gathered in my yard. I lifted my head and looked as doors opened and closed nearby, men starting to trail toward my house to watch the show and gather up their women who'd obviously been enjoying themselves for some time.

“You know, this song caused all sorts of pearl clutchers to lose their shit, but I can't figure out why,” Blue said loud enough to be heard over the din.

“Have you listened to the lyrics?” Pandora asked as she pushed a button on her phone to turn down the music. “Of course people got all up in arms.”

“Those pearl clutchers you're referencing are our age, and apparently, they've forgotten about the music that we listened to when we grew up.”

“I didn’t listen to anything like this,” Pandora argued.

Maylee laughed before she said, “Obviously! We were listening to rap long before they had the ‘E’ on the packaging to warn buyers about explicit language.”

“I learned what a blow job was from an N.W.A. song,” Blue told the group.

“I used to think that “Push It” was about moving furniture,” Jenn admitted. “Then I learned that Salt-N-Pepa were just giving men directions.”

“Have you ever really listened to the lyrics of ‘Little Red Corvette’?” Bernadette asked.

“Let me pull it up,” Pandora suggested as she searched for the song on her phone. Within a few seconds, Prince’s song was playing, and the girls were dancing again. The women were singing along with the lyrics when Pandora stopped, her mouth hanging open in shock. “A pocket full of horses and some of them used? Does that mean ...”

“Means that girl was *nasty*,” Matalie said knowingly.

“They’ve quieted down a little bit,” Captain said as he appeared beside me. We were just beyond the circle of light coming from the fire pit, so the women couldn’t see us watching them. That was made blatantly obvious when they started trying to twerk again. “I guess your girl’s part of the group now.”

I sputtered out a laugh when Pita squatted down behind Jenn and tried to help her butt jiggle with the beat of the music. She was laughing so hard that she fell back onto her ass, tripping Brea in the process. Brea went down in a fit of giggles and then reached out and yanked Blue’s foot out from under her when she started laughing at the women on the ground.

“They’re all going to be hurting tomorrow,” Hook said as he walked up. I saw Chef on the other side of the fire, watching his old lady, soon joined by Bug, Santa, and Preacher.

“I don’t think they fell that hard,” I told him as Paula tripped over Blue’s outstretched leg and sprawled out on the grass. “Okay, maybe she did.”

“They’ve been out here cackling for a few hours. Tomorrow, they’re gonna feel like they did some sort of intense ab workout.”

“I do believe Pita has found her spot in their tribe,” I mused.

“That she has,” Hook said drolly when Pita sat up and slapped Maylee on the ass hard enough to cause her to jump. “She’s just been welcomed to the coven.”

HAMMER

I heard the first notes of a movie soundtrack that I'd been familiar with for more than forty years start playing, and I winced when I heard Evie start to sing along from the kitchen where she and Dena were cleaning up after breakfast.

Since Pita and my girls had moved in two weeks ago, my life had been in an uproar. Granted, it was the best kind of chaos, but it had been hard for me to adjust after so long on my own.

What was once my quiet and organized sanctuary had become a madhouse that included multiple felines, arguing teenagers, constant music snippets, and random conversations from thirty-second videos on social media along with the constant chatter between Pita and the girls.

My once tidy home was filled with ... things. Brightly colored things of every shape and size. Pita had hung paintings all over the house, and there was colorful pottery on almost every surface. House plants now populated the windowsills, their beautiful greenery complimenting the wild designs on their pots. It was all a stark contrast to the white walls and trim I'd chosen for my home.

My kitchen was in a state of chaos. Utter turmoil. I had opened the dishwasher this morning to unload it after the girls did the dishes last night and found it packed so full that there was no way in hell any of them were clean. The knives were in the utensil holder with their sharp tips aiming up while forks, spoons, and butter knives were jumbled in such a way that they would have to be untangled to be sorted. It took me damn near ten minutes to sort them all out so I could run the fucking machine again.

The dishcloth was wadded up in the corner of the sink, and there was a puddle of soap underneath the glass bottle I liked to use as a dispenser. There was something sticky on the

handle of the refrigerator, and when I tried to clean it off, I realized someone had used all the paper towels without replacing the roll.

Worse than any of that was the fact that my favorite coffee mug was missing, and I'd found cat hair in the butter when I pulled it out to make toast.

And the plants. Dear God. So many plants. They were *everywhere*. There were small pots holding fresh herbs and spices on the windowsill above the sink, hanging plants with their greenery trailing to the floor, and a big ugly plant in a massive pot next to my back door. On top of that, I'd found some sort of fucking cactus sitting on the windowsill in my bathroom beside the toilet.

I'd noticed it while holding my cock, thinking naughty thoughts about my new *roommate* and instantly erupted into my hand like a horny teenager.

Pita had been in *my bathroom*. The one attached to *my* bedroom. The bathroom that no one else had ever been in, as far as I knew. That was enough to make me explode like I wanted to do every time she smiled at me or innocently touched my arm while we were talking.

I had it bad. And not just sexual attraction either.

It worried me because I wasn't completely positive it had been Pita that put the cactus in my bathroom. It seemed like my house was sprouting new growth everywhere. I wouldn't be surprised to find out that the succulent had manifested itself.

Things were that bad.

There was pottery everywhere you looked with something growing out of every damn piece of it. But the plants and pottery weren't the only things multiplying on their own.

There were more shoes in my house than in the entire Tenillo mall. Maybe even more than could be found in the entire Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area.

There were shoes lined up next to the front door, in a pile beside the back door, and jumbled together on the floor of the

hall bathroom. There was one shoe on top of the dryer and another, not the match to the one on the dryer, peeking out from beneath the couch. Just yesterday, I'd found one of those fucking cats curled up with a hot pink sneaker while she toyed with the laces.

Why did three females need so many fucking shoes? I knew exactly why. Because they never put them up where they belonged, so they had no idea what they actually owned and had to buy more. That was the only reason I could muster.

Evie's voice, so off-key that it made my molars ache, belted out lyrics that I'd never really listened to before today. I'd been singing the songs from the *Grease* soundtrack since I was a kid, but for some reason, hearing my daughter singing about a car that was a 'real pussy wagon' set my teeth on edge.

"What in the fuck?" I hissed as I really heard the lyrics for the first time in my life.

The music stopped abruptly, and I heard Dena yell, "We're going to hang out with the girls! Call us if you need us!"

"¡Estar a salvo! ¡Te amo!" Pita answered from somewhere in the back of the house.

"¡Te amo!" the girls called out in unison.

I sighed. Pita was probably putting more fucking plants somewhere in my house. Or shoes. Or bottles of lotion.

God. The lotion. All the bottles of ... stuff ... everywhere I looked, usually next to a damn plant. I didn't know what any of the concoctions were, but I assumed they were what made Pita smell like heaven.

I let my head drop into my hands and sighed. I'd been dreaming of having my daughters close to me since the day I was sent to prison, and now that they were here, I was losing my goddamn mind over shoes and lotion? I had a beautiful woman sharing my home, and I couldn't get past her obsession with plants. What in the hell was wrong with me?

"Denny? Are you okay?" I heard Pita ask from the doorway.

I took a deep breath before I pasted on a smile and lifted my head. “I’m great. Why do you ask?”

“Do not lie to me, Denny Grey,” Pita chided as she walked closer, stopping in front of my chair. She stepped between my knees and reached out to touch my face with her hands. She rubbed her thumbs from the bridge of my nose over my eyebrows and down to my cheekbones a few times before she said, “There are lines here that don’t belong, and I feel like they’re partly because of me.”

I never even considered hiding my feelings and said, “I don’t want to imagine life without you and the girls here, but I will admit it has been an adjustment.”

“In just two weeks, you’ve let me make this into the home I’ve always imagined, but I never even considered that we were changing the home you’d built from your *own* dreams. I apologize, Denny.”

“I wasn’t around for you to ask permission, and even if I had been, you wouldn’t have needed it anyway.” I closed my eyes and relaxed under Pita’s soft touch as she rubbed my face.

“You have been busy chasing that bastard, but he’s a wily one, just like that sister of his. They are probably hiding under rocks in the desert like the other snakes and insects.”

“We’ll find him. Preacher has another lead, and the information you gave us has really helped.”

“I still have people working on it.”

“Are you ever going to tell me who those people are?”

“They’re ones that you’d never begin to suspect. That’s all I’ll say.”

“I guess that will have to be enough then.”

“Yes, it will because that’s all you’ll get.” Pita’s hands moved into my hair, and I bit back a moan as she started gently scratching my scalp. “If I believed in past lives, I might think you’d been a cat, Denny.”

“Are you saying I’m annoying, always underfoot, and leave hair all over the place?”

Pita laughed softly and nudged my head forward so that my forehead was resting on her belly as she ran her nails over the back of my head. “I’m saying that every time I find an excuse to touch you, I can guarantee you’ll sit still until I’m finished. It’s like your kryptonite.”

“I like it when you touch me,” I admitted, resisting the urge to beg her to touch me a little lower. With her mouth. I’d dreamed of Pita on her knees in front of me in my shower or in front of me while I held onto her hips and drove my cock deep inside ... or riding me while I sat in my favorite recliner ... or laid out on the table while I feasted on her pussy. I bit back a groan and murmured, “Your hands feel so good.”

“They would feel good in other places too.” My eyes snapped open, and I looked at her face, wondering if I’d imagined her words or if she meant that in the way my entire body wanted to take it. “Yes, I’m talking about the rest of your body, Denny.” Pita’s hand trailed from my face, down my neck, over my chest, and then cupped my jeans where my cock was straining against the zipper. “I’m talking about here, specifically.”

I swallowed hard, making an audible gulp, and tried to think of something intelligent to say. Unfortunately all the blood had rushed from my brain to my cock, and I couldn’t form so much as a syllable.

“I know that this is forward of me, and I’m not going to apologize for it, but you said that you’d like to date me before you force me into marriage.”

Suddenly able to talk, I interrupted, “That’s not what I ...”

Pita smiled. “I know you’re not going to force me to do anything I don’t want to do, I was just trying to get a rise out of you. It seems that I got more than one.”

Pita’s hand was rubbing up and down my zipper and I gulped again. “You sure did.”

“You’ve been a very busy man trying to find Coleman Fairchild, and I’ve been a very busy woman trying to get our daughters settled into your home.”

“Our home.”

Pita smiled. “*Our* home.” She leaned down so that we were eye to eye, our lips just a breath away from each other, before she said, “I’ve never been one to wait for things in life to come for me, Denny, and I’m not going to start now. I want you. Do you want me?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve noticed you watching me when you think I’m not looking, and I can see the hunger in your eyes. I have just one question.”

I gulped again and then winced when my voice broke as I asked, “What’s that?”

“If you want me, then why haven’t you taken me yet?”

“Taken you?”

“Yes. Up against the wall, in the shower, on the porch when we’re alone, to your bed ...”

“Uh ...” It was like this woman was reading my mind. “I want all of that.”

“This is an invitation to do any ... no, *all* of those things, Denny. Will you accept?”

“Fuck yes,” I hissed as I wrapped my arms around Pita. I pulled her close to me and molded my mouth to hers in the hottest kiss I’d ever experienced. I stood with her clutched against me as our tongues warred with each other and only stopped moving when the back of her legs hit the desk on the other side of the room. I pulled my mouth away from hers and ran my hand over my face, frustrated that I couldn’t take her right here in the bright light of the living room and create a memory I’d think of every time I sat in this space.

“What’s wrong?” Pita asked. I could see that she was confused about why I’d stopped, and I reached out to grab her

hand when she tried to push me away so she could get off the desk.

“The girls could walk in any second,” I muttered as I pulled my phone out of my pocket. I dialed Kitty’s number, and when he answered, I didn’t even say hello. Instead, I barked, “My girls are at your house, and I need you to keep them occupied for ... a while.” Kitty’s laughter burst through the speaker, and Pita blushed, knowing that Kitty realized what was happening without me even having to say the words.

“Take your time, brother. We’ll keep them entertained.”

I slipped my phone back into my pocket and grinned down at Pita. “Now we’ve got all the time in the world with no interruptions.”

“We do.” Pita smiled seductively and asked, “What will we do all alone in this big house?”

I rested my hands on her knees that were on the outside of my thighs and then ran them up, gathering the skirt she was wearing as I went. When my thumbs hooked into the bend of her legs, I yanked her forward so her ass was perched on the edge of the desk, and then I dropped to my knees in front of her.

“Now we’re going to do all the things I’ve been dreaming about since the first time I met you.”



PITA

I watched Hammer drop to his knees in front of me as he ran his thumbs over my hips. I gasped when he encountered the edge of my panties and growled. In the next second, he’d torn my underwear and pushed my legs apart. The look on his face was what could only be described as hunger, and it turned me on more than I cared to admit.

For years, I’d worked to get over the trauma from living with my husband. I’d been the token young virgin thrown into the lion’s den by her own father as a sacrifice to the evil entity

that ruled the country where we lived. After my escape, I spent a lot of time alone, processing my thoughts and working through my emotions, before I started to date.

There were plenty of offers, but I acknowledged very few of them and accepted even less. By instinct, I'd chosen men who were weaker than me, not in a physical sense but emotionally. The few men I'd slept with over the years let me take the lead, giving me the sense of power I needed to discover my own sexuality without the fear of the dominance I'd experienced during my marriage.

Not once had a man ever positioned me just the way he wanted and then torn at my clothing in his haste to get to me. I realized now that's what I'd been missing. Need. I'd never experienced such urgency before, an overpowering need to touch the other person and feel his hands on my body.

It was a heady feeling, knowing that just the thought of touching and tasting me had brought out a side of Denny I'd always wondered about. A side that was forceful and controlling but somehow dominating and tender at the same time.

Denny used his thumbs to open my sex and then smiled wickedly before he pursed his lips and aimed a soft breath at my sensitive clit. When I shivered, he chuckled darkly, then stuck his tongue out and flicked it against my clit a few times. I moaned, wanting more, and he sensed that. After a few more seconds of teasing me, he leaned forward another few inches and sucked my clit in between his lips and hummed.

I let my head fall back as pleasure racked my body and gasped when he pushed two fingers inside. He pressed his fingers on a spot I'd only read about, and it set every nerve in my body on fire. As his mouth devoured me and his fingers explored, I let myself get swept up in the sensations and relaxed in a way I'd never been able to do before.

Denny played my body like an instrument, drawing me tight until I felt ready to explode. Never before had I known such rapture. I was right on the edge of orgasm, on the precipice of release, when he stopped and leaned back to look

into my eyes. I clutched at his hair and tried to pull his mouth back toward me, but he slowly shook his head.

“Not yet.”

“Please don’t stop!” I begged. I’d never in my life begged for anything, but five minutes with this man’s mouth and hands on me had turned me into a different person. “More, Denny. Please.”

His fingers slowed to a much more leisurely pace as he kissed my inner thighs and licked at my pussy almost casually. Slowly, he built up the pace and pressure again, taking me right to the edge before he stopped again to catch his breath, leaving me panting and moaning as I clutched at him and pleaded for more.

He took me to the brink so many times that I’d become a whimpering shell of myself who had no control over the words or whispered pleas coming out of my mouth.

Finally, with a low growl, he attacked my pussy with a fervor I’d never experienced before. He pushed me past the breaking point until I came harder than I ever had. My hoarse screams blasted through the empty house as my entire body shook with my release, leaving me breathless and limp on the desk in front of him.

I thought that nothing could make me feel better than his mouth until he stood between my legs and opened his pants to unleash his cock. It was thicker than any I’d ever seen in real life and so large that it hung down even though it was already hard and weeping. He stroked it a few times and then rubbed the tip back and forth over my sensitive clit.

“Do you want this, Pita?”

“Yes,” I panted. I tried so hard to resist, but I couldn’t stop myself from begging, “Please, Denny. I need more.”

He situated the head of his cock at my entrance and held it there for a second before he pushed inside ever so slowly, letting my body adjust to his size. He’d push in a fraction and then pull out almost all the way before he gave me more. When he was finally deep inside, he let his head fall forward

and tried to catch his breath, holding still while I adjusted to the thick intrusion. I waited for him to start moving, but when he didn't, I decided to take the reins.

I lifted my hips, pulling him in even deeper, before I dropped them again and let him pull out a fraction. Denny moaned, and the look on his face was pure bliss when I did it again and then again. His eyes opened, and he stared down into mine as he leaned over my body and rested his hands on either side of my shoulders. He slowly bent down until his lips touched mine, and I could taste myself when his tongue darted out and touched my own.

"I've been dying to be inside you for weeks, Pita," Hammer admitted as he kissed his way from my jaw to my ear. He nipped my earlobe with his teeth and then pulled back so he could look into my eyes again. "How much do you want this?"

"So much," I whispered, my words sounding more like a plea than an answer. I tried to move my hips, but his weight was pressing down on me, holding me still. "Please, Denny. I need ..."

"I know what you need," he growled as he pushed himself back up and hooked his arms underneath my legs, changing the angle and making me gasp. He lifted my body off the desk and pulled his hips back until he was almost all the way out of my body and then snapped them forward until he'd filled me up again.

Denny thrust in and out in earnest, bucking his hips so that he bumped my clit, driving me wild. After he'd built me up into another frenzy, he let one of my legs drop to the desk, stretching my body out as he lifted my other leg higher. He pressed down with the palm of his hand beneath my belly button while rubbing my clit with his thumb. The head of his cock rubbed that place he'd found with his fingers earlier, and I suddenly came so hard that I saw stars.

I was vaguely aware of his urgency and then sighed when I heard him let out a roar right before his cock twitched inside

me. He stilled for a second and then started leisurely moving his hips, his cock softening gradually.

I had almost caught my breath, my racing pulse finally calming, when Denny leaned forward and gave me a lingering kiss.

“That was wonderful,” I whispered between kisses, wishing we were in bed so I could roll over and take a long nap.

“It was,” Denny agreed. He rubbed his nose against mine, and I giggled before I opened my eyes and stared into his. I felt his cock start to thicken again, and my eyes got wide when he asked, “Are you ready for round two?”

“Now?”

“Wrap your legs around me,” he ordered as he held me close to his chest as he stood up to his full height. “Now we make a memory in the kitchen, and when we’re finished, we’ll move on to the bathroom to make another memory there. I can only beat off looking at a cactus for so long before it starts getting weird.”

“A cactus?”

“Don’t even ask, Pita. The explanation is a little crazy, even for me.”

HAMMER

I leaned back in my chair and stared at the ceiling, wondering how I could get this client off the phone faster. My work as a private investigator wasn't nearly as glamorous as the television shows made it out to be. It mostly consisted of online research and spending countless hours sitting in my car waiting for something to happen.

There were times that I pulled a case that was a little more exciting, but those were rare. Unfortunately, my bread and butter, the cases that kept the money coming in, were cheating spouses and insurance fraud. Two things that disgusted me and bored me to tears.

Today's case was a mix of both. A woman found me through word of mouth. Normally, that would be a plus, but the referral had come from this woman's sister who had used me to catch *her* cheating spouse. This woman now had the same problem, and frankly, that told me a little more about the family dynamic than I wanted to know. After listening to the client list her husband's faults for more than half an hour and now suffering through her rant about her ungrateful stepchildren and his horrible mother who hated her guts, I wondered why the man didn't just get a fucking divorce and start fresh. If I had to listen to this woman for much longer, I was going to look for a tall building I could throw myself off of. I couldn't imagine being married to her and wondered how the man had gotten to the point of proposing before using an icepick to take out his eardrums for a little peace and quiet.

I let my mind wander and thought about mine and Pita's first argument that had happened a few days ago. We had spent Saturday afternoon getting to know each other physically, which translated to fucking in four rooms of the house before we moved into the shower and then passed out tangled in bed for a few hours.

The next day started off great, spending time in the kitchen with my daughters as we cooked breakfast together. I took them over to Bug's to visit the horses while Pita slept in and then made my way back home later when the girls ran off to hang out with Kitty and Pandora's girls.

I woke Pita up with my mouth on her pussy and gave her two mind-blowing orgasms before I pushed into her and found my own release. As we laid there, content and breathless, I mentioned getting the girls registered for school the next day, and all hell broke loose.

When I brought up going to the school to get the girls enrolled for the fall semester, Pita lost her fucking mind in a way that shocked me speechless until I started yelling too.

"My daughters will not ride off to be put in the care of even more strangers for hours on end!"

"First of all, sweetheart ..."

"Don't call me sweetheart in that tone of voice, Denny Grey. I am Gabriella Lupita Maria Donella Gonzales, and you will not treat me like I'm a child to placate with that sexy drawl of yours!"

"Well, I'm Denny Fucking Grey, and they're my daughters too!"

The argument built from there and included quite a bit of foot stomping and swearing in at least three languages. I was positive that Pita had not only insulted my ancestors but my manhood too. She finally stormed into the bathroom and slammed the door behind her, leaving me naked in the bed where we'd just made love.

After a few minutes of trying to catch my breath and calm myself, I got out of bed and pulled on a pair of shorts before I raised my hand to knock on the bathroom door. I heard a sniffle and then a whimper and realized that Pita was crying. I opened the door and found her sitting on the edge of the bathtub with her head in her hands, tears streaming down her cheeks as she tried to quiet her sobs.

"Don't cry, sweetheart."

“I like it when you say it that way rather than the other.”

“I’ll try to remember that.”

“I know they’re your girls too, but they’re my babies, Denny. I am afraid to let them go. How can I trust other people to care for them when the world is such a horrible place?”

“You’ve been protecting them for years, Pita, and given them the best education that money can buy. They’ve been exposed to more countries and cultures than most people can ever imagine. But the one thing they’ve never experienced is sitting down in a classroom and making friends with people their own age.”

“I thought I would arrange for tutors like I had before. I didn’t know you’d expect me to give them up to strangers.”

“I want you to talk to Pandora and get her input about the school. Let her tell you the ins and outs and her experience with the administration. We’ll go over together and tour the place after we meet the people in charge, and if you’re comfortable after that, we’ll let the girls start there in the fall.”

“But they’ll be surrounded by strangers!”

“They’ll have a head start because they already know Kitty’s girls, and I’m sure they’ll meet some of their schoolmates over the summer. I’ll make sure Pandora and Kitty include Evie and Dena when they can so the girls will know plenty of kids in their class.”

“What if they don’t want to go?” Pita asked hopefully.

“They’re already talking about it, babe. Just this morning, Dena mentioned that she was going to need me to take them into Dallas to shop. She said something about a shoe store she wanted to visit, and when I balked, she argued that she doesn’t have anything from this season. I don’t even know what the fuck that means, but I think they already believe it’s a given that they’ll be going to the same school that Pandora’s daughters attend.”

“I’m not ready to lose them, Denny.”

“You’re not going to lose them, you’re going to let them grow up. And you won’t be alone, sweetheart. I’ll be right beside you the entire time.”

“I’m sorry I called you names.”

“No, you’re not,” I argued with a bark of laughter.

Pita shrugged. “I’m really not. I meant every one of them at the time.”

“I recognized the Spanish, but the other languages were a mystery.”

“Good. That way you’ll never figure out what I actually said.”

“I could just ask our daughters.”

Pita winced as she shook her head. “I’m already worrying about them growing up in this crazy world. I don’t want them to get that much of an education yet.”

“Are you even listening to me, Mr. Grey?” the woman on the other end of the line shrieked.

“Of course. I’ve been listening to you for ...” I paused and looked at the clock in the corner of my computer screen and then continued, “Forty-three minutes now. I charge by the quarter-hour, and in two minutes, we’ll have racked up another one.”

“I can’t believe ...”

“Let me see if I’ve got the gist. You want me to prove that he’s not as injured as he says so he won’t get the insurance payout he’s expecting and will have to stay married rather than leave you for the lady who works in the insurance office ... who you’re sure is the reason he fell off the scaffolding in the first place.”

“Exactly.”

“Did you ever wonder if he just jumped?”

“What?”

“Sorry,” I hedged. “That was a hypothetical idea. I’m sure that’s not what happened.”

I looked up when I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and found Captain standing in the doorway with a grin on his face.

I listened to the woman sputter for a few more seconds before I said, “I’ll start on this tomorrow, but just in case this doesn’t go the way you want it to, I’ve got a good lawyer I can recommend for the divorce.” Captain frantically shook his head, his eyes wide because he’d heard me bitch about this woman before. “The firm is called Brass Law Services, and the man’s first name is Auggie. Tell him I sent you.”

Captain flipped me off and then flopped down in the chair across from me with a dramatic sigh. I waited for the woman to write his information down and then assured her that I’d be calling her by the end of the week with a report. When I finally hung up, I let my head fall forward in relief until I couldn’t resist looking at Captain and saying, “I found you a new client.”

“Fuck off.”

“You could pawn her off on Matalie, but then you’d have to be her defense lawyer after she killed the woman.”

“Again, fuck off.” We laughed for a second before he asked, “How are things going at home?”

“Good. They’re getting settled in, and I’m getting used to having people there. When I got out of prison, I swore I’d live alone for the rest of my life so I didn’t have to put up with having other people around or having my shit getting moved around when I’m not looking, so it’s been a bit of an adjustment, but I’m working through it.”

“It’s making you crazy isn’t it?”

“I’ve seen guards toss a cell and make less of a mess than my daughters can muster in three minutes. It seems like every other second, Pita’s after them to pick something up or clean up their mess. She’s having some regrets about the lifestyle she’s established, that’s for sure.”

“Like what?”

“She always had a live-in housekeeper, so the girls never needed to pick up after themselves,” I told him with a shrug.

“Have you already started the interview process?”

“I’ve got three scheduled for tomorrow afternoon,” I admitted. “Not live-in but definitely daily.”

“I don’t mean to sound shitty, but what exactly does Pita do all day?” I raised my eyebrows, and Captain put up his hands in surrender. “If you tell anyone I asked that question, implying that cleaning the house was her lot in life, I will deny it until my last breath.”

“If your old lady finds out you said that, your last breath will come a lot quicker than you imagine, I’m sure.”

“Don’t rat me out, but I’m still curious.”

“She’s on the phone a lot. Most of the time, she’s writing in a journal that she keeps locked away somewhere in the house. Occasionally, she’ll go into the bathroom and turn on the water so I can’t hear her talking.”

“Any word on her son?”

“I asked her if she’d talked to her other kids, and she said that she called them as soon as she got those men subdued that day and talked to each of them multiple times since then.”

“And did you find out what her son does for a living?”

“He’s undercover just like we thought. When she and the girls were kidnapped, she immediately thought it might have something to do with him. Turns out they never once mentioned her son since it was all about what she knew.”

“And what does she know?”

“Everything. She’ll turn the television on and flip through the channels until she finds a news program that interests her. If something comes on about a scandal or a death concerning a high-ranking government official in one country or another, she’ll get this mysterious smile that sort of unnerves me.”

“And you think she has something to do with that?”

“I’m positive she does, but I can’t figure out how.”

“Have you thought about wiring your house or getting Kitty and the guys to set up some cameras?”

“I would never. That’s a complete invasion of privacy, especially with my family.”

“You had too many years of people invading *your* privacy, huh?”

“You get me,” I said, nodding.

“I’ve got a question.”

“Only one?”

Captain laughed softly before he got serious again and asked, “Can you and Pita have a future if she won’t give you an honest answer about how she’s gotten all this money over the years and what exactly she does when she’s being so secretive on the phone?”

“I’m going to give her some time to open up. We’ve only been around each other for a few weeks, and after her past experiences, I can’t expect her to bare everything to me just yet.”

“Sin called Boss with some information about Coleman Fairchild. He’s got Fish dressed as a maintenance guy in that new high-rise downtown so he can poke around and see if he’s living there.”

“That building has apartments?”

Captain nodded. “The top three floors are for the Tenillo elite, whoever that may be.”

“That must be why I didn’t know they were there.”

“Fish should have some information for us soon, so make sure you keep your evening open in case we have to rush off.”

“I’ll do that.”



PITA

I pushed the speaker button on my phone when I saw Denny's truck pull into the driveway. Since the girls were at August and Rodeo's for the evening, babysitting their three young daughters, Denny and I would have the house to ourselves. I had planned a nice dinner and was ready to trust him with information I'd gathered over the last few days in the hopes that it would give him insight into not only where Coleman Fairchild was hiding out but where his sister was too.

"I'll send you the screenshot of his location, but it's out in the middle of nowhere which makes me believe he's not working for the son but the daughter."

"Thank you, Sienna. That's great. Do you need anything from me? Are you doing okay?"

"I'm doing just fine, but thanks for asking. I've got everything I need."

"Did your mother like the pottery I sent?"

"She did! She told me it's serving as her table's centerpiece and to give you her thanks. Now she's dying for me to take her to an open-air market they have in Dallas so she can search for more."

"That bowl was made by one of my relatives in Mexico. She has a thriving business and is more than happy to send things if there's something in particular you'd like."

"I'll keep that in mind. Her birthday is in the fall, and I will probably want to get her something then."

"I'm sure I'll talk to you before then," I hinted.

"Of course. Roger is going to take me to dinner next week, and I'll probably have more information for you the next day."

"Call me anytime, Sienna. Thanks again for your help."

My contact disconnected the call, and I realized that Denny had come in through the garage door rather than

through the front, meaning he'd heard the last half of my conversation.

"Do you need me to go outside so you can hide your notes?" he asked.

I wasn't sure if he was being sarcastic or not, but I chose to greet him with a smile anyway. "Not this time. These notes are more for you and your friends than for me."

"How so?"

"I know where Coleman Fairchild is hiding, and I have a good lead on where his sister might be too."

"No shit?"

I laughed at Denny's shock as I nodded. "No shit. My contact has gotten rather close to one of the Fairchild guards and got a lock on his location last night. He's working somewhere in the country, so they're just coordinates rather than an address, but she's sure that's where the sister lives since my other contact shared that she met Coleman Fairchild when she cleaned his penthouse."

"How do you know these people?"

"What people?"

"Your *contacts*." Hammer used air quotes to highlight his question, and I couldn't help but smile. "How do you find all these people?"

I tiptoed up and gave Denny a kiss on his cheek before I breezed around him into the kitchen. Over my shoulder, I said, "Women talk to each other when they find a kindred soul. Unfortunately, there are way too many of us out there that have been hurt by a system that would prefer that we stay silent. When we band together and watch out for each other and our families, there is nothing that can keep us from doing the right thing and stopping people who are intent to do wrong."

"How did doing that get you on Fairchild's radar?"

"I have intel on men and women from all walks of life. I started gathering my information when I still lived in Mexico

with my father, and when my voice got too loud for him to silence, he sold me to Israel for a pittance. After a few months, I realized that information was the only way for me to regain my power. I started taking notes on everything I saw and heard. Nothing was insignificant, as far as I was concerned. I befriended my guards by listening in on their conversations and then helping them without them even realizing that was what I was doing. I was able to solve disputes with their wives or girlfriends, help them figure out if a woman was right for them, and even counsel them on the romantic gestures that a woman might like. By the time I left Israel, I had five of his men in my pocket, and every one of them was more than willing to funnel information to me so I could blackmail the politicians and businessmen in bed with the cartel. I used that information to take their money while slowly but surely undermining everything they were working so hard to hide.”

“It started with the guards, but how does that help you here and now?”

“Those men had women who loved them, and those women knew others who were domestic workers in other households who knew other workers and so on. I became acquainted with women from every walk of life. Mothers who wanted to help stop the system that had taken their children’s lives before it took more. Sisters who missed their brothers, and aunts who had lost entire sections of their family. I know women whose lifestyles range from a prostitute on the street to a sister in a convent. I treat them all with respect. We’re all equal with one goal in mind - to make it safer for the next generation of women who should never have to experience what we’ve lived through.”

“You’re an information broker.”

“Yes. I like that description. It sounds much better than an extortionist, don’t you think?”

“How did that get you on Fairchild’s radar?”

“My father put a price on my head and intentionally let it slip that I had intelligence on all sorts of people who would

benefit from ending my life. That made me enemies of people I'd never even heard of before. Fairchild isn't one of those, or not the woman, at least. She is smart enough to realize that I have contacts and knowledge that can help her rebuild the drug pipeline that kept her family rolling in money all those years. She wanted my information and was willing to torture me to get it."

"I would have thought she'd have used the girls to force you to talk."

"The sister wasn't aware the girls were there. Coleman had an entirely different scheme thought out," I told him with disgust. "I discovered he had plans to give my daughters to some man to settle a debt. He was just waiting for the man to arrive in town. I arranged for my girls to escape, and then I took care of what I could at the time and called my son to take care of the man who was coming for his little sisters."

"And did he do that?" I made sure my face didn't give anything away, but Denny knew by my silence that Cristobal had taken care of the situation in a way that would keep our girls safe. "Good. That's one less person on my list."

"Coleman Fairchild can be found in the penthouse suite of a building his father purchased through a shell company. His sister isn't on the premises, choosing to keep herself as far away from her brother as possible in case he slips up and someone gets to him. I believe the ranch she's staying on is still in probate from a great uncle who suddenly passed away a few months ago."

"What was his cause of death?"

"I don't know that information, but I'm sure I can find out if you need it."

Denny laughed as he pulled me into his arms. "I'll let you know if that question comes up when I talk to the guys. I'm going to be gone for a little while this evening."

"Would you like some help?"

Denny leaned down and kissed me before he said, "If I had to ask anyone to watch my back other than my brothers in the

club, it would definitely be you, pretty lady.”

“I can ask Pandora to keep an eye on the girls, if you like.”

“Why don’t you sit this one out?” Denny suggested as he ran his hand over the scar at my hairline. “I think you’ve put in more than enough work on this.”

“Will you do me a favor then?”

“Anything.”

“Make him pay for every bruise our daughters suffered and every second of fear they experienced.”

“What about what he did to you?”

“I’ve been through much worse, Denny, but it seems like I’ve finally found the gold at the end of the rainbow.”

“You think I’m the treasure you’ve been looking for?”

“I’ve known where you were all along. You’re the treasure I’ve been *waiting* for.”

“You know what you just did?”

“What?” I asked as he pulled me closer to his chest and started swaying to a song only he could hear.

“You just picked out our wedding song.”

“I did?”

Denny started humming, and I smiled as I imagined a ukulele playing as he sang, “*Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high ...*”

HAMMER

“And she’s sure that’s where he is? Maybe we should wait on Fish to ...”

“You wait on Fish to report back. I’m going to the top floor of the Tenillo Bank and Trust to find that son of a bitch, and then I’m going to make him hurt ten times as much as he hurt my girls and my old lady.”

“It’s really like that, huh?” Boss asked.

“I’m in,” Preacher said with a firm nod. “We’ll roll out whenever you’re ready.”

“I’m trying to be the voice of reason here. All we’ve got is Pita’s word, and that’s second-hand information at best,” Boss argued.

“If Jenn told you ...”

Boss pushed his chair back and stood up. “You’re right. Let’s go. I’ll take my truck and call Sin on the way. He can gather his men and go find that bitch while we deal with her little brother.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“What exactly are we going to do when we find him? Bring him back here or ...” Captain asked.

“If he lives through his fall, why not?” I asked.

“And then what?”

“I say we lock him in a room like he did to my girls and just let him suffer in pain like he did to Pita.”

Preacher grinned. “That sounds like an excellent plan!”



“How are we going to get in there?” Chewie asked as we watched Kitty study the lock on the door.

“I could blow the door off,” Bug suggested. “But that might cause some alarms to sound and the cops to come running.”

“Have you heard from Sin yet?” I asked.

“His guys are on it,” Boss said simply.

“In that case, cover us,” I ordered as I nudged Kitty to the side. “A little help here, Chef? Hook?”

“On three?” Chef asked.

“One, two, kick, or one, two, three, kick?” Hook asked as he stepped between us.

“We’ve really gotta establish some parameters for this shit so you boys aren’t standing in front of a door that won’t stop a bullet coming at you from inside the room,” Boss complained.

“So is it *on* three or *after* three?” Hook asked again.

“Fuck this,” I growled before I took a step back and kicked the door right next to the frame. It creaked but didn’t fly open. Rather than count, Hook and Chef did the same before they gave me a chance to kick it again.

Before Hook and Chef went at it again, Boss tilted his head curiously. He twisted the doorknob and pushed the door in a few inches before he turned and looked at us with a dumbfounded expression. “Really?”

Captain covered his mouth and tried to choke back laughter but wasn’t very successful. Instead, he snorted and then coughed causing Preacher to laugh out loud.

“Shit,” Kitty mumbled. “My bad.”

“No wonder we all got caught and sent to prison.”

“In my defense, I sat and waited for them to show up,” Chef disagreed. Boss looked at him with wide eyes, and Chef shrugged. “I’m just saying ...”

I walked into the empty apartment and looked around, vibrating with anger at the possibility that we'd only missed Fairchild by a few minutes. Fish hadn't seen him leave the building so we must have passed him in the elevator.

"Fuck!" I roared in outrage. I slapped the wall and then stomped into the living room, not even seeing the view of the town or the beauty of the fields beyond it. Instead, I saw my last chance to take my revenge on the man who had hurt my daughters. The man who had injured the woman I love.

I shook my head to clear it, wondering where that had come from, and then turned to ask Boss what he thought we should do next when I heard a noise come from somewhere to my right.

"Did you hear that?" I asked in a voice barely more than a whisper.

"It came from the couch," Preacher said as he walked that way. The noise sounded again, and we all heard a woman's voice say, "Shh!"

Preacher's head snapped toward a closed door next to the entryway. He pointed at Chef, who was standing closest to the door. He nodded and reached out to grab the knob. All of us moved out of the direct line of sight and then Chef threw the door open.

From where I was standing, I could see a young woman cowering in the corner of the closet with a baby in her arms. She looked terrified, and when I opened my mouth to say something, she shook her head and put a finger over her lips. Instead of saying anything, she pointed at the ceiling. There was a square panel there that had to lead to a maintenance space or something.

Boss motioned toward her, and she shook her head. He motioned again and gave her that look that somehow always made people obey him. She got onto her knees and then to her feet before she walked out of the closet with the squirming baby clutched to her chest.

Rodeo, the youngest of our group and also the one who looked the friendliest, offered his hand, and the girl gave him a timid smile as she let him lead her out of the room. Bug held the door open for them and then followed them out, nodding over his shoulder to let us know that he and Rodeo would take her and the baby to safety.

Chef, who was still closest to the door, got very still and tilted his head, listening to something inside the closet. He held his finger in front of his lips to keep us quiet and then reached out and shut the door, turning the knob rather than letting it click in place. He touched his ear and then pointed at the ceiling, letting us know that he could hear movement up there.

Santa tapped Kitty on the shoulder and then put his finger in a V-shape and pointed at his eyes then waved his hand toward the hallway, telling us that they were going to look for another access point.

Knowing that we might be here a while, Preacher pulled one of the sections of the couch back a few feet and then turned it around so that it was facing the closet. He sat down on it and leaned back, getting comfortable for the wait. I sat down next to him as Boss and the other men crept around the apartment, looking for what, I wasn't quite sure.

Kitty and Santa came back a few minutes later, shaking their heads to let us know they hadn't found any other access points before they got comfortable on another sofa across the room. A few minutes after that, Boss's phone vibrated, and he smiled at the screen before he touched it with his finger. A baby's cry came out of the speaker, just loud enough for us to hear clearly where we sat across the room, and he slowly moved his hand from right to left, making it seem like someone was pacing back and forth with a baby in their arms.

Boss stopped that recording and walked closer to the closet before he touched the screen again. A woman's voice called out, "It's okay! They're gone!"

I had to hold back a laugh when I heard movement inside the closet before the door flew open and a harried looking man

stormed out. When he saw us camped out around the room, he came to an abrupt halt and his eyes got as wide as saucers. He turned to run back into the closet and slammed into Chef's chest. When he bounced back, he lost his footing and ended up sprawled out in front of me and Preacher.

Preacher and I leaned forward and looked down at the shocked man.

I grinned at him when I said, "Hi there! I'm glad you decided to join us."

"I'm feeling parched. Do you happen to have something to drink?" Preacher asked. "Maybe a Dr. Pepper?"

"Um. Who ... who are you?"

"I'm not surprised you don't know. Modern art depicts us in many different forms, but we prefer these mortal coils," Preacher said with a completely blank expression.

"Mortal ... huh?"

"I'm Darryl. That's my other brother Darryl," Preacher said, pointing at Chef. "And this is our brother ... Well, he hates it when I call him this, but he's quite the songbird. When he gets quiet, that means he's become the angel of death."

"What?"

"I haven't heard him say anything in a while. Have you Darryl?"

"Nope," Chef deadpanned.

"Quiet as a church mouse."

Since the man was still sprawled out on the floor with the help of Chef's big boot that was now planted on his crotch, he could see the men standing around us.

Santa popped his head over the back of the couch near my shoulder and said, "You could take a lesson or two from this guy. We've been listening to you fidget up there for the last ten minutes."

Boss walked around the end of the couch and scowled down at the man before he said, “Dumbass.”

“You’re Sheriff Barnes.”

“If you try to butter me up by saying you voted for me, I’m going to rip your nuts out through your eye socket.”

Preacher barked out a laugh and said, “No one voted for your ass. That election was rigged, and you know it.”

“I didn’t vote for him,” Captain said with a shrug.

“You’re not allowed to vote, asshole,” Boss reminded him.

“I am too. We can all vote once we get off parole.”

“We can?” Boss asked.

“You’re a fucking elected official. Shouldn’t you know this shit?” Preacher asked.

“We can’t get a passport, though, can we?”

“Have you been living under a fucking rock? Of course you can,” Chef told him, ignoring the man squirming under his foot. “Now, you can’t go just anywhere, but you can go places.”

“Australia?” Boss asked. Chef shook his head. “Scotland?” Chef shook his head again. “Ireland?”

“That’s a yes. I’m gonna take Blue there someday.” Preacher nudged me with his elbow and said, “If your girl goes to visit her family in Mexico, you can’t go with her.”

“Why the hell not?”

“They don’t allow felons. Neither does Canada.”

“Shit. I guess that means I’ll never get to meet my mother-in-law.”

“She could always come to visit,” Preacher said with a shrug. “None of us have a mother-in-law, so we’ll get to laugh and tease you while you bitch about her taking over your house.”

“Why the fuck are we talking about this now?”

“I’m trying to calm you down so you start singing like a psycho while you torture this fool rather than let you rip his squeaker out and end him immediately and then regret it for the next year or so.”

“He doesn’t have a *squeaker*.”

Chef pressed down with his foot, and the man on the floor let out a loud screech. Through his laughter, Chef said, “Yeah, he does.”

“Are you still planning that stairs thing?” Boss asked.

“Yes, I am,” I answered eagerly.

“Stairs?” the man asked through his rapid breathing. “What stairs?”

“The ones I’m going to bounce you down for hurting my daughters. Hell, for helping hurt a lot of people’s daughters, you piece of shit!”

“You’re getting worked up already,” Preacher chided. “Squeak squeak, Hammer.”

“I will rip your fucking face off,” I threatened as I glared at the man beside me. Preacher giggled like a little kid, and I heard a few of the men behind us laugh.

“Gentlemen, thank Hammer for helping you get your cardio in today. I need one of you to post up at each exit and make sure no one comes through for any reason.”

“How many floors do you want us to go down?” Chef asked.

“How many floors does this building have?” I asked the man on the floor.

“Twelve.”

“Is there a garage?” He nodded. “Thirteen. I want to take him as close to hell as I can before I send him there.”

“Tie him up. We’ll clear all traces that we’ve been here,” Boss said as he walked over to the counter and pulled at the roll of paper towels. “Wipe everything down, gentlemen. Smudge the boot prints and make sure you move all the

furniture back into place. Hammer, do you want to get him to write a note?”

“A note?” the man asked.

“To explain to the investigators why you threw yourself down the stairwell,” Boss explained.

“But I ... I’ve got money. I can ...”

“Good,” Preacher said cheerfully. “Leave a tip with your note. That way, they can buy some donuts. They *love* donuts.”

“Oh fuck off,” Boss grumbled as he wiped off the counter he’d been standing beside. “Hammer, tie him up.”

“Do you know why I’m about to kill you?”

“I didn’t do anything. My sister ... My dad ... I don’t know anything.”

“Wow. All of that hard work to find his ass, and it turns out he’s a sniveling little bitch,” Chef said sadly. He pushed down harder on the man’s crotch again, and he let out a yelp. “I don’t know why he keeps making that noise. It’s obvious there are no balls down there.”

“I’m going to kill you slowly and painfully, making sure that you have ten times the bruises that my daughters had and that you feel ten times the pain my woman did while your men tortured her.”

“Your woman?”

“Gabriella Gomez,” I growled.

“But ... I ...”

“Crush his nuts while I find something to tie the asshole up with,” I said to Chef as I stood up. “I need to gag him while I’m at it. I want to be able to hear his bones snap when he bounces instead of having to listen to him cry.”

“Oh shit! I almost forgot!” Preacher said when he was just a few feet away from the door. He shrugged out of the backpack he was almost never without and unzipped one of the compartments. “Your old lady sent you a gift.”

“She did?” I asked in confusion.

“Yeah. There’s even a note,” Preacher said as he dug around in his bag. With a huge smile, he pulled out a claw hammer with a bow tied around it. Hanging from one of the strings was a notecard with a heart drawn on the front.

I took the hammer from him and opened the note. Once I read the words, I couldn’t help but smile as I felt music fill my heart.

Dear Denny,

I want you to have this and know I embrace all that is you just like you have embraced all that I am. Thank you for fighting for us and seeking vengeance when it’s necessary. No one has ever done that for me, and it’s a heady feeling.

Please use this to avenge what was done to your daughters just as you used one just like it to avenge the death of your son.

With all the love at the end of the rainbow and beyond,

Pita

“Holy shit,” I whispered before I read the note again. I realized that Boss was on one side of me and Preacher on the other, both men reading along with me. I looked at Boss and whispered, “She loves me.”

“She’s even crazier than we first thought,” Preacher grumbled as he walked toward the door. He veered to the left and kicked Fairchild in the ribs before he said, “See you downstairs ... somewhere ... if you live that long.” As the door shut behind him, I heard Preacher say to Santa, “You just watch. He’s gonna sing “Stairway to Heaven” as he tosses that bitch down.”

I looked past the hammer in my hand at the man whimpering on the floor at my feet as I griped, “He thinks I have no imagination.”

“Um ...”

I lifted my arm and swung it down, feeling all the anger I’d been holding since I found out that my daughters had been

held hostage rush out of my heart and down my arm, coming out of the end of the hammer in an almost visible arc when it encountered Coleman Fairchild's arm.

Fairchild howled, and I took a deep breath. It felt like the first one I'd taken in years.

"Damn, that felt good."

"He's not gonna make it to the stairs, is he?" Boss asked, his voice resigned. He handed me a roll of tape and sighed as he looked around the room. "I have no idea how we're gonna cover up the blood spatter. I'll probably just let Bug burn the damn building to the ground."

"Don't worry. I've got this," I said as I handed back the roll of tape. I reached down and grabbed a fist full of the man's hair, ignoring his struggles to get away and his weak voice begging and pleading for mercy as I walked toward the door that Captain held open.

I could feel a song stirring around in my chest, ready to burst out at any second. Boss rushed ahead of me and called down the stairwell, "All clear?" When he heard confirmation that we were alone in that section of the building, he nodded at me.

I yanked Fairchild up to stand in front of me and looked him in the eye. He started to say something but shut up when I lifted the hammer again.

"No one fucks with my children and lives to tell the tale." With a hard yank on his hair, I threw him over the balcony. His screams were almost the right pitch to go with the song I'd chosen for this moment.

"And I'm free! Free fallin'! Yeah, I'm free ..."

"There's our Hammer," Boss said proudly. He slapped me on the shoulder as we watched Fairchild bounce off the railing of a floor below and then flip backwards as he kept falling. Preacher's head poked over the rail as he watched the man fall. Fairchild was soon nothing more than a mass of bone and flesh on the concrete far below. "Feel better?"

“That was amazing. The only thing that could make me feel any better than I do right now is to be home in bed beside my old lady.”

“Let’s get this shit done and then we’ll all get that wish.”

I took one last glance down at what was left of the man who’d inflicted so much pain before I pushed away from the rail and slipped the handle of the hammer through my belt loop.

“She said she loves me.”

“That’s good since it’s obvious that you love her.”



I had just slipped into bed when Pita rolled over and opened her eyes. “You’re home.”

“Hey, sweetheart. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Did everything go okay?”

“It did,” I assured her. “Thank you for my gift.”

“You’re welcome,” Pita said shyly.

“I’m not just talking about the hammer.”

“You’re not?”

“No. You’ve given me my daughters as well as yourself. And, as an added bonus, you’ve given me so much happiness that I want to sing from the rooftops to tell the world that you’re mine.”

“I am, and I will be for as long as you’ll have me.”

“That settles it. We’ll be together until we find the end of the rainbow.”

“And beyond.”

I gave my woman a soft kiss and felt her melt against me. “Love you.”

“I love you too.”

EPILOGUE

“You know what’s sad?”

“What’s that?” I asked Preacher as we watched my girls demonstrate their abilities on the human pinata we’d found for them.

“When stupid people don’t realize how stupid they are.”

“True,” Santa agreed.

Preacher leaned forward and looked across to his brother-in-law as he asked, “What makes you think you don’t fall into that category?”

“Are you sure he’s okay with the girls practicing on him? He hasn’t said a word since they started.” Pita perched on my lap and watched Dena flip the prospect over her shoulder onto the grass. He let out a muffled ‘oomph’ but didn’t say anything else, just got up and faced her again. “Why isn’t he talking?”

“Because his mouth is taped shut,” Preacher said simply. Pita slowly turned and looked at him in question, and he shrugged. “You asked.”

“Is that why he’s wearing a helmet?” Kitty asked from the blanket on the grass he was sharing with Pandora and their son.

“Yeah. I thought about a ski mask, but then they’d be able to see the fear in his eyes, so I went with the full face helmet instead.”

“He’s not out there voluntarily?” Pita asked.

“Absolutely,” Boss assured her. “He said that women couldn’t fight nearly as hard as men. I told him to put his money where his mouth was and that he would be rewarded if he survived. However, there’s a catch.”

“What’s the catch?”

“The catch isn’t nearly as great as the reward.”

Pita was getting impatient now. “*What’s the catch?*”

“He can’t fight back.”

“And the reward?”

“If he survives, we’ll have his patch ceremony in two weeks.”

“What?” I barked.

“Hear me out,” Boss said with an evil grin. “In the last two months, Ryder has pissed off his parole officer, two cops who’ve pulled him over for speeding, the traffic court judge he went in front of for those four tickets, the guys at the motorcycle shop, half the bar where Pitbull gave him a job, every member of the Infidels, and every fucking one of us, including Pop. And all of *that* happened *after* Hammer broke his finger to teach him a lesson.”

“What did he do?”

“What didn’t he do?” Blue asked. “He tried to tell me all about how I should ride on my old man’s bike, he argued with Preacher over some bullshit rule he heard about bikers, and he said that if Preacher got off the bike while I was still on it, it would flip over backwards because of my weight.”

“He basically called her a fatass,” Brea said helpfully.

“He insisted that the bags on my bike weren’t the standard ones that came from the factory because they were too big. ‘*Real* saddlebags won’t hold more than a Coke can,’” Captain explained, mimicking Ryder’s voice almost perfectly. “Matalie just happened to be walking by with a bag of clothes she’d picked up for the girls, and she stuffed the whole fucking thing in there with room to spare just to prove him wrong.”

“He also said that if a man was a true biker, he couldn’t be trusted,” Pandora added.

“And *then* he told Jenn that big girls shouldn’t ride on the back of motorcycles because the frame can’t hold their weight,” Blue chimed in.

“He said what?” Boss asked in a deadly calm voice.

“Uh. You didn’t know that?” Blue asked. I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and realized Jenn was motioning for Blue to shut up. It was too late.

“No, I hadn’t heard that little nugget,” Boss said as he turned and glared at his old lady. “If I had, I’d be the one out there whipping his ass.”

“Now, now, Boss. Let the girls have their fun. You can turn him into a squeak toy before we drop him off at Pop’s tonight,” Chef assured him.

“And then what? He walks around with a grudge because our daughters beat him like a bongo?” Pita asked, getting more irritated by the second.

“What Boss didn’t get a chance to say before everyone started listing out Ryder’s big mouth declarations is that tomorrow morning, he’s gonna get picked up on a parole violation. He’s headed back to the pen to serve out the rest of his sentence. That’s a good thing because Pop realized that he’d only chosen to tell him partial truths. Turns out the dipshit lied on his application thinking Pop wouldn’t find out the real reason he went to prison.”

“What did he do?”

“He was a scam artist,” Preacher explained. “He posed as some kind of professional and took people’s hard-earned money before he half-assed the job and went on his way.”

“So he won’t be here to hold a grudge?” Pita asked.

“From the look on Boss’s face, he won’t even be here tomorrow for his PO to pick him up,” Blue said warily.

“You shouldn’t kill him, Boss,” Pita chided. “If you do that, then he won’t suffer nearly enough from the ass-kicking the girls are giving him. At least wait a week or two for the bruises to start to fade before you take him out.”

“My old lady’s diabolical,” I boasted.

“So’s mine,” Preacher said with a wide grin before Blue leaned in to give him a kiss.

“I think they all are, and that’s why they keep us around,” Soda chimed in.

There was a loud thump and then another moan, but rather than wince like she had before, Pita cheered, “You get him, mija! As long as he’s not complaining, he can take more!”

“I want a turn,” Jenn said as she stepped around Boss’s chair and started walking into the yard to join the girls who were cheering on Evie.

“Do you think she’ll show us how to karate chop him?” Brea asked as she got up too.

“I’m so in,” Pandora said giddily as she got up from the blanket. “Come on, Pita. Let’s go try to crack open the pinata!”

Blue and the rest of the ladies hopped up to join the rest of the women on the grass.

“Everybody was kung fu fighting. Those girls are fast as lightning,” I sang, changing the lyrics and not paying attention to the groans around me. Pita spun around and took a fighting stance before she performed a perfect roundhouse kick. She blew me a kiss, and then I enjoyed watching her play around with her girls.

I shouldn’t have worried at all. My old lady fit right in with us, the crazy coven included. She’d brought my daughters back to me and filled my stark world with color.

If I was her pot of gold, Pita was my rainbow, and I couldn’t be happier with her by my side.

THE END

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COMING SOON

One More Day (Springblood, Book 1)

COMING APRIL 15th, 2023!

Tremayne Badeaux has lived a thousand lives during his time on Earth. He's explored the world, made lifelong friends, started empires, and destroyed enemies, but he's never experienced an all-encompassing love that he's willing to give up his own life for - until he meets the one woman he can never lose.

Clover is happy with the life she's made for herself, surrounded by family and friends and working hard in the career she's chosen. The second she met Tremayne Badeaux, her world forever changed, and she can't imagine ever spending a day without him by her side again.

In a split second, everything they've created together is torn apart, and decisions are made that will change the course of their lives forever. Tremayne and Clover have to decide what they're willing to risk to have just one more day with their soulmate or if they're ready to lose each other forever.

Join Cee Bowerman as she explores a world that most have no idea exists, even though parts of it are everywhere you look. People you thought you knew aren't what they appear to be but are even better than you can imagine. She's ready to share their magic with you.

About the Author

Cee Bowerman is a proud, lifelong resident of Texas. She is married to her own long-haired, tattooed biker and is Mom to three mostly adult kids - a daughter and two sons. She believes in love, second chances, rescue dogs, and happily ever after.

Cee received her first romance novel along with a bag of other books from her granny when she was recovering from surgery at 15. She has been hooked on reading romances ever since. For years, she had a dream of writing her own series of stories, but motherhood and all the other grown-up responsibilities kept getting in the way. Luckily, with the support of her family and the encouragement of her son, she purchased a computer and let her dreams become a reality.

With over fifty published books, Cee is still happily writing and creating new worlds for her readers to enjoy.

You can find her on Facebook @ceebowerman or online at www.ceebowermanbooks.com.

Look for more fun romances in the coming months and get updates on the Facebook page for more information on characters and stories that are in progress.
