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Hidden Passion

Barrington Billionaire Series

Book Fourteen



HIDDEN PASSION

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HIDDEN PASSION

Bowman Gossage never imagined he'd turn in his badge and go on the run. He'd spent most of his life dodging the trouble that came from his parent's crimes and swore as an adult it would be different. Now he found himself serving as the only shield between a dangerous man and a woman in the line of fire.

Sarah Rossi has always played the part. Dutiful daughter in a large Italian family. Now she's the wife of a man who demands she fall in line with his every whim. When the honeymoon period ends and real life sets in Sarah realizes she and her daughter will never be safe unless they finally make a run for it.

When it becomes clear the only way to survive is by running, Sarah finally takes Bo up on his offer to get her out of town. Leaving behind everything they've ever known, she and her daughter have to trust Bo with their lives. In this new place, a farm in Canada, the peace and quiet brings with a new kind of lonely. Something Bo knows all too well. But falling for each other won't be nearly as dangerous as what is lurking in the shadows at every turn.

CHAPTER ONE

Bowman

None of this was moving fast enough for him. Logically he understood that acting recklessly could be life or death, but every minute that passed was like torture. He'd give up everything for Sarah and he'd do it a thousand times over just to know she was safe. The not knowing might kill him.

"You have to stop pacing," Nick complained as he pointed to the couch. "You're like a carnival ride. Chill out."

"We can't leave Sarah on her own. We need to go get her."

"You know it doesn't work like that. Sarah has to reach out when she's able. If we try to pull her and her daughter out of somewhere we'll be outgunned. You'd be putting them both at a much greater risk."

"More of a risk than her abusive, drug-dealing, mafia-boss husband?"

"Yes." Nick pointed again to the couch. "We need a plan. You're a cop. You know how this works. What's her normal schedule? How does she usually reach out?"

"I'm not a cop." The words were like a mouthful of rusty nails. He hated saying it. This was the career he was supposed to retire from. He'd watched his father use his military status to break laws and skirt justice. It planted a seed in Bo. Something he thought he'd be able to grow and cultivate his whole life. The police force was supposed to be that place

where he paid the universe back for all the bad his family had done. Even the score.

Instead he walked into the sergeant's office and turned in his badge. Walked away from his pension and his career. All because he couldn't follow the order given to him. Leave the Rossi case alone. Stop getting involved. The problem was no one else seemed to give a damn what happened to Sarah and Emelia. They wanted Lou 'Crusher' Rossi in handcuffs. And Sarah, their informant, was the key to that.

"Well, most of my experience with cops is from the perspective of being in handcuffs. Maybe we start there. Tell me about the guy we're dealing with?"

"He's the worst kind of man. The kind who thinks money makes him powerful. Untouchable. That his family is his property and he can do what he wants when he wants."

"And this was your case?"

"I was undercover. Not even deep cover. I was working as a bartender at a place where Rossi ate once or twice a week. It's a federal case and I was mostly just picking up overtime hours. It was more about having eyes on him, not even collecting intel."

"So how did you get so personally involved?"

Bowman drew his knuckles into a tight fist. "I watched him humiliate his wife in front of the entire place. She was wearing a dress he didn't like and he poured a bottle of red wine in her lap. The entire bottle. Let it pour out all over her. Sarah never moved. She was frozen. Their six-year-old daughter just watched. It was obvious this was nothing new for them."

"Dickhead."

"He's a psychopath. When Sarah went to the bathroom, one of Rossi's guys told me to take her towels and find a coat she could cover up with. When I found her and her daughter in the bathroom, they were trembling. I took the biggest risk of my life."

“You told her you were a cop?” Nick’s eyes were wide with disbelief. Bowman still couldn’t believe he’d done it either. Undercover 101: you don’t blow your own cover no matter what.

“I offered them a way out. Right then and there. I said I’d get them out of the restaurant and make sure they never had to see Rossi again. Sarah almost came. She’s got these eyes. Dark, almost black. They’re haunting and for a moment I watched them flicker with hope. But a voice outside the door snapped her out of it. I gave her my coat and told her there was a burner phone in my pocket. It’s what I used for undercover and I knew my sergeant was looking desperately for a way in on the case.”

“That’s a hell of a risk you took.”

“Maybe, but in that moment, I knew she was more afraid of him than the idea of any kind of legal trouble I could bring her way. She wanted out. I knew it then and I know it now.”

“Did she end up calling?”

“Yes.” He abruptly stood up from the couch and tried to decide what version of this story he would tell. He knew how it looked. He understood what people would think when they heard it. “We talked often.”

“And she was an informant for your department?”

“Not formally. She wasn’t ready for that. She just needed someone to talk to. Someone she could trust. I kept working at the bar and would see her a couple times a week there. We would talk at least once a day if it was safe for her.”

“And you were the only one who knew?” Nick’s face was slathered in judgement. Bowman had braced for this. People wouldn’t understand.

“She wasn’t ready.” He gave a simple answer and punctuated it in a way that made it clear he wouldn’t be explaining himself any further.

“But eventually she did decide to become an informant?”

“The risk to her life was growing. Not just from Rossi. His enemies had been making bold attempts on his life. There was a chance Sarah or Emelia would end up in the crossfire. I offered to pull her out of there and do what I could to keep her safe, but the resources at the FBI would offer her more than I could.”

“And what would she need to do?”

“More than she was willing to do,” Bowman reported disappointedly. “They wanted to bring Rossi down, not just put a dent in his operation. She’d need to bring them something that tied directly back to him. He’s a pro at making sure he’s got plausible deniability about all the crimes his people commit. It would take someone as close to him as Sarah to be able to really incriminate him.”

“And she didn’t want to do that?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Rossi is her child’s father. They’re married. I get it.” Nick was being generous with this empathy.

“And he’s spent a decade convincing her she can’t live without him. Literally. That if she leaves, he’ll kill her. There was a lot of damage done there. It took time to convince her we could keep her safe if she left.”

“And can you?” Nick scoffed. “Women are at the highest risk of homicide by a partner once they finally get the courage to leave. He has access to weapons; I’ll assume he’s not above murdering someone. Your promise of protection, even with the FBI, was lofty.”

“I know it was. I’m not blind to the problems in our system. It was the best of bad options. She was running out of time.”

“You convinced her to become an informant? What was she supposed to do?”

“There was a gun he used to kill Donny Shire. Donny was one of his guys and he made the mistake of skimming some money off the top of his drug stash. They tossed the body in the quarry but the ties to weigh him down in the water broke.

With a ballistics match and Sarah's testimony about knowledge of the murder we could finally get Rossi."

"Testify?" Nick shook his head. "You really think she'd live long enough to testify?"

"None of it matters now," Bowman reported solemnly. "She bailed. He got suspicious and it's been hell on earth for her ever since. She's been a prisoner in her own life. He has someone watching her all day every day now that he's suspicious."

"And she cut contact with the FBI?"

"She had to. Total radio silence with them."

"But not with you?"

"It's sporadic. Only when she can get a text out here and there. It's at a tipping point. At any moment he could find out what she was trying to do and it's over. She's dead. Maybe her daughter too."

"How can the FBI abandon her when they know the risk she's facing?"

"Sarah didn't produce what they needed so they don't care. They know she's compromised and untrusted by Rossi now. She's useless to them."

"Nice."

"It's why I turned in my badge. I used to hold the institution of law enforcement so high. I know there are still plenty of people in the industry who are doing it right and laying their lives on the line every day. But what they are doing to Sarah is no better than what my father did to me and my siblings that day."

Nick shifted uncomfortably as he shoved his hands in his pockets. Bowman couldn't blame him. It was a horrible story. People didn't want to believe that a father would call the bluff of some weapons dealers at the risk of his children being killed. But that was exactly what happened. Bowman could still recall how helpless and abandoned he'd felt that day, just

a teenager with a gun to his head, praying his father would come save the day.

That hadn't happened. There was no question how dispensable they were at that point. The guns and money were more important than his own flesh and blood. Bowman had known his father was reckless and selfish, but that day brought it all to a new level. Even if he wasn't brave enough to do what Cleo did and call the police, it changed him. Set him on the path he was on right now.

Sitting back and watching another family go through what he had was not acceptable. He wouldn't let it happen. There were too many flaws in the system and terrible people to contend with. He wasn't a child anymore. He wasn't afraid of assholes like Rossi, even if he should be. The only thing that scared him was not doing enough to keep Sarah and her daughter safe.

"You have no one on the force willing to help?" Nick seemed shocked. "There is no one there who can help?"

"They've made it clear; I'm on my own at this point. There is too much liability if something happens. The case against Rossi fell apart. They have to find some other way to take him down. They've got nothing else for me. I'm on my own."

"You're not. Trust me. I've got resources you can't even imagine. People who know exactly what to do in these situations. But they come in once Sarah and her daughter are out. That's going to be up to us. We need to find a way to safely make contact and tell her the plan."

"Rossi has to know by now I was a cop. I've had cars following me for days. If I get anywhere near her, it'll all blow up."

"He doesn't know me." Nick beams with a misplaced pride. Bowman knew damn well he couldn't put this kid in harm's way. Finally reconnecting with his twin sister, Cleo, was something he'd wanted for ages. Sending the guy she loved into a mess that might get him killed was not an option.

“We’ll figure something out.” Bowman was evasive as he looked down at his phone again and willed it to ring. He’d settle for a random emoji just to let him know she was alive.

He’d failed his sister and he wouldn’t make the same mistakes again.

CHAPTER TWO

Sarah

Regret. She was drowning in it. There were hardly any memories she could conjure up from the last ten years that weren't tainted with remorse. From the day she said yes to Lou's marriage proposal straight through to this morning. There was a domino effect of one bad decision toppling over and striking the next until everything had fallen down around her.

The only choice she'd made that was completely free of regret was her daughter. Emelia was perfection. Her tiny laugh and bouncing curls were the soothing balm Sarah needed at the end of every day. For a six-year-old she was one of those kids with an old soul. Insightful. Able to read the room. Converse with adults and stay out of the way when needed. Sarah hated that for her daughter. She knew this obedience wasn't a byproduct of miraculous maturity or incredible parenting. It was instead fear based. Emelia knew what was expected of her, and what would happen if she didn't do it.

Right now she should be whining about being bored. Most children would. They'd been locked in the bedroom for days. Every toy had been played with. Her favorite cartoons watched again and again until they were no longer enjoyable. The air was stale. The claustrophobia palpable. But there had been one truth Sarah understood from the moment she realized she was pregnant. Motherhood was the constant denial of your

own wants and needs in the pursuit of your child's safety and happiness.

She'd failed Emelia in almost every way and the lock on the outside of the door was the most painful example. The funny thing was, the lock was just for show. Even if the door was open, she wouldn't walk through it because Lou had told her not to. That was a much stronger mechanism to hold her in place than any lock.

It was obviously serious at this point. More than any other point in their decade long relationship. He'd had her locked up before. Followed and spied on. But the fact that it was King, Lou's right-hand man, who had been assigned to be her prison ward was telling. King had been undyingly loyal to Lou since they were children. He ran many of the operations for their business. He'd even taken a bullet in the leg, trying to protect Lou when a deal went bad.

King had more important things to do than babysit Sarah. Unless Sarah was the most threatening thing in Lou's life. If King was there to keep her in line, it meant Lou was sure she couldn't be trusted. And in Lou's world that was punishable by death.

But that hadn't happened yet. Either Lou had some internal battle about putting a bullet in the forehead of the mother of his child, or he was still not completely sure she'd betrayed him.

She hadn't. Not technically. The cops weren't kicking in their door with a search warrant or tossing their entire mansion right now. They weren't slamming his head against the hood of a cop car and pinching his wrists with cuffs. That was why Lou hadn't killed her yet. If she'd turned on him, things would have come crashing down by now. There was just enough doubt, and she needed to keep it that way if she wanted to stay alive. Because if he did decide to kill her, she had no idea what would become of their daughter.

There was no disputing that Lou loved Emelia. Some kind of twisted blind love. In his eyes, she could do no wrong. And she was perfect. In spite of all the disfunction and danger,

Emelia was still sweet and jubilant. For five and a half of her six years she loved her father just as deeply as he loved her. She overlooked the violence Sarah suffered. The coarse language. The shady behavior. The brash booming voice. She saw only her cuddly father who would do anything to make her smile, even if he had been the one to put the tears in her eyes to start with.

That had changed, becoming Sarah's catalyst for wanting to leave, for knowing she had to go. When Emelia's love for her father had cracked and fragmented, her behavior gave her away. Recoiling from a hug. Taking longer to forgive him after a loud fight he was having with someone on the phone that frightened her. There were less giggles and more scowls. Fewer requests for bedtime stories and more hiding under her covers.

It was natural and Sarah understood why it was happening, but that didn't make it any less dangerous. Lou couldn't tolerate rejection. For a man who prided himself on being tough, he was one of the most fragile people Sarah had ever met. It had already started. Emelia would pull away from him and Sarah would watch his anger bubble. Eventually it would spill over and Emelia would not be safe.

That meant it was time to go. Bowman seemed to show up at just the right time with all the perfect promises. She hadn't believed him at first. He wasn't the only cop who had rolled up on her, looking for dirt to use against Lou. It had happened for years. They knew she had access to enough to put him in prison. But she'd turned them all away. Vocally asserting that her loyalty was to her husband and always would be. She believed it back then. Her love knew no bounds. But apparently her line in the sand was her daughter's safety.

"Can we play outside?" Emelia asked as she flopped her large stuffed elephant onto the bed as if it were annoying her. What she didn't realize was inside Mr. Snuffles was the key to their freedom. It held inside its stuffing the one link they had to the outside world. A phone. The phone Bowman had given her. At the moment it was dead and there was no way to discretely charge it and make a call. If Lou realized she hadn't

turned anything over to the cops he'd come around. The former warm spot in his heart he had for his daughter would thaw and heat up again.

“Let me ask,” Sarah sang with that smile she saved only for her daughter. No one else in her life right now deserved it. Knocking on the door, she waited for King to unlatch it and peek his head in.

“Can we take Emelia to the park for a little while? She’s stir-crazy.”

The lines of his frown deepened. King wore a scowl like a tattoo. A permanent addition to his face. But Sarah knew it as a persona, not his real personality. She’d seen him pop Emelia up on his shoulders and pretend to be a pony. She’d seen him scare monsters out of her closet with a playful growl and a bottle of spray he’d made that he swore would keep them away.

“You can’t go out,” he reported and Sarah could see him wrestle with the words as if he wanted to pin them to the back of his throat and not say them.

“I know, and we’ve been really trying to make things work and be good. But we can’t stay in here forever. She needs some sun and some running around. It’s not good for her to be cooped up.”

Sarah intentionally turned her face just the right way to show her barely healed black eye. “Lou said—” he began.

“He listens to you. More than anyone in the world, he listens to what you have to say. Just call him and tell him you’ll escort us. Emelia needs a break.”

She wished he would do something to look more relaxed. To stop treating her and Emelia like they were a job. But he was a serious guy when it called for it. Even his look was serious. King’s hair was black and cut military style close to his head. As much time as they’d spent together over the years Sarah had never seen him wearing anything besides a suit and today was no different.

“I’ll call him,” King sighed. “A little fresh air will be fine.”

“Thank you,” Sarah chirped, turning excitedly to Emelia. “King is going to take us out. Let’s get your socks and shoes on.”

“Can I bring sand toys?” Emelia batted her lashes hopefully.

Sarah moved to the side so King had no choice but to look at her head-on. “You can take them. But you have to share them with me, okay?”

“We can make the biggest castle,” she sang, clapping her hands together.

It had been eight days of this. Under the watch of King, not for their protection but to keep them from running. And every day, King looked slightly less comfortable with the arrangement. He’d never betray Lou’s trust but he’d intervened plenty of times before when Lou’s rage was boiling over on Sarah. Never overtly overstepping, but creatively defusing the situation.

King obviously didn’t believe you should hit your wife, but he never made Lou look bad in the process of protecting Sarah. That took immense skill and Sarah had always been grateful for the ally even though she knew he had limits. Today she was going to test those limits.

After King’s phone call to Lou and quickly packing a toy bag, they walked to the park. Living in the suburbs had been a change for Sarah. The city had been her playground. Thinking back on all the dangerous things she’d done growing up, she could hardly believe she’d survived. She and her sisters would be up all hours playing on the rickety fire escape, trying to see how much they could make it shake. They’d dodge traffic the way kids might dodge each other in a game of tag. They were practically feral some days, but there were always two places they had to have their shit together and act civilized: the church pew and the dinner table. If they cleaned themselves up for that, their parents didn’t bother worrying about them.

It had gone on that way for years until something dramatic had changed. Sarah had become beautiful. Stunning really. The kind of young teen who turned heads well before she understood why. Then her mother had begun to take notice too. There would be no more wild running in the streets and unbrushed hair. Perhaps it had been a means of protecting her daughter, but it had felt much more like she was sheltering some kind of natural resource that might change the family's luck.

The next five years had been spent harnessing Sarah's beauty for profit. Making connections. Her dazzling smile had opened the doors to private schools that her sister Martha's impressive grades couldn't. Sarah had begun to understand what her job was. How to make a man bend the rules by believing they had a shot with her. She'd weaponized her beauty to fight her family's way out of poverty and it had worked.

It was also what had led her straight into the arms of a man like Lou. Her mother had gotten a spot for her and all of her sisters in St. Mary's Precious Blood for the best education possible. The relationships formed there had helped her father move up the ranks to foreman and then on to a cushy position in the head office. At every party, any kind of event, they had shoved Sarah up front, the head of the spear, cutting a path through the world.

That's where Lou had spotted her, out front. Leading the way at a Christmas party at her father's work now that he was important and climbing the corporate ladder. Sarah was nineteen, in her sophomore year of college at the state university. She didn't know then but Lou was there for nefarious reasons. It was an intimidation tactic to convince the construction company not to bid on a government job so the company he'd invested in could win the bid.

Within ten minutes of arriving he'd cornered Sarah, bought her a drink she wasn't old enough to have, and stared deep into her eyes. She was used to the attention of men, but something about this was different. Lou was powerful. The air in the room changed when he walked in and she seemed to be the

only thing he cared about, even though everyone else was interested in him.

Love-bombing her with compliments and touching her affectionately every chance he got that evening, had lit a spark that would end up being the long fuse to the bomb she was clinging to today. And she knew damn well she was running out of time to get rid of it.

“King, she can’t stay cooped up in that room much longer. Her friends are going to be wondering where she’s been. She missed a birthday party this weekend. And she was supposed to go to the roller rink with Stella tomorrow. Lou has to know that people are going to start asking questions.”

“No they won’t,” King scoffs. “People don’t question him. Stella’s father knows who Lou is, he’s not going to get involved. Everyone knows better.”

Sarah pulled her sunglasses off and tipped her chin back as they stepped onto the mulch around the playground.

“Don’t do that,” King pleaded. “Put your glasses on.”

She hadn’t covered up the bruises on her face like she normally would. She’d gotten quite good at finding the best concealers and the colors that could offset the ever-changing shades of a black eye. But today she left it like a flashing sign for everyone to see.

“What?” she asked, playing dumb.

“You’re going to ruin this outing for Emelia. I will take you both right back home.”

“Forcefully?” Sarah asked.

“If I have to.” He looked at least remorseful about this. “But please don’t make me. Put your glasses back on. Let her play.”

“We can’t keep this up,” Sarah sniffled, putting her glasses back on. “He’s losing it. I would never turn on him. I would never give the police anything on him.”

“We can’t talk about this.” King took a few steps away from her.

“I need help, King,” she said, wiping at the falling tears, keeping her voice low. “I’ve never asked you for anything. You have to convince him he’s just being paranoid. It’s always been like this. He thinks I’m cheating. He thinks I’m lying. Now he thinks I’m ratting on him to the police. He’s never been right. You know that. Lou gets something in his head and it sends him spiraling. This is lasting too long. I can’t keep going this way. Please talk to him.”

“You did go to the police,” King said coolly. “I know about that cop, Bowman. I know he worked at the restaurant and that’s how you two connected. He gave you a phone. He put you in touch with the FBI.”

She’d thought she’d felt her stomach drop before this, but now it was bottoming out completely. Hitting her toes. Leaving her body. “King—”

“He doesn’t know.” King runs his hand over his freshly shaved cheek and closes his eyes as if this is killing him. “You’d be dead already if he did.”

“It wasn’t like that. I was only trying to get Emelia to safety. I didn’t give the FBI anything. They’d have already come after him if I did.”

“He will never let you leave. Not alive anyway.”

There was still hope. King hadn’t told Lou what she’d done. He’d protected her. Maybe he would do more to help her.

“He’s going to hurt Emelia. He’s unstable. I can’t let that happen. I was just trying to protect my daughter.”

“You did just the opposite,” King hissed. “He’s more than paranoid; he’s convinced you can’t be trusted. That you both have to be locked away or you’ll go. He’s not wrong and that will keep this going until it comes to a tipping point.”

“Can you help us—”

“Stop,” King snapped. “I’ve helped you enough already. I’ve betrayed him by keeping what I know to myself. I won’t do anything else. He’s done more for me in my life than anyone. I owe him everything I have. We both do.”

“And what do we have exactly? You’ve got blood on your hands and I’ve got bruises on my body. Ten thousand square feet and an infinity pool don’t make up for all we’ve been through. He’s asked too much of you. More than anything you’ve gotten in return.”

“You and I will never speak of this again.” King cut his hand through the air. “You will do what you are told. You will stay locked up as long as you need to until he trusts you again. No matter how long it takes. He will eventually come around when the cops don’t come banging on the door with something only you could have given them. But until then, you take your lumps.”

“Lumps,” she bites back indignantly. “Punches. Punishments. Threats. That’s not exactly taking my lumps. She sees it all, you know. She’s not a baby anymore. What do you think will happen the first time she tells him to stop or rejects him?” Sarah paused, letting the realization wash over King’s face.

“He wouldn’t hurt her.”

“He didn’t used to hurt me either,” Sarah sighed. “When I did everything he wanted the way he wanted it, I was safe. But that eventually changed. It will for her too. I have to get her out of here.”

“If you say another word about leaving . . . the only reason I didn’t tell him what I knew was—”

“Oh God,” she groaned. “He’d have made you do it.”

“Sarah.” He gnashed his teeth together. “Stop.”

“He’d have made you kill me. That’s your job, right? Do the dirty work he doesn’t have the stomach for. You could really look me in the eye and pull that trigger?”

“No,” King said, but his expression didn’t soften. “I have a code. Lou knows that. But you would end up dead. Just not by me.”

CHAPTER THREE

Bowman

The term *going crazy* had never meant much to him. But he could actually feel himself losing his grip on reality. Nick had set up this call that was supposed to help, but Bowman wanted nothing to do with it at the moment.

“Carmen, thanks for calling me back so quickly.” Nick paced the room and Bowman wanted to shove him into a seat on the couch. His nerves were shot.

“No problem, Nick. I know when an O’Malley brother calls it means they either need bail money or they have a big plan to sell me on.”

“I’ve got bail money covered,” Nick chuckled.

“Is this about Cleo? She’s arrived in Portland. I’m excited for the great work she’s going to do out there. Everyone is wondering if you plan to join her.”

“I am.” Nick cleared his throat. “But I’ve got some unfinished business here first. Cleo’s brother, Bowman, is here with me. He needs some help.”

“Oh,” Carmen answered, sounding like she was swallowing her concern. “How can I help?”

“He’s a cop, or he was. He stepped away from his job recently. There is a woman—”

“That’s how this always starts,” Carmen replied, sounding a bit more at ease.

“She was working as an informant but it didn’t pan out. Her husband is a dangerous criminal and now he suspects she’s been disloyal. Sarah and her daughter are in grave danger.”

“And let me guess,” Carmen sighed. “The police have all but abandoned her now that she’s not able to give them valuable information that might lead to a prosecution?”

“Exactly,” Bowman chimed in. “I couldn’t sit by and let her pay the price for something we asked her to do. Especially when it might cost her her life.”

“It’s more common than most people realize,” Carmen said and the sound of shifting papers and another loud sigh rang through the call. “Prosecution is always the most important thing and there ends up being a lot of collateral damage. You know we’ve got resources to transport and protect Sarah and her daughter. We’re happy to do so.”

“Who are you exactly?” Bowman asked as though he were waking up from a trance finally. “What organization are you with?”

“Those aren’t details we’ll be discussing.” Carmen didn’t offer anything further and Nick gave Bowman a look of assurance but it wasn’t working.

“I’m supposed to just send her off with you and hope it all works out? How do I know I can trust you?”

“This is what we do. All day. Every day. We have locations all across the world where women can recover, heal, and rebuild their lives while knowing they are safe. Part of that safety comes from us not discussing the details of our organization.”

“I’m not just anyone,” Bowman interjected, but hardly got the sentence out.

“Have you done undercover work before?” Carmen asked coolly.

“Of course.”

“Then you understand how fragile that cover is. How important it is for your safety and the integrity of the operation you are working on for that to stay intact.”

“I’m not asking—”

“Any questions are too many questions. That’s what we like to say around here. It’s not personal. I’m sure you are incredibly trustworthy. We don’t take chances. There are too many lives at stake.”

Bowman stared down at the floor for a long moment and then thought of Sarah. “I understand. I just might not be ready to let her go and never talk to her again.”

“Who she talks to, within certain safety perimeters, will be up to her. Once she’s settled, safe, and healing, she’s free to do what she likes. No one is a prisoner.”

“It just seems—”

“I know,” Carmen said, now sounding more sympathetic. “I spent years living in one of these safe havens. And then I stayed on to work and help others. It saved my life, but it also stalled my life. It would be a lot easier if none of this ever happened in the first place. I’m sorry she’s in this position and that it might be painful for her to get out of it. But our number one priority is safety, and safety comes through secrets here.”

“I’m grateful she has options,” Bowman offered, trying to sound more agreeable. “I appreciate you being able to help.”

“And she’s willing to come into our program and get help? We can arrange a flight out for her and her daughter within twenty-four hours. Can I speak with her?”

Nick hummed out a noise that indicated there was a problem. “We haven’t been able to make contact with her at this point. She’s under the watch of some of her husband’s men and it’s not safe to reach out. We’re afraid it might put her further into danger.”

Carmen shot back, “It most certainly will. She needs to come to you when she’s ready and able. Until then any type of

intervention could cost her everything. And Nick—”

“I know,” Nick groaned.

“If Brian finds out you’re involving yourself in this outside of the bounds of our normal process, he will flip. We do things in a very methodical way to ensure we’re all around to keep doing this work. It’s not about playing cowboy and kicking in doors to rescue people. There is a procedure and sometimes as hard as that is, it requires patience.”

“I don’t know if she has time to wait,” Bowman reported somberly. “Rossi is a killer. His fuse is short and any type of disloyalty is met with swift repercussions. His organization is notorious for their high body count.”

“Nick.” There was a maternal snap in her voice and it had Nick’s back straightening up a bit.

“It’s all under control,” he promised, looking anything but confident.

“That’s about my least favorite thing an O’Malley brother can say. You do understand how often I hear that line from one of you, right?”

“And it always works out.”

“After I do a ton of behind the scenes work to bail you all out. Listen, I’m not saying you shouldn’t help, but the second Brian hears about this your phone is going to start blowing up. Then Junie will hear about it. You know once Kenan knows you’re going to get an earful.”

“You could just keep this between us,” Nick suggested, looking as though he already knew what her answer would be.

“Nice try. You know that’s not how things work in this family. My advice to you is, pick up the phone when they call or it’ll only get worse. Have some patience and don’t rush the situation with Sarah. Trust that she’ll make contact when she can and you’ll make a safe exit strategy for her.”

“Got it,” Nick said, shooting Bowman a look.

“Thanks,” Bowman edged out reluctantly. He was unsure what he was grateful for right now. He thought maybe these

people would swoop in and help him get Sarah out. But that's not what they were offering at all.

"I know it's stressful when someone we care about is in danger," Carmen said gently. "But that's exactly when they need us to stay calm and calculated. When you've got her somewhere neutral, I promise we can help her from there."

After disconnecting the call, Bowman moved to the window and stared out at the cars passing by. It had been too long. The longest they'd gone without speaking since the first time Sarah had made contact with him. If this called for patience, he knew he was in trouble.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sarah

“Emelia needs the bathroom,” Sarah said as she patted the sand off her daughter’s knees. “They are over there.”

“I know where they are,” King replied, looking more worried. She’d crossed the line. Asked for too much. Now he was in the terrible position of having to tell her no. But this he would have to oblige.

“Let’s just head back to the house.” He looked around the park with unease and then down at Emelia.

“I can’t hold it.” She danced a bit in place and then pouted up at him, just as they had practiced and it could actually work.

“Leave the toys and we’ll come get them when we’re done.” Sarah took her daughter’s hand and began marching her toward the cement building that housed the park bathrooms. These had been the perfect option. The place Sarah had been contemplating getting to since the moment King had locked the door and she knew things needed to change for her and her daughter. Actually, she’d thought of this place ages ago. That’s what survival mode looked like. Always strategizing your way to safety.

“I need to bring Mr. Snuffles.” Emelia bent and pulled the stuffed elephant to her chest. “I can’t go without him.”

“Fine,” Sarah huffed as if it were an annoyance, but really, it was all perfectly executed. She was proud of her daughter, and sad that it had come to this.

“Can we just get back to the house?” King asked again, but he was nearly out of earshot as they made their way to the family restroom. Stepping in, Sarah clicked the deadbolt behind her. This was practically a safe room. There were no windows, a heavy steel door and a formidable lock. More importantly, there was an outlet.

Instantly, Sarah grabbed the stuffed elephant. With an apologetic look she pulled at the loose thread and opened the seam, cotton stuffing spilling out. Inside she reached for the cell phone and the charger. This was her best chance. Her only chance.

Plugging it into the wall she held her breath, waiting for it to come back to life. “Flush the toilet,” she called loud enough so she knew King would hear. He’d be right outside the door. Lurking. Worried. Impatient. That was what she needed.

“911, do you need fire, ambulance, or police?”

“Police,” Sarah whispered.

“Where are you ma’am and what’s going on?”

“I’m at the East Mill Community Park. There is a man here who tried to grab my daughter. He tried to pull her into his car.” She let her voice crack with terror and emotion. That wasn’t a far stretch from what she was feeling.

“Okay. Is your daughter all right?”

“She’s with me. I took her and ran into the bathroom. I think he’s right outside the door waiting for us. Please you need to send someone quickly.”

“I have a car less than a minute away,” the operator assured her. “Is your daughter hurt?”

“No, just shaken up.”

“And can you describe the man?”

“He’s tall, maybe six foot three. Dark hair. A blue suit jacket. I think I saw a gun. Like on his belt. I’m really scared.”

“I know, just stay on the phone with me. I have officers pulling up now. Do you hear the sirens?”

There was a banging on the door. “Let’s go,” King boomed. “We need to go.”

Sarah didn’t answer him. “He’s banging on the door,” she cried into the phone. “He’s going to get in here. He’ll take my daughter.”

“Officers are there now, just give them a minute.”

“Open the door,” King boomed again. “What did you do? Dammit, did you call the police?”

“Go,” she cried through the door at King. “Just go. They are coming for you. Go.” She hung up the phone and tucked it and the charger in her pocket.

There was no benefit to getting King arrested or detained. He’d be let go within a few hours when one of her husband’s contacts on the police force made a call. All she needed him to do was get away from the door. Get far enough away from her so she and Sarah could run.

Even the police couldn’t help her at this point. Running to them and crying about being held against her will would get their attention for a minute, but cause her many more problems in the long run. All she needed was the diversion and a chance to get away.

Pressing her ear to the door she could hear the sirens were very close and King didn’t seem to be standing by the door any more. She got down to her knees and looked under the door, pressing her face to the ground.

“Gross, Mommy,” Emelia cried and she was not wrong.

“I know, baby, but I need to see if King is gone. Remember what we said we would do?”

“Run,” Emelia replied proudly. “Kind of fast but not looking like crazy people.”

“That’s right.” She nodded and stood, clasping her hand tightly. “Are you ready?”

“Are you sure he’s gone?” Emelia asked. It broke Sarah’s heart to think that her daughter was afraid of King, a man she’d always trusted as a protector.

“He’s gone. I promise.” There was no way to know for sure, but this was the best she could do.

Swinging the door open, she stepped out and quickly rounded the building away from the direction the police were coming from. She could see a flash of King’s suit ducking into the woods and she cried out, “Over there!” but she pointed in a different direction. It was enough to send all three uniformed officers running after nothing.

“We have to go,” Sarah said, yanking Emelia’s arm a bit too hard as they sprang into a jog.

“Where are we going?”

“It’s not far,” Sarah promised. “We’ll be safe.”

She didn’t know that for sure. It wasn’t definite that they would open the door for her. This was a long shot. But there was a delicate process to consider. She couldn’t turn to any friends or family. It would be easy for Lou to find her there and put people she cared about in danger. She couldn’t even call Bowman. They were onto him. There needed to be many degrees of separation between the people she turned to and the people Lou knew about.

Knocking on the door she tried not to look frantically over her shoulder. Emelia had become adept at reading body language and Sarah needed to keep her calm. Knocking a little harder this time, she finally heard footsteps.

“Who is it?” A woman’s voice from the other side of the door sounded cheerful but tentative.

“It’s Sarah. Sarah Rossi.” She wasn’t sure the name would even mean anything anymore. Would she even remember?

“Sarah?” The door opened and a pensive worried expression greeted her. “What are you doing here?”

“Carry, we need help,” Sarah sputtered out. “Can we come in?”

“I guess.” Carry stepped aside and quickly closed the door behind them. “Are you hurt?”

“We’re not,” Sarah answered ushering Emelia farther into the small apartment. “But we need a place to regroup for a minute so I can make a plan.”

“Lou?” Carry asked in a whisper.

“Yes. We’ve got to get out of town but things are bad. I don’t have anything with me. We left with just the clothes on our backs.”

“And Mr. Snuffles,” Emelia said holding up the stuffed animal whose stuffing was now hanging out the back.

“I haven’t seen you since—”

“Since Emelia was a baby. I know this is a lot to ask and very out of the blue. I just needed to get Emelia somewhere I knew he wouldn’t think to look.”

“How did you know I still lived here?” Carry looked bewildered. Her short bobbed black hair was wet, probably from the shower, and her face wasn’t made up yet.

“I didn’t know for sure. I was hoping you did.”

“The sirens at the park, was that for you?”

“We created a diversion.” Sarah shrugged and offered a half smile.

“Is he there? Is Lou at the park looking for you?” Worry washed over Carry’s face and Sarah couldn’t blame her. No one wanted trouble brought to their doorstep. “I can give you some cash so you can find a place to stay tonight.”

“Lou wasn’t at the park and he won’t know we came here. He doesn’t know anything about you. No one does. That’s why I came. I needed it to be somewhere he wouldn’t think to look and someone who might be able to give me a head start.”

“Okay, right,” Carry stammered. “What can I do to help? Do you want me to call the police?”

“No,” Emelia cried out with heartbreaking speed. “They help my dad. Don’t call them.”

“We just need a little bit of time,” I told her. “I’ve got money stashed in a locker at the bus station. It’s not much but it’ll get us out of here. I hate to ask for money but if we can borrow enough for a hotel tonight, I know a place where he’ll never look. We could use some food. Maybe a change of clothes for me?”

“Of course. I told you that day, if you ever needed anything, just ask. Let me get my wallet.”

“I didn’t know if you meant that literally or if you were just being nice, but I’ve held on to that offer for six years.”

“I meant it.” Carry tipped her chin back and gave a serious look at both of them. “Of course I meant it. I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Sarah – Six years earlier

Motherhood was a scam. Either that or she was doing it wrong. There had been no quiet cuddly moments of maternal bliss where her baby felt like the answer to all her prayers. It was all projectile fluids, screechy cries, and dirty diapers. The sink was always full of dishes and the hamper overflowing with clothes covered in spit-up.

She was failing. She was a failure. And if Sarah doubted that, Lou was right there to drive the point home. He seemed disgusted with her. Disappointed. He talked often about how his mother had six children and her house was always spotless. Sarah wasn't managing her time right. She wasn't working hard enough or planning well enough.

No one had told her how babies could have acid reflux or mothers could have postpartum depression. There was so much to worry about. Was the car seat in correctly? SIDS. Tummy time. Baby-proofing. Solid foods. Clogged ducts. Recalls. All the while she was fumbling through motherhood there were the demands of her marriage. Of keeping her husband cared for and most importantly centered. He had to be in the middle of it all. She'd learned that too late. After the ring was on her finger and the cake was cut, Lou would come second to no one and nothing. Not depression. Not his daughter. Not any need at all that Sarah might have.

“You stink like puke,” he said as he leaned away from her attempt at a hug. “You need to shower and change before I get home. You have all day.”

Sarah had given up debating where all those seconds and minutes of the day went. How it could be six at night before she took her first real bite of food or her first deep breath for that matter. Instead she replaced all those points of argument with sorry. “I’ll go change now.”

“Then dinner will be cold,” he hissed back. “Just get dinner out and change after. You can’t imagine the kind of day I had. All I want is for things at home to be good. To be calm. All the things I do, I do for you. And you can’t seem to even do the simplest things for me. It’s a slap in the face, Sarah.”

“I’m really trying,” she sputtered out, not even pausing for a moment at the irony of him complaining about a slap in the face. He’d been the only one to deal those out so far.

“You can’t be trying that hard. Look at this pasta.” He stabbed his fork into it with the force of a dagger through a heart. “It’s soggy. You left it on too long. I told you a million times.”

“The baby was crying and I—”

“You are not the only person with a baby. You get that, right?” He tossed his fork down with a loud clattering noise. “Women do this all the time. They manage the house and raise their children. Children. Lots of them. You have one. If I knew this was how you were going to be, I wouldn’t have even—” He sipped his wine rather than finishing the sentence. He didn’t need to. The point was clear.

When Emelia screeched loudly from her rocking swing by the window he slammed his wine glass down on the table. “What do you do to that kid to make her sound like that. I’ve never heard a baby scream like that in my life.”

“It’s her stomach,” Sarah said, hopping to her feet. “We need to take her back to the doctor. I think she has gas pains or maybe an allergy.”

“You think?” he said in a mocking voice, implying she was dumb. “You’re her mother. You’re supposed to know these things. If she needs to go back to the doctor you should have taken her by now.”

“I will,” Sarah shot back angrily. “But the last time I told you this, you said she was fine and not to act like a hypochondriac. That I shouldn’t be racing back to the doctor every week because they’ll think I’m a nut job.”

“What?” The question wasn’t from lack of hearing. This was always how it started. He wanted to hear her say it all again. To use the same angry tone and see what might happen.

“I’ll take her to the doctor,” Sarah replied, cooler this time. She scooped up her daughter and held her close. There was a bounce, a sway of the hips, and a dip she could usually do to calm her.

“That’s not going to help tonight. I lost my damn appetite.” Lou pushed the plate away, spilling sauce onto the tablecloth. Sarah made a mental note to get stain remover on it as soon as possible.

“I’m sorry,” Sarah sighed, clinging tightly to her daughter. She’d learned that having Emelia in her arms humanized her to Lou. It made it hard for him to think about an outburst. It was a selfish tactic but the only one that worked lately. Apparently, he was on to her.

“Put her down. That’s half the problem, you hold her too much. She has to be able to calm herself down at some point. My mother says you’re spoiling her.”

“You can’t spoil a baby,” Sarah retorted with a small laugh but slammed her lips instantly shut. “But I know your mother knows what she’s talking about.”

“Turn the swing on and put her down,” Lou said through pursed lips. “She’ll stop fussing.”

“Your mother always says a baby needs air,” Sarah cut in quickly. “I’ll take her to the park. A walk. You eat dinner. Have some peace and quiet and I’ll walk her.”

She hastily made her way to the front hall closet and pulled out the stroller, expertly unfolding it with Emelia still in her other arm. Laying her down and buckling her in she shushed her daughter with a desperation she was embarrassed to have to use. “Quiet, Emmy.”

“Don’t call her Emmy. I told you I hate that. No nicknames. She’s not our puppy, she’s our daughter.”

“Right,” Sarah said, her back to Lou as she gripped the handles of the stroller. “We won’t be long. I think she’ll settle once we’re out in the fresh air.”

The way his hand crashed down on her head made her shriek. The fistful of her hair was just enough for him to yank her backward off her feet. It was near impossible to have a clear thought when pain radiated from her scalp and fear raged through her, but she knew to let go of the stroller rather than pull it down with her. Motherhood always trumped fear and pain.

“Who’s at the park?” he snarled, yanking her head against his shoulder. It stole her breath but she knew silence wasn’t an option.

“No one,” she sputtered through the pain. “No one is at the park.”

“You want to go meet someone?” he yelled, his voice piercing her eardrum. “You think I won’t find out?”

“I just wanted to give you some peace and quiet,” she cried, not fighting against the tight grip. It would only make it worse. With a grunt he shoved her to the side until she collided with the wall. “I swear. Just a walk. I will just take her for a walk.”

“Go,” he said, shoving her one more time. “Go. I don’t even care anymore.”

If it was a trick, she didn’t care. There was a chance he’d grab her hair again the second she reached the door. But she had to try. Yanking the door open, she pushed the stroller through.

Lou didn't yell. He didn't make a scene. He let her walk away as if nothing had happened. It went like that sometimes. A furious tsunami that receded into calm waters.

There hadn't been time to assess. It was simply forward motion. It was amazing how perpetual motion was a form of survival. Her mind only had one word, running on a loop.

Park.

Park.

Park.

And out loud she would occasionally shush Emelia. The screech coming from her tiny body felt so far away Sarah could hardly hear it. But apparently, she was the only one.

"Whoa," a woman said, stepping in front of the stroller and holding up her hands. "Are you all right?"

"Park," Sarah said. She shook her head to try to get her thoughts straight. "I'm going to the park. She needs some air."

"You need a bandage," the woman said, gesturing up at Sarah's head. She hadn't felt blood dripping down from the small cut above her eye.

"I bumped my head," Sarah sputtered out. "I'm okay."

"My name is Carry." She held her hand to her heart as though she was trying to overcome some language barrier. "May I pick up your daughter and try to calm her down?"

Suddenly the sound of Emelia's shrieks filled Sarah's ears. "Yes," she replied, feeling mortified. "Please. I couldn't get her to settle."

"That's okay. I work in the NICU at the women's hospital. I'm kind of a baby whisperer. Let's go over to that bench." She was speaking gently. Moving gingerly. Sarah could only imagine what a maniac she looked like.

"She's been so fussy and I was trying to get out of the house. I walked right into the door frame. I've been exhausted and clumsy."

“It’s not all the magical moments you were promised, right?” Carry laughed and cradled Emelia tenderly until the baby could catch her breath.

“Not at all.”

“I meet a lot of mothers and most feel the same way. It’s a bait and switch, all this talk of sleeping like a baby and how you’re supposed to know what to do. It’s bullshit, and that’s my professional opinion. These tiny little creatures are more than one person can bear, especially if they are not feeling good or have a chronic issue. Good for you, coming out here and trying to get her some air when I’m sure you’d rather be sitting down and resting.”

“Rest,” Sarah sighed. “I haven’t rested since she was born. She cries so much. Spits up all the time. The pediatrician says it’s normal but it feels more serious to me. He keeps telling me I need to get her on a routine. Trust me, I try. She doesn’t want a routine. She wants to be held and consoled and rocked. All the time.”

“It could be acid reflux or maybe an allergy. I hate when doctors are dismissive to new mothers. I hate high-handed superiority. It runs rampant in the medical field. In my opinion, an arrogant doctor is a dangerous one. There is something to be said for an exceptional depth of knowledge and the confidence to execute this important work. But a cocky practitioner is frequently reckless. I consider it a critical aspect of my job to keep the doctors’ egos in check.”

“I could have used you at our last our appointment.”

“Why don’t you come up to my apartment and let me clean up that cut? I’d be happy to do a quick exam on the baby and you can just relax for a bit. Take a breath.”

“A breath.” Sarah closed her eyes. That was irresponsible. Lou had drilled it in her head since the first week they met. Trust no one. He had enemies everywhere. They were ruthless. Smart. If she let her guard down, she would open Lou up to immense danger. Handing her baby over to a stranger and going into an apartment she didn’t know could mean walking into a trap.

And even knowing all that, as she looked at Carry, she didn't care. Maybe it was the soft blue eyes rimmed with worry or her disarming cardigan sweater. Or, even more likely, Sarah was desperate for any refuge. Any safety. She would risk anything to find it.

“Okay, yeah, I'll go with you.”

The walk to her apartment building was short and wove through parking lots and around little restaurants. The city was busy this time of evening and Sarah kept her head down as she maneuvered her empty stroller.

“It's a long way up,” Carry apologized as she guided Sarah up the stairwell, still holding a now calm Emelia.

“You really are amazing with babies.”

“It's a lot easier when you're only helping out for a little while. It's a whole different ballgame when you're sleep deprived and never get a break. I'd be a terrible mother. I like the babies I can give back.” She chuckled, handed Emelia back to Sarah, and pulled out her keys to unlock the door.

Emelia's red cheeks had settled back into cool pink. “She's doing a lot better.”

“How long ago did she eat?”

“About two hours ago.”

“Are you nursing or formula?”

“Nursing.”

“How's her latch?”

“Terrible.” It had been a point of constant self-loathing to know that something Sarah's body was supposed to do completely naturally was not working. Generations of women for centuries had been able to feed their babies properly, but she was not one of them.

“That happens. And I bet she's maybe getting some extra air while she's eating and it's causing some gas. I'm going to give you the number of my friend Susan. She's a lactation consultant. She'll come right to your house.”

“No, she can’t come to the house,” Sarah said before she could think of how it might sound. “I can go meet her.”

The damage could not be undone. Carry looked at the blood on Sarah’s face. The terror in her eyes that she’d mistaken for maternal overwhelm. Now this reaction had sealed the deal. “Sarah, are you not feeling safe at home?”

“I am not safe at home,” Sarah admitted, this time with some confidence. “But I am less safe if I try to leave.”

“I understand,” Carry assured her. “I’m not here to try to disrupt anything and make more problems for you. Just tell me how I can help.”

“My husband is Lou Rossi. Do you know who that is?”

Carry’s mouth opened slightly, closed, and then opened again though no words came out at first. “Um, I do. I know who he is.”

“I can’t leave him. I don’t want to leave him. I just need to find a way to make all of this work better. I have to be better at this.”

“Sarah, you—”

“We can skip the longer conversation about how I’m doing just fine and all of this mothering stuff is normal. At the end of the day, she can’t keep crying like this or he’ll never calm down about it. I need her well so I can do what needs to be done around the house and get things back in order. That’s what I need.”

“Okay,” Carry agreed, though she seemed reluctant. “I’ll give you Susan’s number. If it turns out it’s not the latch that’s giving you trouble and causing the fussiness, we’ll get to the bottom of it.”

“You’re not going to preach to me about how I should leave? How I should be stronger for my baby and do the right thing?”

“The right thing?” Carry’s eyes were wide. “I’m in no position to tell you what the right thing for your life is.”

“I know what it must look like from your perspective.”

“I do not have my life sorted out and my taste in men is not some impressive standard. The best we can ever do for people is meet them where they are and help with what they need. Let me get something to clean that cut and a Band-Aid.”

“I’ll use one from my purse.” Sarah looked away. “So he doesn’t think someone else helped me.”

“Good thinking. And I’ll give you my number. Just call if you are ever in a pinch and need anything. I work crazy hours at the hospital but my apartment here is close to the park. Just come up whenever you need, even if I’m not here.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“You’d do the same. If someone showed up and needed something, you strike me as someone who would help.”

“I would.”

“And so, I’ll help you if I can.”

“If Lou found out that I came here or told anyone what happened—”

“You didn’t tell me and he won’t know you came here. We’re strangers. You tell him you went to the park. You went in the bathroom and cleaned up your cut and came back home. And if you find yourself back in the area and you need something, come back.”

Carry moved around the apartment and did little tasks without looking put out at all. She wrote down some phone numbers of resources and friends who could help with Emelia. Cleaned Sarah’s cut. Cracked a few jokes. Pretended this was all very normal.

By the time Sarah left, the anxiety of how long she’d been gone and how mad Lou might be had crept back in. Would he know she’d been in this stranger’s apartment? The punishment for that poor judgment would be steep. While Sarah was grateful for the kindness, she understood that roses could have deadly thorns.

There would be no going back to Carry. No knocking on her door or reaching out to her contacts. This had been a

mistake, one Sarah wouldn't make again.

CHAPTER SIX

Bowman

“I shouldn’t be calling you,” Paul Pavine said in a hushed voice. “Every directive we’ve gotten is to cut you out and not continue any of the shit you were pulling on the Rossi case.”

“I was doing my job,” Bowman shouted, then lowered his voice when Nick shot him a look from across the coffee shop table. “We failed to protect her.”

“I know,” Paul replied, shocking Bowman with his candor. “I also know there is no way in hell you are letting this go and flying blind will get you killed. I trained you so I know exactly how screwed up this is and how determined you’ll be to fix it.”

“I’ve got to do something. You’ve got intel?”

“She left him,” Paul said, still sounding reluctant. “I don’t have the details. A wire was intercepted between someone at one of his warehouses and his cell phone. The warehouse is one of the few locations we still have tapped.”

“She left?”

“Ran off. Got away. They were being cryptic. I think it was his right-hand man, King. He was winded and all flustered like it had just happened. Like she got away from him.”

“Because he was holding her captive? Can we use that? Kidnapping charges. We could follow up with—”

“There is no we,” Paul cautioned him. “I don’t know where she is and there isn’t anything in the intercepted call that could lead to charges. They were careful, but Lou is irate. He’s going to burn this city down looking for his wife and daughter. Wherever she is, she’s not going to be safe for long. That’s why I’m telling you.”

“You’ve got no leads on where she is?”

“Nothing. The only thing King mentioned was the park. The local precinct had a call from a woman who said a man had tried to take her daughter but they were gone as was the assailant when officers arrived. We think that might be where she took off from.”

“She likely had nothing with her.”

“Has she made any contact with you at all?” There was a hitch in his voice. The subtlest change that should have been imperceptible with all the adrenaline coursing through Bowman’s body. But he heard it. And the hair on the back of his neck stood up. “Does she have your cell phone still?”

“She ditched the phone a while back.” Bowman held up his hand to make sure Nick didn’t say anything to contradict him.

“Hmm, okay. We can track that if she turned it on, but you’re sure it’s gone?”

“Positive.”

“Well listen, just keep me posted if you hear from her. I know we can’t utilize all the resources of the force, but I’ll help where and when I can, brother. It’s important that she’s found safe.”

“You’re a life saver,” Bowman said as he balled his free hand into a fist. “I’ll keep in touch. Let me know if you hear anything.”

“Will do.”

It took all his willpower to not throw the phone against the wall as he hung up. “That son of a bitch.”

“What?” Nick asked, leaning forward urgently. “Who was that?”

“A cop,” Bowman reported through gritted teeth. “And a mole apparently. He’s not trying to help me or Sarah. He’s probing for information. Sarah got away and Lou must be freaking out to the point he’s calling in all his favors.”

“How do you know this cop is dirty?”

“I’ve thought it for a while, but didn’t want to believe it. The way he asked about the phone, I just knew. And worse, if she turns it back on, they’ll trace it. They’ll find her.”

“We need to find her first,” Nick said, pounding his hand on the table.

“I have no idea where she would have gone. No way of knowing where she is now. If he was holding her captive, she left with nothing. He’d have made sure of it.”

“There has to be something. Sarah has been dealing with this for a long time, right? She’d have been doing whatever she could to be ready. There must have been some money squirreled away or someone she could turn to.”

“I was supposed to be the person she could turn to.”

“Where would she go? You must have talked about that.”

“There was a locker. I think she said the bus station,” Bowman recalled, trying to fight through the haze of fear. “She had a safety deposit box, but there wasn’t very much in it. Just what she could put away without him noticing.”

“And you think Lou doesn’t know about it?”

“I think that man knows a hell of a lot more than we do in this situation. He watched her in the most suffocating and stalker-like way possible. She never had a moment to herself. I’d bet he knows about the locker and plans to stake it out, wait for her to show up.”

“Then we have to do that too.” Nick hopped to his feet, banging the table so hard he knocked over their half-full, long-gone-cold coffees.

“Damn, kid,” Bowman shouted, but calmed himself quickly. No one was there but Nick. This kid had no reason to show him this loyalty and the energy that had him knocking over the coffee was exactly what he needed. “It’s fine. You’re right. We need to be at the bus station, ready to step in between her and whatever Lou sends her way. But I can’t ask you to—”

“You’re not asking anything of me.” Nick cut his hand through the air to make his point. “Let’s get to the bus station. We’ll sit there all day every day if we need to.”

“You must really love my sister if you’re willing to do all this.”

“I do, but that’s not why I’m staying.”

“Then why?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do. In my family, you do the right thing, even when it’s shitty or hard. And you never let anyone do it alone. No one stands alone. Never. That’s how this works. Or it doesn’t work at all.”

“Damn,” Bowman said, shaking his head. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had anyone have my back in a real way. No questions ask.”

“Well there is one condition.”

“Oh,” Bowman said, always assuming there had to be some catch.

“Food. The O’Malleys will always step up, but we do require snacks. A stake-out has good snacks, right?”

“It should,” Bowman replied, slapping a hand to Nick’s back. If this was the man who loved his sister, he knew she really had done all right for herself. In spite of all the messed-up things that had happened in their childhood, she’d found someone good to care about her. Now all he could hope was the same good fate could be waiting for Sarah.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sarah

Emelia's hand was sweaty and hard to grip, but Sarah was holding on for dear life. She'd picked this time intentionally. The commuters were barreling toward their trains with music blasting in their ears and the distraction of an incoming text message making them oblivious. They weren't paying attention to the frantic pace Sarah was keeping in order to try to stay safe.

There had been a lot of sitting. Waiting. Scoping out. Was King here? Did Lou come himself? Was there a whole army of his men or maybe even cops he'd paid who would arrest her? Emelia would be ripped from her arms. Life would be over, even if Sarah lived.

This had to work. The best she could remember there was seven thousand dollars in the bag in the locker. A couple of changes of clothes and a cell phone. That would be crucial. She knew turning on the phone Bowman had given her was a lost cause now. A one-way ticket back to hell. It could be traced and tracked. But the phone in the locker, once charged up, could be the lifeline she needed.

"My legs, Mommy," Emelia complained as Sarah tugged her along. It was far too fast a pace for the little girl, but danger would catch them if they slowed down.

"I know, baby," Sarah apologized as she hoisted Emelia up on her hip. The child was too big to be carried now but the

adrenaline-fueled strength of a mother could not be matched. “We’ve got to get in here and get something really quick and then we’ll go.”

“Go where?” Emelia whimpered. “Back to Carry’s house? The hotel? I want to get my other toys at home. I want to take a bath. Where is my blanket?”

“I don’t know if we can go back and get those things or not. But they are just things. It started getting very scary for Mommy and I knew if I didn’t want to be scared anymore, I’d have to be brave enough to find a way out.”

“I don’t understand,” Emelia sobbed. “I want to go home.”

“We can’t.”

Her daughter wiggled off Sarah’s hip and stood, digging her heels in. Folding her arms across her chest, she tried to look immovable. The reality was, if Sarah wanted to, she could scoop her daughter up and carry her kicking and screaming where they needed to go. But making a scene wasn’t ideal. And more than that, Sarah didn’t want her daughter to ever feel as trapped and controlled as she had over the years.

“I’m so sorry that I haven’t done a better job of protecting you,” Sarah said, patting Emelia’s cheek gently. “I know this is confusing grown-up stuff, but I’m asking you to trust me. I want you to be safe and happy and to do that, we have to go.”

“But go where?”

“I’ve got it all under control. We are going to those lockers over there and getting a bag that has some money in it. Then we can buy bus tickets and get somewhere safe.”

“What about school? My friends. Daddy.”

“It’s not going to be forever. It’ll just be a little trip. You know when Mommy is cooking and sometimes the water boils over when I forget to turn it down. It makes those sizzling noises and a big mess?”

“Yeah.”

“Well everything is boiling over right now and we need to get away until it cools down. It won’t be like that forever, but it’s really important. Do you understand?”

“I don’t like when Dad yells,” Emelia admitted. “Or when he tells us we have to stay in a room or we can’t talk to our friends. I really don’t like when he makes you cry or hurts you.”

“I don’t like it either. That’s not what dads are supposed to do.”

“Why does he do it? You make him mad?”

“Sometimes there are things I do that make him mad. But other times he does it just because he can’t control himself. He needs help.”

“Then you should help him. You are his wife.” Emelia’s eyes were wide and desperate. “Isn’t that what you do when you are married?”

“It’s more complicated than that. I don’t think there is anything I can do to help Dad. I have to put you first. I have to make sure you are safe.”

“I am safe.” Emelia stomped her foot. “Dad doesn’t hurt me.”

“I want to keep it that way.”

“He wouldn’t —” before the last syllable left her tiny pursed lips, there was a hand clamping down on her shoulder. “Ouch,” she cried, falling to her feet.

“Damn you, Sarah,” King shouted as he reached to try to get a hold of Sarah. The man gripping Emelia was Billy, and he had a furious look in his eyes.

“No,” Emelia cried. “Mommy.”

“Hey,” King shouted, turning his attention to Billy, “don’t shove her.”

Sheer maternal instinct propelled Sarah to strike Billy in the groin with the point of her boot. The air left his body in a gasp just as quickly as his grip on Emelia loosened. Sarah

clasped her daughter's hand and slid her on the concrete floor for a foot or two and then scooped her up.

"King is mad," Emelia sputtered out. "The other one hurt my shoulder."

"We have to go." Sarah had her eye on the exit, her mind tugging her back toward the locker. Without that money she was stranded. Penniless and unable to get far enough away to keep Emelia safe.

"Is he coming?" Emelia asked, her grip on Sarah's neck growing tighter by the second. "Is he going to get us?"

"No," Sarah asserted. "No, we're going to get out of here."

"The hell you are," Lou said, stepping in front of them like a brick wall. One Sarah ran directly into. It knocked her backward, the hard cement rising up to crush her back. Emelia was on top of her, flailing and crying.

"Run," Sarah whispered harshly into her daughter's ear. "Run and hide." There had been hundreds of impossibly hard moments in her marriage but this was by far the worst. Shoving Emelia off her body and in the opposite direction of Lou was like ripping away a piece of herself. Chopping off a limb. "Go," she shouted in what she knew her daughter would perceive as anger.

Hopping to her feet, Sarah put her body in the way like a defensive play in basketball, disrupting his move to grab his daughter.

"Get out of my way," he demanded, barking down into Sarah's face, but she wouldn't move. They were in public. People were watching. He wouldn't be so brazen as to hit her here.

"You're not getting her," Sarah yelled back. "You're never going to see her again."

"You bitch," Lou snapped, grabbing her arm and yanking her to the exit she'd been heading for before he'd stopped her. "She's six years old. You just told her to run? This is the damn bus station. It's dangerous."

“You’re dangerous,” Sarah bit back as he pulled her outside. “She’s better off with any stranger in that place than with you.”

“King will get her,” Lou hissed. “And I’ve got you.”

“All I care about is her being safe.”

“She’s my daughter. You can’t keep her from me. Do you know what I’ll do to you?”

“I don’t really care anymore, Lou. Don’t you get it? I’m done being afraid of you.”

“That’s the stupidest thing you’ve ever said, and you’ve said some real stupid shit. This is exactly when you should be the most afraid of me. I know what you did. I know what you tried to do. It’s over for you. You screwed with me and you know the consequences.”

“Go to hell, Lou.” She spat the words in his face defiantly. Where this bout of confidence was coming from she had no idea. They were already to the black car with the open door that he would shove her into. There wouldn’t be anything she could do to get away from him. But Emelia had a chance. She could find help. Tell them her dad was hurting her mom. Have some sort of fresh start if the stars aligned perfectly.

As Lou shoved her into the car, Sarah craned her neck and looked in the large glass windows of the bus station, scanning desperately for King, Billy, or Emelia. A police officer or a kind stranger who might take her daughter by the hand.

With the last sweep of her eyes before the car squealed away, she saw her. In the arms of Bowman. Safe. Frantic but safe.

He’d found them. Kept his promise the best he could so far. She’d know him from the restaurant. From his kindness the few times they’d all interacted. Emelia would be scared, but she’d be safe. Lou could do his worst, but if he couldn’t get to Emelia, Sarah would be at peace.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bowman

The bus station smelled of stale body odor and fruity vapes. He couldn't picture Sarah, in all her elegant dresses and pinned up hair having to run around this place, slinking toward a grey rusty locker with a desperate hope to get out of town.

His gut twisted in knots at the thought of her having to hide from Lou. That she hadn't contacted him. This was such a long shot. A stake-out was usually fruitless. He'd learned that on the job during plenty of wasted nights. But he needed this to be different.

"I'll keep an eye on the lockers from over there," Nick said, pointing at a bench with a good line of sight.

"I'll be there," Bowman said, pointing to the other corner. "You have all your snacks and supplies? This could be a long day and there's a good chance she won't show at all. If she's really in hiding, she might not risk it."

"Long shots pay off big sometimes," Nick said, yanking open a bag of chips and offering some to Bowman.

"I don't do snacks," Bowman said, holding up his black to-go cup of coffee. "This is all I need."

"She's going to turn up here," Nick said, nodding his head as though that might make it true. "You've got to stay positive."

Bowman wondered, five hours in, if Nick was still feeling quite so positive about anything. The bench was rigid. The crowd was obnoxiously loud and impatient. And they were no closer to finding Sarah than they had been this morning.

Nick didn't look daunted though. He was eating a long string of licorice and pretending to read a thick novel he'd brought.

Bowman rolled his eyes as Nick turned the page without even looking down at his book. The kid had a long way to go if he ever thought he'd be doing something like this again. Though Bowman wasn't doing too good himself, allowing this to distract him. Refocusing on the lockers he tried to will Sarah to show up.

There had been a few attention-drawing moments so far. A man with a sign related to his religion had been yelling too close to people and had been escorted out of the station. A baby was inconsolable, shrieking with red cheeks and a frazzled looking set of parents. A bunch of teenagers had jumped the turnstile and been chased down by security. Bowman had been watching each of those situations closely, but it wasn't until the ruckus of some people gasping that he finally spotted something important.

Lou was there, standing by an exit. Sarah was on the ground. Emelia running away from them. Running toward Bowman.

"Nick," Bowman shouted, but he was already on his feet charging over, looking ready to throw down.

Lou's meaty hand snagged Sarah's as he tried to discretely drag her outside. There was no way to close the gap between them before Lou would have her there. He had to make a choice. A split-second decision.

"Emelia," he called, waving with a smile. "Honey, it's okay. Come here."

With tear-streaked cheeks, the child looked over at her mother who was being pulled out the exit door and seemed to

realize she was alone. That her mother was not there to rescue her this time.

“Emelia,” Bowman called again as they reached her. “You know me, right?”

“Bowman,” she sniffled. “My mom’s friend.”

“Right.”

Her arms opened wide and he knew she wanted him to pick her up. He lifted her from the ground and her tiny arms wrapped around his neck. With eyes fixed on the street outside the window, he watched as Lou crammed Sarah into the car.

“We’ve got to go,” Nick said, pointing over at King. “That’s one of his guys, right?”

“Yeah,” Bowman replied, hustling toward the busy ticketing station. They’d get caught up in the crowd. Blend into the commuters.

“Mommy,” Emelia sobbed into Bowman’s neck. “He’s going to hurt her.”

“I’m going to get her back,” Bowman promised. “You’re safe and she will be too.”

“King is going to come.” Emelia said, her words broken with scared breaths.

“He’s not,” Nick said, looking over his shoulder. “He’s not coming.”

“And if he does,” Bowman growled, “he’s not getting anywhere close to you. No one is going to hurt you.”

“I want my mom.”

“I know,” Bowman replied as they stepped out onto the street. “We need to get you somewhere safe.”

“Let me make a call,” Nick said, pulling his phone out of his pocket. “I can arrange something with Carmen and my brother Brian.”

“Good,” Bowman answered. “Because I’m going to be a little busy getting Sarah back.”

“He’s going to hurt her,” Emelia cried again.

“No,” Bowman promised. “I’m going to hurt him.”

They walked the three blocks back to Bowman’s car and he tried to peel Emelia off him but she wouldn’t budge.

“We can’t stay here. You have to get in the car.”

“I don’t want to. I want my mom.”

Nick patted her back. “I have some friends who can keep you very safe while Bowman and I go find your mom. But we have to drive away from here first.”

She leaned back and looked at the car. “You don’t have my booster seat.”

“It won’t be a far ride.”

“That’s illegal,” Emelia protested.

“It’s an emergency,” Bowman countered. “We don’t have a choice right now. This place isn’t safe and we have to go somewhere that is.”

“My mom never lets me ride without a booster.”

“Today she would understand.” He was not adept at negotiating with children, but the last thing he wanted was King rolling up on them and trying to get her back by force. And every minute that passed was more dangerous for Sarah.

“What if the police see?” Emelia asked, finally letting go of Bowman and allowing him to put her down.

“Bowman is the police,” Nick said, leaning down to look Emelia in the eyes. “That’s why your mom is friends with him. He is trying to help get you somewhere safe. Your mom trusts him. So I think she would want you to trust him.”

“I know she does,” Emelia whispered. “She told me. She told me you were the good guy and you were trying to help us.” She stomped her foot. “But that didn’t help. It made my dad madder than before. And he wouldn’t let us leave the bedroom and it was terrible. It was better before my mom knew you.”

The gut punch of her words winded him. “I’m sorry.”

Emelia didn’t answer but she reached for the handle of the car door and climbed in the back. Bowman was too dumbstruck by her analysis of the situation to move, but Nick seemed to know what to do. He leaned in, buckled her seatbelt, and gave her a half smile.

“It’s going to be okay, kid,” he promised.

“How do you know?” she whimpered back.

“You’re with the good guys now,” Nick answered proudly.

In a hushed voice, as he closed the door, Bowman turned his attention to Nick. “What the hell do we do now? We can’t take her back to my place. I can’t trust any cops. We’ve basically just kidnapped a six-year-old. I don’t have a plan for this.”

“Carmen will know what to do.”

“I need to get to Sarah.” Bowman clenched his jaw. “I should have run after her. I could have maybe—”

“There was no way. You got to Emelia and that’s what Sarah would have wanted. Lou had her out that door before we could have done a thing. Now let’s go find somewhere to lie low while we figure out what to do next.”

“I already know what to do.”

“What’s that?”

“Lou is going to call.” He held up his phone. “He’s going to want his daughter.”

“And what are we going to do?”

“We’ll use that to find Sarah?”

“Lou doesn’t strike me as a fool. He’s not going to let you come for Sarah without bringing him Emelia. And there is no way we’re letting that child anywhere near him again.”

“Just make your call and see what they can do to help.” Bowman slapped a hand to Nick’s back, grateful for the help.

“We got her safe,” Nick said, trying to sound optimistic.
“That’s a big deal.”

“It’s a start. But what good have we done if her mother is dead and her father is hunting her for the rest of her life?”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“You’re so sure?”

“Of course, because of the way you’re ready to tear someone limb from limb. You look like a predator right now. I’m not worried about anyone hunting that little girl. I’m worried for them.”

CHAPTER NINE

Sarah

Lou slammed the car into park in front of one of his warehouses and spun on her. “Why aren’t you asking to go back?”

“What?”

“You’re not asking about Emelia or begging to go back to find her. Why?”

“I don’t want her around you,” Sarah lied. The truth was, the second she saw Emelia in Bowman’s arms she knew the best thing she could do was keep Lou away. Give Bowman as much time as she could. Anything to get Emelia safe.

When his phone rang he punched at the steering wheel as though the shrill noise was a painful dog whistle.

“What?” he barked into the phone. “Do you have my daughter, King?”

“Boss, I’m sorry. I don’t have her.”

“Where the hell is she?”

“That cop, the one who was working undercover at the restaurant, was there. He took her.”

“What?” Lou’s teeth gnashed together as he stared at Sarah. “You were there with that cop?”

“No,” Sarah said, her eyes wide with fear. “I didn’t know he was there. I was trying to get money I’d stashed in a locker. He must have known just like you did. I didn’t call him. I didn’t reach out to him at all.”

He slapped her with the back of his hand and she yelped. It was relatively kind compared to other things he’d done to her in the past, but she knew it was going to get worse.

“Where is he going to take her?”

“I have no idea.” She held her cheek and hair fell over her face. “I didn’t plan this. I was trying to get away.”

“You can go wherever you want. You can’t take my daughter.”

Sarah knew she wasn’t allowed to go wherever she wanted. Lou was going to do and say anything to get Emelia back. Not because he loved her, but because he wouldn’t win if he didn’t get her back.

“King, you get back here. Grab a few of the guys. We’re going to get my daughter back and then deal with my wife.”

“Maybe we should call in the cops. You’ve got a few allies there. This is kidnapping. You can get Sarah deemed unfit. There are channels to do this if you really want Emelia back.”

“He doesn’t,” Sarah said, hearing King’s words through the phone. “He wants to hurt me but he doesn’t really want his daughter. And what do you think he’ll do when he realizes that? You’re a better man than this, King. Don’t help him.”

The hand was a closed fist this time and she saw stars.

“Boss,” King called loudly through the phone. “We’ll find Emelia.”

“I’ll find her,” Lou said, disconnecting the call and throwing the phone against the dash. “You got in King’s head? My most loyal guy and you screwed with that?”

“Please, Lou,” Sarah pleaded as she pulled at the door handle. She knew it would be locked. Lou didn’t make mistakes when it came to being in control.

“Call him.” He slammed his hand to the dashboard again.
“Call that cop right now. I want to talk to him.”

“I don’t have a phone,” she hissed back. “You took it. You took everything from me.”

He reached down for his phone that was by her feet and shoved it in her face. “Call him. I want to talk to him. Or you’re useless to me. Do you really want to be useless to me?”

“If you’re going to kill me, do it now. You’ve taken everything from me. I have nothing left. Kill me.”

“Call him.”

“Or what?”

He gathered her hair up with his free hand and knocked her head against the glass. Not hard. Not as hard as she expected. Lou needed her. She was the only link to Emelia.

“Call him.”

“He won’t let you anywhere near her,” Sarah said, taking the phone from him. “Bowman is a better man than you. He’ll never put Emelia in that position.”

“Oh please,” Lou scoffed. “You think this guy is some kind of hero? You never learn. Men want one thing from you. They’ll play any game to get it. He’s not putting his neck out for you. Call him.”

Sarah took the phone and reluctantly dialed the number. She knew Bowman would pick up. He’d be waiting for her call. And that was the problem.

“Hello?”

She couldn’t even enjoy the relief of hearing his voice. There was too much on the line. “Bowman, it’s me.”

“Where are you?”

“She’s not going to tell you that.” Lou grinned maniacally as he snatched the phone from her. “You’re going to bring me my daughter.”

“Not a chance in hell.”

Sarah could feel the temperature in the car climbing by the second and she stifled her yelp when Lou's hand clamped down on her leg. That's what he wanted. For her to cry out for help so Bowman would react recklessly.

"My daughter is coming home to me."

"So you can lock her in a room again for days at a time and beat her mom whenever you're feeling small and want to feel tough."

"I want to feel tough right now," Lou ground out as he squeezed down tighter on Sarah's leg. She bit down on her lip so she wouldn't make a sound.

"Emelia is safe."

"Sarah is not." Lou laughed. "Give me back my daughter or I'll rain hellfire down on you and everyone you love."

"That's easy," Bowman laughed. "I don't love anyone."

"You love my wife, don't you?"

"I'm not playing your game," Bowman snarled.

"Why else would you be doing all this? She's a shit cook and can't keep house at all."

Bowman chuckled. "It's funny that you think I'd have to be in love with Sarah to want to keep her from getting her ass kicked on a regular basis. I think you might have a twisted view of what love is. The bar's pretty low to be better than you."

This bravado wouldn't help, but Sarah understood they were sizing each other up and it was probably necessary.

Lou finally let go of her leg. "You don't know what power looks like, buddy."

"Power isn't controlling other people. It's controlling yourself. Something you obviously can't do. This is only going to end one way. You're going to let Sarah go. Let them have a life that doesn't involve being terrorized by you. The police don't have shit on you or you'd already be locked up."

Quit while you're ahead and don't turn this into a hostage situation or a kidnapping."

"You're the one with a kid that doesn't belong to you. And no badge. And no allies on the force. You took your shot and missed. You tried to get my wife to turn on me and sell me out and she failed. Now she's paying the price. I hope you feel good about that. Every bruise. Every bone I break. It's because you told her you could keep her safe and you failed."

"She never turned on you. God you're stupid. For whatever reason, no matter what I said, she wouldn't hand over anything that would put you in jail. And you know she could. She's one of the only people who really could take you down if she wanted to. But she didn't. I thought she was stupid. Honestly. I thought why in the world would she protect you? Maybe she's brainwashed. Or terrified. I don't know. But I couldn't get her to do it."

"Then why exactly are we in this situation?" Lou's eyes were fixed on Sarah. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of looking back his way.

"Because you're paranoid and you finally broke her spirit enough to make her want to leave. You got close enough to hurting her daughter to snap her out from whatever spell you had her under. She didn't run to me, she ran from you."

"I would never hurt Emelia." He narrowed his eyes and ground his teeth together.

"Why?" Bowman said with a humorless laugh. "What makes her so exempt? Don't you think someday she's going to piss you off enough that you won't be able to keep it together? Haven't you been close before? You already made her watch while you beat her mother, and you've locked her away for days at a time. If you think you haven't already hurt her, you're an idiot. She's terrified. She wants her mother. And this child knows damn well you're the thing keeping her from that. Even if you ended up with Emelia, she'd never look at you the same. You're the monster under her bed. I'll make sure she knows that."

“Go to hell,” Lou snapped. “Bring me my daughter or I will have every contact I know hunting you down in this city. There won’t be a single place you can hide.”

“Then I guess we’ll leave the city. See you might be the big fish in this little pond, but I’ve got contacts who can have your daughter safely out of this country before the sun sets tonight. Do you know why?”

Lou didn’t answer.

“Because they are the heroes. They swoop in all the time and find people who are being crushed by men like you. Men who have power and reach that makes getting away feel impossible. But there is an entire legion of humans who have linked arms, ready to disrupt the shit you do. And they don’t fail. Because sadly they have lots of experience.”

Lou was silent. She could see him pondering this reality. He believed Bowman. It made sense that for every person like Lou there would be ten willing to help.

“You’re playing with fire. Don’t you care what happens to Sarah?”

“I do. But I know she will never use her daughter as a bargaining chip to save her life. She doesn’t want me to bring Emelia anywhere near you. And I won’t.”

“Then I don’t need her.” He said it bluntly.

“You plan to kill your wife because she just doesn’t want you hurting her anymore?”

“I can’t trust her. She’s nothing to me now. And it sounds like I’m going to have to put all my energy into scorching the earth looking for my daughter. You do understand I’ll never stop, right?”

“It won’t matter. If you hurt Sarah, I’ll make sure you pay. You’ll be under the earth, not scorching it.”

“What is your play here, big guy? We’re not making deals. We’re not getting any closer to a resolution so why are we still at it?”

“I think you’re just arrogant enough to believe you can get me to change my mind. That I’ll be willing to risk Emelia for the chance at saving them both.”

“You don’t think you’re brave enough or tough enough to pull that off?”

“I’ll never underestimate how vicious you are. How willing you would be to lose them both just to win. Emelia is not in play here. You’ve scared her for the last time today. Now do the right thing and let her mother go.”

There was a rustling on the other end of the phone and Sarah held her breath. She knew what was about to happen.

“Daddy?” Emelia asked in a broken-up voice. “Do you have Mommy? Can you give her back to me?”

“Emelia, you know you have to be strong in moments like this,” Lou said, though his voice was a bit softer. “I know it’s scary. Those strangers are going to bring you back to me.”

“I don’t want to go back. I just want Mommy.”

“Baby, you’re with strangers. You need to be with your family.”

“You locked the door.” Emelia sounded stronger with each syllable. “I don’t like that. I don’t like what you do.”

“Things will be better. Your mom and I are working it out right now. We just want you to come home.”

“You always say things will be better.”

“Grown-up things are complicated.” He was tensing up, his patience running thin. “Those men are going to send you away and you’ll be alone.”

“That’s not true.”

“Where do you think they’re going to put you?”

“I wouldn’t be alone if you let Mommy come.”

It was beautifully played and Sarah’s heart broke that her daughter had to be this smart. Smart enough to challenge her father.

“Put the man back on the phone,” Lou said in a sour voice.

“Your daughter wants her mother,” Bowman said. “You’re going to keep them apart?”

“I’m going to make Sarah pay for the situation she put us in. And I hope you know her blood will be on your hands.”

“Daddy don’t,” Emelia said and Lou’s face went red with anger. “Let me have Mommy back, please.”

He disconnected the call and rage filled the car like it had been submerged in water with the windows open. “He just signed your death certificate. I hope you’re happy. And you can die knowing I will get Emelia back. I will find her wherever they go.”

“Lou, it doesn’t have to be this way,” Sarah cried, holding her hands up, anticipating a blow.

“You did this.” He snatched up a handful of her hair. “Remember that you did this.”

The knock on Lou’s window was forceful. A fist crashing against the glass. He let her hair go and spun, ready to meet whatever was waiting for him.

“Boss,” King said, “get out of the car.”

“What the hell are you doing?” Lou snapped.

“Get out of the car.” King took a step back and waited for Lou to open the door. He did, not because he was following King’s order but because he was ready to knock the man down for interrupting and challenging him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing? All these years I’ve kept you paid and in power. I’ve given you everything you have. You want to turn on me now? Suddenly you don’t like the tactics that brought us where we are. You don’t have the stomach for it.”

“That’s not what this is,” King said in a low voice. “I’ve got your back. I always have.”

“You just don’t like how I handle my marriage. Or how I protect our business. Because she’s the one who went to the

cops. She's the one who turned on us. You've never had a problem dealing with disloyal people before today. But apparently, you've got a soft spot for my wife. I guess I should be worried about why."

"It's not like that."

"Then why are you banging on my car, interrupting what needs to be done."

"Because you're sitting under a traffic camera. It's the middle of the day. You're being sloppy and my job has always been to keep you from screwing shit up. You're about to."

King gestured up at the light pole with the city camera on it. Then looked down at Sarah.

"You're not trying to play hero? Her bullshit hasn't worked on you?" Lou flung an arm back toward Sarah.

"I'm doing what I've always done. Protecting what we've built. You're the one risking it all. Spiraling. You need to get your shit together."

King's chest was puffed out and he looked ready to brawl. Sarah had seen him fight. He'd have no problem putting Lou in his place. But it had never happened that way before. Lou dominated in other ways, and King always backed down. She wondered if maybe this would be the time they would finally come to blows and King would knock Lou on his ass.

"Fine," Lou said, drawing in a deep breath. "Take her inside."

"Here?" King asked. "We've got seventy-five employees in there working. You think you're going to march her in and no one will notice?"

"Then where? I don't know that I should be taking advice from you. You're the one who let them get away in the first place. My daughter is gone because of you. That cop is saying he's going to send her away. I'll never get her back."

King shook his head. "That's not going to happen. As long as you've got Sarah, you have leverage. He's not going to leave her here with you."

“So I shouldn’t deal with her now,” Lou said, a devilish grin passing over his face. “That’s what you want right? You care about her.”

“She’s your wife.”

“And?”

“And I’ve been like family to you for years. We’ve all been like family. I was there the night you guys met. At your wedding. When Emelia was born. I know you think I’m just some heartless meathead here to do the dirty work, but damn, Lou. She is like family to me. I’m not going to apologize for that.”

“Family doesn’t do what she did.”

“She didn’t do anything,” King protested. “If she did we’d both be in jail already. You need to let this go.”

“Oh, that’s what I need to do?”

“Yes. She’s not a rat.”

“You’re a fool.”

“I’d rather be a fool than the guy beating up his wife in the front seat of my car.”

“What did you say to me?” Lou took a step in, his hand in King’s face.

“I’ve sat by and watched you pull some terrible shit. Hell, I’ve been your trigger man every time you’ve needed it. You know I’m in this with you. But there has to be a line.”

“There is a line. A line you just crossed.” Lou shoved King’s shoulder backward and he stumbled almost comically. Then she realized that’s exactly what King was doing. Acting. He squared up with Lou as if he were intimidated, when she knew he shouldn’t be. He was trained in multiple types of martial arts and boxed at a high level. He had at least twenty pounds and three inches on Lou. But he was shaky on his feet and looking dodgy. When he took a swing at Lou and missed, he locked eyes with Sarah. Raising just one brow, he made his message clear.

Run. Go while she could. This would be a distraction and he'd keep it going long enough for her to get away. It could change everything in King's life. Everything he had was built around Lou. All his connections. Their money. Their power. If she ran again and he was to blame again, King's life as he knew it would be over.

Lou shoved him back and threw a punch that connected with King's jaw. It seemed instinctive as King swung back. This was her moment. As Lou stumbled backward, Sarah made her move. She leaned across and hit the button to unlock her door and jumped from the passenger seat. There was a hundred yards between her and the woods. If she could get in there, she could weave her way back toward a street she knew. Find a way to call Bowman.

All she heard behind her were the grunts of a fist fight as she ran with everything in her. Every ounce of strength she had left had to get her to the woods.

"Hey—" Lou was yelling. But she was gone. The leaves under her feet. The twigs pulling at her hair.

King had given her enough time to get away and in turn ruined his own life. It was more than she deserved. More than she could ever pay back.

CHAPTER TEN

“Was that enough time?” Bowman asked frantically as Nick held up his finger to get him to hang on for a second. “Did they trace the call?”

“They triangulated the towers. Hang on.” Nick was talking on the phone and scratching down information on a notepad.

“He’s got a warehouse. It’s on Fifth and Lincoln. Judging by the towers he’s pinging off of, that’s the best bet for where he is.”

“You’ve got to get Emelia somewhere safe. I’ll go after Sarah.”

“You can’t go on your own. He’s probably got every one of his guys there ready for you. We need a different plan.”

“There isn’t time for a plan. There is a good chance he’s tracked where we are. Where can you take her?”

“Carmen sent me the information on a safe house. It’s a few hours north. Part of their network. I can drop her off and then come—”

“You don’t leave her side.” Bowman dropped his voice. “If I do get Sarah back, I need to be able to look her in the eye and tell her that Emelia is with someone we can trust.”

“Okay,” Nick said reluctantly. “We’ll get to my car and I’ll text you when I’ve got her in the safe house.”

“Emelia,” Bowman said, turning around and touching her cheek gently. “I’m going to get your mom. Nick’s going to

take you somewhere to wait. You'll be safe there. Just keep thinking good thoughts."

"I want to go with you to get Mommy."

"You can't. That's what he wants."

"And it's a trick?" Emelia asked in a sad whisper.

"Yes."

She only nodded and took Nick's extended hand as he helped her out of the car. "Don't let him hurt her anymore," she pleaded.

"I won't."

Bowman put the address in his GPS and turned out of the parking lot in a rush. He had no idea what he would do when he found her. The urge to pummel Lou and make him pay was strong. But the need to get Sarah out of there had to be more important.

When his phone rang with an unknown number, he picked it up, an even mix of apprehension and hopefulness. There was an equal chance that it could be good or terrible news.

"Hello?"

"Bowman," Sarah cried. "I'm at the gas station on Blythe. The one with the big slushie sign on the roof."

"Sarah," he breathed out. "How did you—"

"He and King got in a fight. I made a run for it. I'm a damn mess. The guy at the gas station is letting me use the phone but he doesn't want to get involved. I've got to get out of here."

"I'm ten minutes out. Just stay there."

"He's got to be looking for me by now." She was panicking. He could hear it. And he couldn't blame her.

"I can't stay in the gas station. He wants me to go."

"Put him on the phone."

"No I—"

“Sarah, put the guy on the phone.”

“Hello?” a man with a shaky voice and a heavy accent asked.

“Listen to me. You put that woman in the back room. Lock the door. Don’t let anyone know she’s there until I get there. I’m driving a black SUV. White shirt. Blue pants. A black baseball cap.”

“I’m not getting involved in this.”

“If I get there and she is not locked safe in the back room, you’re going to lose everything.”

“Pardon me?”

“Everything you care about. Everything you love. Every penny. Everything. Whatever you are worried about happening to you if she stays, trust me it’ll be worse if you make her leave.”

“Fine. Fine. She will be here. Just hurry. Whoever did that to her face better not show up here.”

His gut sank. In all their time together, Sarah had shared about Lou’s violence. There had been a few bruises on her arm but Lou had been relatively distracted in the months that Bowman and Sarah had been connected. Now it had come to head and Bowman would be face to face with the aftermath of Lou’s aggression.

“I’ll be there soon. Just do what I said.”

Disconnecting the call, he hit the gas and blew through the red light. He’d nearly forgotten he couldn’t turn on his lights and weave through traffic as if he were responding to a call.

But there were blue lights. Behind him now. Bowman gripped the steering wheel and ran through what he would tell this officer. If it was a rookie, he’d play it tough. An old grisly officer near retirement would require some more finesse.

He pulled his car to the side of the road and wished he had his badge to flash. But as the officer stepped out, he realized he wouldn’t need it.

“Luke,” he called from his open window. “I’ve got a situation. I can’t explain right now but you need to trust me.”

“Bowman?” Luke asked, tipping his head to the side curiously. “You blew through that light.”

“I know. I’ve got an emergency.”

“What kind?” He had a concerned look that let Bowman know this was not going to be as simple as he hoped.

“I don’t know who I can trust on the force right now, so I can’t explain.”

“Are you accusing me of being dirty?” Luke scoffed. It was a laughable accusation. Luke was as clean as whistle and fast-tracked for the internal investigations department.

“Not you,” Bowman sighed. “But I can’t risk this right now. It’s life or death.”

“You’re not a cop anymore. You need to let the professionals handle it. This isn’t the Wild West.” That was always a favorite line for Luke.

“You might not be a dirty cop but you work with plenty of them. People willing to let a good woman, a mother, die just to protect their deals with a criminal. I didn’t get fired. I turned my badge in because I can’t look at myself in the mirror and know I let her down. You’ve got to let me go.”

Luke’s grimace didn’t waver. It was impossible to know if he was actually considering this request. “This isn’t how things are done.”

“He’s going to kill her, and your brothers in blue who have sold their soul to the devil don’t care. I need you to give a shit.”

“I do.” Luke shifted his weight, showing for the first time that he was conflicted. “I don’t endorse vigilante justice.”

“That’s not what I’m proposing. Sarah has found a way to get free of him. I just need to get to her before he does. I’m not looking for vengeance, just a way to get her out of here.”

“Fine,” Luke grunted. “But I’ve already called in your plates. If you’re right and this whole operation has been flagged by dirty cops, they’ll know you’re here.” His radio crackled.

“Officer 214, do you copy?”

“Yes dispatch, I copy.”

“There’s a BOLO out on that car you’ve just pulled over. Back up is en route.”

“I’ve already let him go,” Luke said into the radio on his shoulder. “What’s the BOLO for?”

“I don’t have that information,” the dispatcher said. “The officer that issued it has asked for details on the stop and which direction the driver headed.”

Bowman gestured north where the gas station was.

“He went south on Bailey. I think from there I saw him head to the interstate.”

“Copy,” dispatch said and the radio went quiet.

“They really want to find you.” Luke looked wounded with disappointment. His badge was everything to him. The brotherhood mattered. But it seemed with every passing year of his career it became clearer that people sullied the position. Tarnished it in irreparable ways that chipped away the integrity of the thing he loved.

“My dash cam is going to contradict the truth,” Luke sighed. “Hopefully no one digs around.”

“They’ll never suspect you misled them.” Bowman assured him. “They know the kind of officer you are.”

“It’s getting harder.”

“The force needs you. Don’t let their shit win out. I’ve got to go. Thanks again, Luke.”

“Don’t blow this.”

Bowman nodded and put the car in gear, racing toward the gas station. If they were all in on this, they’d be able to figure

out the last call he'd received on his cell phone was from that gas station. Luke had bought him a little time, but it still might not be enough.

Squealing into the parking lot of the gas station, he flung his car door open and hopped out while slamming the car into park. The bell over the door jingled as he shoved his way in.

“Where is she?”

The man behind the counter eyed him closely and then pointed to the back room. He tossed a set of keys and Bowman caught them as he headed to Sarah. He was finally within reach of her.

As the door pulled open his heart broke at the scene. It wasn't the bruise on her head or the swelling around her eye that did him in. Sarah was standing there with a large metal rack held over her head, ready to swing. A cornered animal, knowing that the first strike would be the only way to save herself.

“It's me,” Bowman replied, his hands up disarmingly.

Her raised arms shook, the heavy metal rack and the weight of danger too much suddenly for her to bear. “Bowman,” she cried out as the rack fell backward and she clamored to get to his arms.

Enveloping her completely in his embrace, he breathed a million apologies into her hair. He hadn't been the one to frighten her. He hadn't bruised her skin. But he hadn't been there to stop it either and the guilt slid around his neck like a noose.

“Emelia?” she asked, shaking in his arms.

“She's with Nick.”

“Who is Nick?” Sarah asked, pulling away from him to look up into his face.

“He's a friend. A friend with connections. They're on their way to a safe house. He has a whole network of people who can help. We just need to get out of here. Lou has more people

on his payroll than I expected. They're tracking us. They can't be far off."

"There are cops here," the clerk said, sounding relieved and annoyed at the same time. "I don't want this scaring my customers off. Just go with the cops and get out of here."

"No cops," Bowman growled. He fumbled with the keys and finally found one that would unlock the back door that led out into the alley. The problem was his car would be out of reach. "Stall them. Tell them we stole a car."

"I'm not—"

"You are." Bowman looked back at him with an intensity that couldn't be ignored. "They are not the good guys here. Tell them we stole a car. Give them a description."

"Fine," the clerk said, waving him out the back door. "Just go."

"Where are we going to go?" Sarah asked, still clinging to him.

"I'm not sure." Bowman admitted. "But we can't stay here."

"I have a friend," Sarah breathed out, her step lagging behind his by a beat or two. He propped her up the best he could. "Near the park. We can go there."

"Are you sure? Lou won't know about it?"

"No. He doesn't know anything about her."

He moved to the closest cross street that couldn't be seen from the gas station and hailed a cab. "I need to ditch my phone," Bowman said reluctantly. "I'll grab a burner when it's safe."

"Will we be able to reach the people who have Emelia?"

"When we are clear of this place we will."

He opened the door to the cab and gestured for her to get in. He looked down at his phone one more time and then tossed it down the sewer drain.

The ride was silent as Sarah squeezed so tightly on his hand his knuckles turned white. There was nothing to be said right now. They were holding their breath. Watching the rearview mirror. Wondering if they were being followed. If at any moment there would be a cop with blue lights flashing behind them. Or Lou ready to ram the cab with his SUV.

“Just here is fine,” Sarah instructed as the cab pulled up to the curb by the park. “We’ll walk the rest of the way.”

Bowman pulled the fare money out of his wallet and took a quick stock of how much cash he had. Everything was different now. With the cops involved Lou would have access to whatever information he wanted. If Bowman went to an ATM, they’d know where. If he tried to get his go-bag out of his apartment someone would be there waiting for him. Any attempt at reaching out to a friend or allies would be a trap they’d be snared in. For the first time he felt a wave of hopelessness. The only thing he had was his gun, a couple hundred dollars in his wallet, and the anger of a thousand hungry wolves.

“Her name is Carry,” Sarah explained quietly as they made their way up the stairs of an apartment building. Whoever this woman was, she didn’t look like she’d have the resources to bail them out in a real way.

“How do you know her?”

“It’s complicated. She helped me out years ago when Emelia was a baby. I hadn’t talked to her in years, but when we got away from King at the park I came here. She gave us money and some food. She’ll help. I know she will.”

As they reached the apartment, Bowman felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. The door jamb was splintered and the door ajar.

“No,” Sarah gasped. “Carry?” she called, pushing her way into the house far too boldly. Bowman knew she might be walking into a trap. Or about to see something so horrific it would change the chemistry of her soul in an irreparable way.

“Wait,” he said, snagging her arm but letting go instantly when she winced in pain. He unholstered his weapon and took a step in front of her. “Just let me clear the place first.”

He methodically went through each space of the small apartment and checked for any sign of a someone who might still be there. Or worse, the remains of someone.

There was a gasp behind them that sent Bowman spinning, pointing his weapon square at the woman standing with her hand covering her mouth.

“Carry,” Sarah shouted, running toward her. “You’re okay.”

“What the hell?” she asked, surveying her destroyed apartment. It had been completely tossed. Every drawer opened and emptied. All the furniture toppled.

“They must have been here,” Sarah said with tears in her eyes. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know how he figured out I was here. I swear I didn’t say anything. You were always my best kept secret.”

“I think it was me,” Carry said, dropping her head down in defeat. “I left a few minutes after you two last night. You forgot Emelia’s stuffed animal. I knew how much it meant to her and how traumatized she was already. I wanted to try to catch you. But I was jogging down the street with the thing in my hand and I swear there was a guy in a car who spotted me. He looked right at the stuffed animal and then just stared. It was eerie but I convinced myself I was being paranoid. He must have seen me come back into my apartment building and figured out which place was mine.”

“They must have been canvassing the area around the park,” Bowman explained. “They might have assumed you had planned this for some time and that you picked the park because you had someone close by who could help.”

“I’m so sorry,” Sarah said, squeezing Carry tightly. “I should never have gotten you involved in this. Your place is a mess.”

“They took it,” Carry said somberly. “I left the stuffed animal right there on the counter. Why would they take it?”

“So they can give it back to her,” Bowman replied through gritted teeth. “Lou thinks he’s going to find Emelia and that’s going to be his peace offering when he does.”

“And he’s sending me a message,” Sarah replied, looking down at her shoes. “I’m not safe anywhere. There will always be a way to find us.” She turned on Bowman. “How can you be sure Emelia is safe? Is there anything they can trace back to this Nick guy?”

Bowman furrowed his brow. “If they toss my apartment they might find something. I don’t know.”

“Who is he?”

“My sister’s boyfriend.”

“Your sister?” Bowman and Sarah had spent hours talking about every nuanced detail of their lives. That’s all they had. Time to talk. A place to hide in their memories and trade off stories of trauma and pain.

“Cleo.”

“I thought you didn’t have any contact with her?”

“I didn’t. She showed up. Nick and his people have resources to help families like you and Emelia. They know what they are doing and they know how to do it clandestinely. I trust him. I never would have sent her off with him if I didn’t.”

“Families like mine,” Sarah said, her eyes dropping down to the floor again. “I can’t believe this is where I am. I can’t believe I’ve done this.” She gestured around the destroyed room.

“You didn’t do this.”

“Of course I did. You don’t only choose the man who will be your husband, you pick your child’s father. And I picked a monster.”

“We can’t stay here.” Bowman felt a wave of urgency at the thought of that monster. He holstered his weapon and took Sarah by the hand. “If they know about this place, they know you might come back here. We have to go.”

“Carry?” Sarah asked, a one-word question that held so many more within it. What will Carry do? What will happen to her now?

“You’ve got a car?” Bowman asked, looking down at the keys in her hand. “We need to get out of town fast.”

“I can’t just leave town,” Carry said, chuckling nervously. “I have a job. I have a life here. I’m going to call the police and report that my apartment was broken into. Let them pull prints. I’ll tell them about Lou.”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Bowman apologized. “Lou is a powerful man. They are waiting for you to call this in. It won’t go anywhere. You’re in danger. You need to come with us.”

“Thanks, but no. I’m staying here. I knew what I was getting into the first time I brought Sarah up here years ago. When I said I would help her anyway I could, I meant it. I knew the risk. But I’m not running away from my life.”

“When we leave here, you’ll be one of the only links between Sarah and where she might have gone. They’ll torture you for what you might know. Kill you when you don’t prove useful. I can’t leave you here. I’m sorry.”

Sarah put her hand on Carry’s shoulder. “He’s right. Lou is ruthless. A snake we’ve just stepped on and he’s going to strike anyone he can reach. We need to go.”

“I can’t believe this,” Carry groaned. “Go where? You’re not a cop? You can’t give us witness protection or anything. I’m supposed to just pack a bag and walk away from my life?”

“For now,” Bowman apologized. “Until I can bring some resolution to this.”

“Resolution?” Carry scowled. “What does that mean?”

“When I kill him,” Bowman said, tipping his chin back confidently. “Then you can come back. I don’t intend to wait

very long to do that.”

Carry snapped her mouth shut. “What do I pack?”

“Whatever you can get into one bag in the next five minutes. See if you’ve got some extra clothes for Sarah. Any cash you’ve got. Ditch your phone.”

“Ditch my phone?”

“Anyone you call from this point on, they’ll know about. You’ll be putting those people in grave danger. Ditch your phone.”

“I’m so sorry,” Sarah sobbed. “I promise we’ll make this right.”

“Five minutes,” Bowman said, as he stepped into the hallway, waiting for someone to come charging up it. Ready to neutralize whatever threat came their way. But also knowing if they didn’t move fast, he’d be outnumbered and outgunned.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sarah

There was a sense of doom weighing the car down. Maybe it was the tears streaming down Carry's cheeks or the way Bowman drove with one hand on his gun that lay on the center console.

"I never should have challenged him," Sarah said, every syllable filled with defeat. "I'm ruining so many lives just to save my own. It's not worth it."

"It wasn't just your life. Emelia would not have been safe around him forever. There would come a point where he'd have turned on her too. You had a responsibility to get out of there." Bowman offered her a gentle look.

"I don't blame you," Carry said with a sniffle. "I just can't believe this is happening."

"We need to get clear of the city. I'm sure they're looking for your car by now." Bowman pulled into the mall parking garage and took his small utility knife from his pocket.

"Why are we stopping here?" Carry asked, the edge of her voice sharp. "I thought we had to get out of town as fast as possible."

"We do. But I'm sure they're looking for your car by now." He hopped out and crouched down by the rear of the parked car near them. A minute later he was back in the driver's seat. "I had to switch the plates. That'll keep us from

getting popped by every cop out right now that's been told to be on the lookout for it."

"Smart," Sarah said, nodding her head. "We're going to have to try to stay one step ahead."

"How much cash do we have?" Bowman asked, looking in the rearview mirror at Carry.

"I have three hundred and twenty."

He looked down at his watch. It had served as an important reminder over the years. The only thing he had left from his father. Every day he put it on was meant to ground him to the idea that he was a better man. Had to be. Temptation to make quick money or betray his morals would never win out.

"I've got to get some more cash. We need burner phones. Gas. I don't know when we'll get to the safe house. We might need a place to crash tonight."

He pulled the car into a seedy looking parking lot a few miles down the road.

"A pawn shop?" Carry asked.

"I'll be right out. Keep the doors locked. Stay down."

Carry pulled the baseball cap on her head down a little lower. "This is insane."

"I know it is. I promise the second we can end this, we will. I didn't know where else to go. You were so kind to me all those years ago. It stuck with me. It saved me."

"I've never seen anyone look so sad," Carry replied. "So scared."

"I should have left then."

"Why did you go back?" Carry asked, and then bit at her lip. "Don't answer that. I know exactly why you did and it's dumb to ask. Domestic abuse is complicated. Leaving is when you're at the greatest risk. It's not simple and I don't want to judge you."

"You've got every reason to judge me. Or be wildly angry. I've put you in a terrible position."

“I can’t lose my job.” Carry covered her eyes. “My family is going to see my apartment and think the worst. I won’t put them through that. I need to call them.”

“Bowman knows what he’s doing. I am sure the second we have a safe way to do it, you’ll be able to get a message home. But he’s right. Lou will know you’re with us. He’ll look for any contact you have with home and try to exploit that to find us.”

“It’s cruel to leave them wondering what happened to me. I won’t do it. There has to be a way. He said burner phones, right? I can call them once we have those.”

“We’ll find a way. But Lou might be waiting for just that. For a number from some burner phone that calls your family. These phones are only safe when people don’t know who the number is connected to. Once that’s discovered, they are just as traceable as any other phone.”

“I won’t go longer than tomorrow without talking to them. If you really feel guilty for putting me in this position, you’ll do anything possible to make that happen. I’m not asking for much, but I will let my family know I’m safe. That’s not negotiable.”

“I understand,” Sarah said, her gut peppered with a buckshot worth of remorse. Her bad decisions had created this tidal wave and now it was bowling over more innocent people. She had endless questions for Bowman. Questions about Nick. About how he’d contacted Cleo again. The history he’d shared with Sarah had been dark and complicated. And now these people had her daughter.

When Bowman sank back into the driver’s seat, he handed over two burner phones and a wad of cash. “We’ll get the phones set up and I’ll make a call. Nick gave me a number. Someone in his family that can connect us with him.”

“I need a phone,” Carry said, straightening up in her seat. “Which one is mine?”

“Let’s get on the road, and once we have a decent plan, we can talk about what other calls we can make.”

“Why are you deciding what calls can be made? I’m calling my family.” Carry folded her arms over her chest defiantly. “I’m not a prisoner here.”

“You aren’t.” Bowman sighed. “But I’m assuming you’ve never had a powerful, blood-thirsty man trying to chase you down before. Look how they found you this morning. You had no idea that holding a stuffed animal was going to turn into what it did. Every choice we make from this point on has to be calculated. We have to stay a step ahead of them.”

“Tomorrow,” Carry said coolly. “I’m calling home by tomorrow. Can you even imagine what my family will think when my apartment looks like that, I’m nowhere to be found, and I don’t show up for my shift at work?”

Bowman nodded. “I get it. I promise the moment I can make that work, I will. Just one step at a time right now.”

Carry sat back with a thud and closed her eyes. Sarah wanted to open the car door and leap out onto the pavement. Everyone would be better off without her. Everyone. Even her daughter. If Bowman was right and Nick had some sort of resource to rescue her child, these strangers could offer her more than Sarah had ever been able to.

Before they met, Bowman had a career he seemed to love and a life not plagued with chaos. Now he was out of a job, running for his life, and caught up in her mess. So was Carry. Without realizing it, her breath was growing quick and her hands were shaky.

“He’s the problem,” Bowman whispered as he covered her hand with his. “Lou did this, not you. And there is nowhere in the world I would rather be than getting you away from him.”

“But you didn’t know you were getting into—”

“Of course I did,” Bowman corrected. “And I knew it from the first time I saw you. You didn’t trap me. You didn’t trick me. I knew the second I handed you the phone that day in the restaurant that I would give up any part of my life to try to save yours.”

“Why?” she whispered back.

“I don’t know,” he admitted with a shrug. “I just knew. And I still know.” She relaxed her hand and laced her fingers in his.

They’d built something impossibly beautiful in the harshest environment. Like a cactus flower, thriving when all odds were stacked against it. Their phone calls had been her lifeblood. The only thing to sustain her when life didn’t seem worth living anymore. And now here he was. In the flesh. Driving her away from everything that had been dragging her down.

There was finally some hope. Just a sliver of it. But it was something she could hold on to now, and she’d grip it as tightly as she was holding his hand.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Bowman

The sun was setting. He had no idea where they were going. He knew the safe house was a few hours north, so north was the direction he had driven. But now he needed something more. He'd stopped for gas and was pacing around as he made the call.

"This is Bowman," he said, unsure of what the voice on the other end of the phone might answer with.

"Are you safe?" the woman asked seriously. "Do you have Sarah with you?"

"I do. We've made it out of town but we're certainly not in the clear."

"Do you think anyone is following you?"

"I've made sure there isn't," Bowman answered.

"Your phones?"

"We ditched them. This is a brand-new burner. I bought it at a pawn shop. There should be no tie back to me on it."

"Any other devices that could be tracked?"

"None."

"The vehicle you're driving?"

"That's a bit of a problem. It belongs to a woman who they know is tied to Sarah. She's with us actually. Carry Williams. I

swapped out the license plate so it won't be easy to match to a BOLO."

"There is someone else with you?" the woman seemed put off by this. "That's not what I discussed with Nick."

"It was a split-second decision. Her apartment had been tossed and they would have used her to try to get information about Sarah and Emelia's whereabouts if we left her behind. This man's tactics are savage. I had to make a judgement call."

The silence on the other end of the line made him wonder how fickle this agreement might be. Nick had made it sound like a sure thing.

Finally she spoke again. "I'll need her information. Social. Date of birth. I'll run a background on her."

"She's just caught up in this," Bowman argued. "Carry is no threat." He looked in the car where Carry had fallen asleep and felt the knot in his stomach tighten. The decision to bring her along felt right at the time, but now he was questioning if he'd put her in more danger by bringing her along.

"Get me that information. I can't send you to the safe house until she's cleared."

"I can tell you—"

"That's not how this works. You don't tell us, we tell you. There is no way for you to imagine how delicate the ecosystem of our organization is. It requires impenetrable trust. A tight circle. No surprises. No changes to the plan."

"Sarah is desperate to get to her daughter."

"Emelia is our priority right now. She's been removed from the situation. There are no known leaks of her location. She's a minor in imminent danger who is now secure. We're not going to jeopardize that because you made a split-second choice to change the plan."

"I didn't have a choice," Bowman bit back. "Was I supposed to leave this woman to get tortured or killed by a maniac looking to hunt his family down?"

“I didn’t say you made the wrong choice. All I’m saying is that won’t domino into more rash moves. Emelia is safe. You can tell Sarah that. Text me the information I need. I can set you up with a place to sleep and I’ll wire some cash. That’s the best I can do right now. It’s up to you to keep them safe tonight.”

Bowman wanted to argue. This was ridiculous. Carry was a scared woman who’d stuck her neck out for a stranger and was now paying the price. This was just prolonging the inevitable and causing them to be more vulnerable to the people chasing them.

He could think of a million reasons he hated this, but if he were being honest with himself the idea of telling Sarah that she wouldn’t be able to see Emelia tonight was by far the worst. How many times could you break a heart before it turned to dust and simply blew away?

“The sooner you can get this sorted out the better,” Bowman said. “I appreciate all your doing. We’d be screwed otherwise.”

“But?”

“I really want to get Sarah to her daughter. They’ve both been through hell and I want to end it.”

“There’s a process to these things.”

“And where will they go? What will happen next? A safe house doesn’t stay secure forever.”

“You’ll know soon enough. Just understand that our process has been perfected over decades. Unfortunately, this is not a new problem. People have been running for their lives through all of human history. We’ve learned the hard way that risks, even small ones, can cost people everything. I’ve already checked in with Nick; the child is doing really well. She’s well fed and playing happily. Pass that message along and wait for a message from me with the money wire information and a place to stay.”

“Thank you,” Bowman sighed, disconnecting the call.

“Did you get the address?” Sarah asked, opening the car door as if she’d been trying her best to wait patiently. “Can we go to Emelia?”

Carry stirred and sat up, wiping the sleep from her eyes. “Where are we going?”

“We’ll crash around here for the night,” Bowman said, knowing his expression was giving him away. “We can’t meet up with Nick and Emelia yet. Tomorrow. Tonight we just need to get some rest.”

“We’re not that far outside of town,” Carry argued, now fully awake. “If they’re still looking for us—or worse, found a way to track us—we’ll be screwed. You said there was a safe house. That there was a network of people able to help us.”

“There is,” Bowman said, his eyes fixed on Sarah and the way her shoulders deflated with sadness. “It’s just one night. They aren’t going to find us.”

“And if they do?” Carry asked, clutching her chest. “Then what?”

Bowman finally looked her way, leveling his gaze so she understood just how serious he was. “Then I’ll kill them. All of them. Whoever he sends.”

Sarah sniffled and drew in a deep breath. “It’s just one night,” she repeated. “I’ll be able to see Emelia tomorrow.” It wasn’t quite a question but she certainly sounded unsure.

“I promise,” Bowman said, reaching a hand out and hoping desperately that she would trust him enough to do the same.

When her hand was in his, he squeezed it gently. “Tomorrow.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sarah

There hadn't been a single night of her daughter's life that they had spent apart. Not one. No amount of reassurance from Bowman about how well Emelia was doing seemed to help. She wanted to believe him. To picture her daughter in a warm house with a cozy fireplace and swing set in the backyard. A fridge full of food and no one yelling or throwing things. Maybe a bunk bed. Other children to play with. All of that sounded like a pleasant reprieve from her previous life. A well-deserved break from the chaos and fear.

But until she saw it with her own eyes, she'd never be able to relax. Exhaustion wouldn't be enough to get her body to settle. Tears wouldn't be enough to get her eyes to close. Even Bowman's arms draped around her couldn't get her to sit still.

"You've got to eat," Bowman said, gesturing with his chin to the take-out subs he'd picked up. "Or at least have some water. Your body is going to shut down soon and Emelia needs you to be strong when you see her tomorrow."

That was a smart tactic, but even that couldn't get her to eat. Her stomach was knotted closed. "I can't."

"Then you should lie down," Bowman said. The furnished apartment was devoid of any personal touch. An intentional blank slate. Corporate housing meant for a short stopover. Just a place to lay your head. They were lucky for it though. It was

a secure building with security guards. Two bedrooms, one Carry had already gone to sleep in. A decent view.

Sarah was starting to understand who these people were. The thought that went into their work. How quickly they could work and how powerful they were. Within an hour of his call, Bowman had been wired a substantial amount of cash and a door code to enter the apartment. She'd been around powerful people from the moment she met Lou. The entire Rossi organization was full of people who had an abundance of cash and were willing to do whatever they were told.

People willing to risk it all out of loyalty for what Lou had built. They cowered in his presence. They answered his call no matter the time of night. They compromised their morals. They sold their souls. That was the only side of power she'd ever seen.

Using it for good, to save lives, was something completely foreign. To spend money, time, and resources to help strangers with their sometimes self-imposed issues seemed impossible to believe. Everything Lou had ever done was from a place of self-importance and for the purpose of getting more. More money. More control.

“Why do they do this?” Sarah asked, finally taking a seat on the couch next to Bowman. She hadn't even allowed her body to examine what this proximity to him made her feel. There had been so many years of fighting her own feelings. Shoving them down. Putting them last. Turning them off. Disassociating from herself to the point that she'd forgotten what it felt like to be in the presence of a man she found attractive. Who she felt safe with.

Wasn't her stomach supposed to flutter with excitement? Didn't she want to cup his stubble-covered cheek and kiss his lips? He was the man who had risked it all to make sure she could escape her life.

“I don't honestly know a lot about why they do what they do. Cleo works for them. It's Nick's family. Or partly anyway. I don't know where they get their money or how they've built all this. But apparently, it's been in operation for a long time

and obviously their network is extensive. Cleo has always been the best of our family, even when we were children. If she works for them, I know they are good people doing it for the right reasons.”

“And why us?” Sarah rested her head on the back of the couch as she closed her eyes. “I keep wondering why I’m getting this chance when so many others don’t.”

“I’m not sure. But I am glad you are.” He brushed her bangs away from her face and his warm hand lingered. The smell of his cologne gave the first glimmer of those butterflies. Afraid for him to pull his hand away, she raised hers to hold his there.

“Your life would have been better if you never handed me that phone.”

“My life is still happening. Maybe in this moment it’s not perfect, but it’s far from over. We’re going to get on the other side of all of this. You’re going to get the life you deserve with Emelia off somewhere you can stop worrying about the next bad thing that might happen. You can laugh and relax and enjoy. You can breathe.”

“And where will you be?” The question was heavy. Unrealistic. Unfair. Bowman had already done so much for her. Now here she was asking him to tell the future. To commit to something she had no right to ask him for.

“Hopefully I’ll be there to see it,” he said through a smile. “I’m in this for the long haul if you’ll have me around.”

“You don’t have to say that.”

“I mean it.” His face was gravely serious.

“You don’t really know me. You shouldn’t have to tie yourself to me and Emelia.”

“I do know you. We’ve spent hours of our lives talking to each other on the phone. I’ve told you things I’ve never shared with another soul. You’re an incredible mother. Brave. We laughed so much even though things were extremely serious. I know it was unconventional, but it worked for me. Talking to

you changed me. And it was for the better. I'm not looking to let that go."

A tear streaked down her cheek and it wasn't lost on her that the path cut directly over a fresh bruise. "You changed me too," she whimpered. "I don't think I was brave until you believed I could be."

"We don't have to figure every moment out. But know that whatever your future is, if there is a spot for me in it, I'd like to be there. The only thing I know for sure is I'll never stop until I know you and Emelia can live a life without fear. Whatever it takes. Anyone who wants to get to you will always have to go through me."

The urge to kiss him was impossible to tamp down. Men had always been something to fear in her life. Suddenly Bowman had showed her there were people willing to stand in the gap for her and her daughter.

Leaning in, she put her hand on his chest and let her lips crush against his. The passion of pent-up gratitude and attraction overtook her. And he too seemed bowled over by the bubbling up of everything they'd been brewing between them.

Groaning with pleasure he slid her onto his lap with ease. The way her hand grasped at his bicep seemed to send him into a hungry frenzy. She'd been waiting for ages to feel his lips on hers. For his hands to explore her body. To know what it felt like to be his only desire.

The tension of their passion was compounding by the second. She needed him to take her. To replace the pain in her heart with pleasure in her body. Sarah wanted to feel good. To tingle and feel alive and adored. She couldn't be certain she deserved it but she was damn sure that was what she wanted. Needed.

Unfortunately, her body was still the vessel that had endured the violence of reality. The punching bag that could not be healed with Bowman's intentions.

"Ouch," she yelped in pain as he shifted her weight in his lap to have more access to her sweetest pleasure spots.

Something she was desperate for. But she couldn't pretend she wasn't hurt. She couldn't hold in the stabbing pain in her ribs. It was too sharp to ignore. Wanting to be lost in the dream world of passion could not really transport her to a place where she wasn't injured.

"God," Bowman said, his entire body tensing and pulling away. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"It's fine," she tried, her breath still broken, partly from the pain and partly from their deep passionate kisses. "I'm okay." She held one hand to her ribs and leaned in to kiss him.

"No," Bowman said, leaning back. "You're not fine. You're hurt. That matters. It matters more than anything else. I'm never going to hurt you."

"You didn't hurt me. I was already hurt; you didn't know. It doesn't matter."

He cupped his hands gently to her cheeks, demanding every ounce of her attention, his eyes fixed on hers. "Sarah, I would die before I ever made you cry out in pain. Your pain is my pain. It matters."

Sarah's heart ached as she tried to explain. "I don't want you to think that this is just some game I'm playing to mess with you. I'm not trying to—"

"That's not what I'm thinking at all."

She remembered every night of arguing with Lou about intimacy. He felt entitled to her body in every way. Every rejection from her was like a shot across the bow, the start of a war. It made saying no seem like more work than saying yes. He accused her of trying to punish him by withholding any bit of herself from him. He'd gaslight her into thinking there was something wrong with her for not being more interested in him. That she was broken. And now she realized he was right. But he'd been the one to break her.

Bowman laced his fingers with hers. "What do you want right now? That's all I want to know. Not what you think I want. Not what you think you owe me. If you're really worried about my feelings, know that the absolute worst thing I can

think of right now is you doing anything besides exactly what you want.”

“I don’t know what to do with that,” Sarah admitted. “That’s not what I know.”

“I’ll spend every minute I’m in your life making sure you know you’re allowed to want things. You’re allowed to demand things. To say no to things. To expect things. You’re a whole person, Sarah. You can have needs. Wants. Preferences. I know that might seem scary to you, but I’m a patient man. I’ll be here to remind you.”

“That sounds like a lot of work for you.”

“It’s about the pay off,” Bowman admitted, looking reserved for the first time. “If I get to see you come into the woman you’re meant to be, if I have a front row seat to you healing, it’ll be worth every difficult moment. Take a minute. What do you want right now?”

Sarah didn’t know where inside of herself to find that answer. She knew the parts of her brain that could anticipate Lou’s moods. There was a database worth of his preferences. His rules. His demands.

She knew her daughter’s nuances. The items that brought her the most comfort. The snacks she never tired of. The song she wanted to hear in the car and the one she wanted sung every night at bedtime. Without hesitation she knew when the bath was the perfect temperature. When the monsters under the bed were creaking around and needed to be scared off. The direction to cut the sandwich. How high to push her on the swing. How long to let the hide-and-seek game go on. Sarah could write a book about what other people wanted and needed. But for her, the pages were blank.

“I don’t know.” There was no point in being anything but transparent with Bowman. That’s how they’d connected in the first place. Unabashed vulnerability. The phone had created this shield. At least for her it had. Not having to look someone in the eye while you bare your soul makes it a little easier.

“That’s okay too.” He shifted her gently off his lap. “Why don’t we just sit? Maybe you’ll fall asleep.”

“Maybe,” she replied, resting her head on his chest. The thumping of his heart was calm and melodic. Hers was racing as quickly as her mind. But he was calm. At peace with the moment. She envied that.

He had been right. Sleep had come. Not all at once like a light switch being shut off but a sinking. The dimming of daylight into dusk into darkness. With his arm draped over her body, his warmth radiating through her, she let herself go. Only because she knew when she fell, he would catch her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Bowman

The realization that he'd underestimated the situation didn't sit right with him. He'd been naive to think his presence in Sarah's life would be some healing elixir. He was no more than a Band-Aid on a sliced artery. So much more would need to be done to repair what Lou had broken.

As she slept in his arms, he pondered what it might look like when the distance between them and her past was great enough to finally allow her some peace. Bowman had never really been the kind of man to settle down. Life moved fast and he liked it that way. He'd spent his whole young life being violently uprooted no matter how tightly he clung to the earth.

That constant moving kept him restless but it was familiar. He'd told Sarah all about it. Their late nights on the phone were filled with conversations about his father. About the man he was afraid to become. The pain he'd caused other people. The apologies he never made. The loneliness that came from having to break away from your family to survive.

Bowman considered carrying her to the empty bed. She deserved the best night's sleep she could get. Yet selfishly he didn't want to let her go.

"Did you hear that?" Carry asked in a hoarse whisper as she stumbled out of the second bedroom. "What was that?"

“What?” Bowman asked, trying to keep his voice low enough not to wake Sarah. But the rumble in his chest was enough to send her sitting up in shock.

“Bo?” Sarah asked, clinging to his arm.

“You’re good,” he assured her as he reluctantly slid out from under her and got his bearings.

“What did you hear?” he probed impatiently. They were on the twelfth floor of a well-protected apartment no one would be able to connect them to. They’d done all they could to be off the grid. Any noise they were hearing was unlikely to be cause for alarm. But judging by Carry’s face, he was sure it was bad.

“I heard people in the hallway. Men.” She was whispering and pressing herself to the farthest wall as if she might disappear into it if she was lucky.

“It’s probably just other people who live in the building,” Sarah said, but she looked unconvinced of her own explanation.

Mostly for their sake, Bowman took his weapon from the counter and moved toward the front door. He hadn’t heard anyone in the hallway. Carry’s imagination was likely super charged by the adrenaline coursing through her. He raised a finger to his lips and gestured for them to stay silent.

The peephole showed no one in the hallway. He couldn’t hear a thing. The door was fortified with two extra deadbolts and tamper-proof hinges. He’d noticed earlier the windows by the fire escape were also secured with extra equipment. No detail had been overlooked. And another feature he spotted would be just what they needed right now. A phone by the door that connected directly to the security desk.

“This is apartment 1205,” Bowman explained when the security guard picked up and greeted him. “Has anyone been up to this floor recently? Anyone we need to be concerned about?”

“I’m sorry, sir,” the guard answered. “We just did a sweep. It’s customary every two hours. They aren’t meant to disturb

you but they did just clear your floor. Pardon us for the trouble.”

“No trouble at all,” Bowman said, pretending not to be exhausted with worn-thin nerves. “Glad to know you’re on it.”

“Good night, sir.”

He hung up the phone and turned to the women who looked like trembling leaves about to be swept off a branch.

“It was the security team. They were just doing their job. They say this floor is clear. You can go back to bed. This place is safe.”

“I want to call home,” Carry said, her hand shaking as she pulled her sweater closed around her. “You said we’re safe, right? So let me tell my family that.”

“I’m sorry, Carry,” Bowman said, shaking his head. “Not yet.”

“I made a mistake.” Her lip quivered with emotion. “I want to leave.”

“You can’t,” Sarah said, standing and clasping her hands together as if she were pleading. “Carry, you won’t be safe if you go back home. They’ll know you were with us. Lou won’t stop until you tell him what you know.”

“I don’t know anything,” she cried. “You’re going to some safe house. I don’t know where it is. Let me take my car and go.”

Bowman knew what shock looked like. How extreme reactions were born out of terror. Carry was spiraling. It was all finally hitting her. The finality of what had happened. Processing each part of her life that was going to drastically change until this was settled.

“Carry, we are in the best situation possible, considering the circumstances. Take a few deep breaths. You are safe.”

“No, we aren’t,” Carry shouted back. “What if I would have been home when they came to my apartment? What do you think they would have done to me?”

“You weren’t home. Trust me, what ifs are the death of peace. Don’t go down that rabbit hole. Just look around this room. Find something to focus on. Think about the security downstairs. The fact that no one knows where we are.”

“The people you keep calling know,” Carry said, pacing around the room. “Who are they? You don’t know. You sent her kid off with them without knowing who they are. That’s insane. He’s keeping you from your daughter.” She spun and waved a finger in Sarah’s face.

“That’s not true,” Sarah said, but the shake in her voice let him know the thought had crossed her mind.

“What do you really know about this guy? You’re trusting him with your life and how many times have you met in person before this?”

“I know him,” Sarah argued back. “He’s risked everything for me.”

“For you?” Carry asked. “Or for the chance at being a hero? What do you think will happen to the cop who locks up a criminal like your husband? A career-making case. A rockstar.”

“I’m not a cop anymore,” Bowman reminded her, trying not to take this attack personally. Carry hadn’t asked for any of this. She was being kind. Trying to do the right thing.

“They’ll be begging you to take your badge back when you take down Lou. That’s still your plan, I am sure.”

“My only plan is keeping everyone here alive.”

“You want him in jail or dead.” Carry put her hand up to her temple as if she were trying to keep her head from spinning. “You took his child. He’s never going to stop until he gets her back. Never. You really think you can beat him at this?”

“One night at a time.” Bowman held up his hands trying to get her to pump the brakes. “Tomorrow morning we’re going to move to the safe house. Make a plan with people who know what they’re doing. They have resources and expertise.”

“So they say,” Carry huffed. “This is an awful lot of blind trust.”

“It is,” Sarah agreed, wrapping her arms around herself. “But what else do we have?”

“I can leave here anytime.” Carry planted her hands on her hips. “You can’t keep me here.”

“Right now, I can,” Bowman said, sounding apologetic. “Leaving would jeopardize your safety and Sarah’s.”

“So I’m your prisoner.”

“It’s not like that.” Bowman was ready to lose it. He was short on sleep and high on adrenaline. “Please go back to bed. This will all look better in the morning.”

“Whatever,” Carry said, storming off in a huff. “Tomorrow I am calling my family. You’re not going to stop me.”

The slam of her bedroom door was the exclamation point to end her argument.

An itchy kind of silence filled the space between Sarah and him. The quiet that makes you squirm from all the unsaid things.

“I should sleep,” Sarah whispered finally. “You want the bed?”

“No,” Bowman said, gesturing with his chin to the couch. “I’m good out here.”

“Night,” she said with her back turned to him.

Now he was the one ready to spiral. The only thing he could do was hold on to the reality of the situation. Death was knocking on every door Sarah stood in front of and he was the one to keep it at bay. They were blindly trusting people. Someone else was calling the shots, and while that didn’t sit completely right with him, he also understood that David and Goliath was hard to pull off and allies were what shifted the tides in your favor.

Nick could be trusted. Carmen was the professional. It was the right thing to do to rely on them. It would pay off. It would

work out. It had to.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sarah

The sun filtered in through the blinds but that hadn't been what woke her. She was up well before it ever crested the horizon. It was the chilly side of the bed where Emelia should have been that had her stirring awake.

Bowman was knocking lightly on the bedroom door and she considered pretending not to hear it. Not because she didn't want to see him or that she was angry. The decisions were out there on the other side of that door. Possible disappointments. More challenges. More running. But the only way to get back to her daughter was through that door, so even if it was on fire she'd go.

"Come in," she said, shifting the blankets as she sat up.

"Did you sleep?"

"A little," she said, rubbing her eyes. "Have you heard from Carmen?"

"She just called." His voice was low as he closed the door behind him. "She has a preliminary background report on Carry. It took some digging but through her address and some research on her employer we got what we needed."

"This is crazy," Sarah snapped. "I never should have gone to her the day we ran. It was selfish. Look what it's done."

"It's good news," Bowman reported with a half-smile. "She is what she says she is. A nurse practitioner with a clean

employment and criminal report. No red flags initially.”

“So we can go to Emelia? And then what happens?”

“Carmen wanted to wait until they could dig a little deeper but Emelia has a stomach bug.”

“What?” Sarah asked, clutching her chest. “Is she all right?”

“She’s with a very kind family and the father is a doctor. He said she just has an upset stomach and is doing fine. Low grade fever. Nothing to worry about.”

“I am worried.” Sarah shook her head. “If she’s sick, she needs me there. Right now.”

“I know and reluctantly Carmen agreed. We can go as soon as we’re ready,” Bowman said, beaming with eagerness. “From there we will move on to a more permanent location farther away. Somewhere Lou has no contacts or power. I don’t know more about the process from there. Carmen said in some situations they will work behind the scenes to make sure charges are brought against the offender, but it’s not likely in Lou’s case. For politicians and high-powered businessmen, they can sometimes step in, but a career criminal opens them up to more risk than they can afford.”

“I wouldn’t have any expectation that they’d try to take Lou down. Look how many people have tried and failed before them.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

“Carry was right,” Sarah said, feeling terrible for how her words changed Bowman’s expression.

“Sarah—” he began, but she cut him off.

“He can’t lose; he will never stop looking for us.”

“I know,” Bowman said, shocking her with his agreement. “I’ve known men like Lou my whole life. They are their most dangerous when they feel like they’ve lost and are being disrespected.”

The conversation died right there. There was nothing else to say. Just the acknowledgement of what they'd done and what it might mean for their future.

"I'm going to wake Carry up. I told Carmen she needs a way to contact home and let them know she's all right without giving away our location or what's happening."

"And?"

"She's working it out now. She thinks if we use one of the burner phones and then ditch it immediately after, as long as she keeps it brief, it could work. Otherwise an email or a video message that's sent and routed through some global IP addresses might be encrypted enough. How is Lou with tech?"

Sarah nodded. "He uses a firm. This kid he went to high school with who developed a few apps that blew up. Phone tapping, tracing, and cracking encryption has been what has kept Lou one step ahead. He always said it was what separated him from his competition and put him on top. A lot of the other guys pushing dope and laundering money were way behind the times."

"Then we'll need to be cautious." Bowman clapped his hands together. "But right now, let's get to Emelia."

Sarah's heart fluttered at the joy in his eyes. Her goal was his. That was a feeling so unfamiliar to her. To be fighting on the same side of the battle instead of against each other.

"My girl," she said, covering her mouth as the tears filled her eyes. "I can't believe we're actually going to get a fresh start."

"We'll be on the road within the hour." Bowman took a step forward and then paused. They'd left things so undefined and the lack of conversation last night created an awkward air in the room.

"Okay," she said, turning away and blushing a bit. "I'll get ready."

The awkwardness continued in the car. Carry was visibly frustrated and painfully quiet. The progression of their plan

wasn't bringing her any kind of peace and Sarah couldn't blame her.

"How far out are we?" Sarah asked, touching Bowman's shoulder gently. "I'm really anxious to get to her."

"Just a few more minutes. It's a neighborhood next to this really cute main street, I guess."

"I hope she's feeling better," Sarah said, a swell of mom guilt washing over her as she thought of Emelia having to take some liquid fever reducer without her. She hated medicines and Sarah had mastered a technique of distraction and comfort that always made it more manageable. These strangers wouldn't have known any of that.

"I'm sure she is." One of the burner phones in Bowman's pocket began to ring and he fished it out as he pulled into the driveway of the address Carmen had given him. Sarah was just yards away from reuniting with her daughter and starting her new life.

"Hello?"

Sarah could hear a loud voice on the other end of the line.

"Abort," Carmen said, her voice fierce and demanding. "Do not go to the safe house."

"Why?" Bowman asked, gripping the steering wheel tightly. "What happened. We just pulled in."

"Dammit," Carmen yelled. "Get Nick and Emelia and get the hell out of there. But you have to leave Carry behind."

Carry sat up straight in the back seat and clutched her bag. "What's going on?"

"Bo, what's the matter?" Sarah shrieked in terror. "Is it Emelia?"

Bowman held up his hand and clutched the phone tighter. "Carmen, tell me what's going on."

"It's Carry," she reported. "We should have waited."

"I don't understand."

“And I don’t have time to explain it to you. They know where you are. You led them right to Emelia. Get out of there. We’ll extract the family living there and make sure they are safe. You just go.”

“Sarah get out of the car.” Bowman hung up the phone and flung the car door open and ran toward the house. “Nick,” he called. “Nick, we need to roll now.”

Sarah was on his heels and still clamoring for answers. He didn’t have any to give.

A man spilled out of the house, pulling on a hoodie and looking alarmed. “What’s going on.”

“Nick, get Emelia. We need to leave now. They know where we are.”

Nick didn’t asked questions. His red hair was messy and his bare feet were already moving back into the house. A moment later he was outside with Emelia in his arms and fight in his eyes.

“We need your car,” Bowman said, tugging Sarah along. She wanted to hold her child. To kiss her red cheeks and see if her stomach was better. But she was nestled in Nick’s arms and clinging to his neck. They were moving too quickly to stop and hand her over.

“What about Carry?” Sarah asked, looking back at the other car. “We can’t leave her.”

“We have to.” Bowman opened the back door of Nick’s car and stepped aside for Sarah to get in and strap her daughter into the booster seat.

“Why?”

“Get in Sarah,” Bowman demanded. “We don’t have time.”

She looked at Nick and then back at Carry. “Why isn’t she getting out of the car?”

“Because she knows what she did. She knows they’re coming.”

“They’ll hurt her.”

“No, they won’t,” Bowman boomed. “Because she did what they asked her to.”

“I don’t—”

“Sarah, I know you don’t know me, but if you care about getting your daughter out of here before Lou shows up, get in the car.”

Without another word, Sarah sank into the backseat and clutched her daughter tightly. There was hardly enough room for Bowman to maneuver the car they were in past the car they’d just parked, but he looked unbothered by this. Turning in the driver seat he skillfully backed out at a high speed and squealed the tires as he hit the street.

Sarah tried to read Carry’s expression on the way by, but it was blank. She wanted to scream and demand answers. Yesterday she would have. Tears would have filled her eyes. She’d be frantic. But there was always one thing that trumped her reckless emotions. The eyes of her daughter were wide and worried, looking at her expectantly. Waiting to know how bad this was. How scared she should be. And Sarah would give her only the impression that everything was all right.

“Just hang on,” Sarah said through a smile. “Bowman is taking us to an even better place.”

“Nick, get Carmen back on the phone.” Bowman was talking through ground together teeth.

“Got it,” Nick replied, his eyes on the side mirror, trying to make sure they weren’t being followed. “We can’t be out on the road like this. I’m sure he’s got the cops out here looking for this car. There’s an Amber alert for Emelia.”

“There is?” Sarah asked, resentful that she’d been kept in the dark about her own daughter.

“Yes. It’s being handled,” Nick said, the phone pressed to his ear. “Carmen, what’s the situation.”

“Speaker phone,” Sarah demanded and he obliged.

“We found a connection between Carry and Lou.”

“What?” Sarah gasped. “That’s impossible.”

“He’s been paying the bill for her brother’s care ever since he had a bad car accident that resulted in a debilitating brain injury. He’s in a facility outside the city and one of Lou’s shell accounts has been paying the bill.”

“For how long?”

“Six years,” Carmen reported.

“That’s when I met her,” Sarah explained. “But Lou never knew about her. He didn’t know she’d helped me at all.”

“He did,” Carmen said flatly. “And he knew you’d likely go back for more help someday. So he made sure he had her under his thumb so when the time came, she’d sell you out.”

“No,” Sarah said, cutting her hand through the air. “I went there when I got away from King. If he knew about her, that’s the first place he would have gone. She gave me enough money to have a place to hide out that night.”

“A small kindness,” Carmen said. “Traffic cameras in the area show Lou showing up to her apartment that night. Apparently Carry lied for you. She must have said she hadn’t seen you yet. But we just got ahold of her text messages from her personal cell. She messaged him hours later saying you might be going to the bus station to collect money you had stored in a locker. He was threatening to harm her brother or discontinue his care if she didn’t give him something.”

Nick grimaced. “It sounds like she was trying her best to give you a chance to get away, but still protect her family.”

“Bull shit,” Bowman growled. “She’s the reason he was there waiting for you.”

“But then he’d have known that was where we would go after I got away.”

“I’m sure he did, but we got there first.” Bowman hit his hand to the steering wheel. “The apartment was probably tossed by his guys while you were trapped with him. Looking for Emelia. Once he understood she wasn’t with you and she

wasn't at Carry's, the best way to find her was to let Carry lead him there."

Carmen continued to explain. "Like I said, we just got ahold of Carry's personal texts. That morning he told her to go along with you. She was supposed to make contact when you arrived at the location where Emelia was."

"How could she—" Sarah cried, covering her mouth.

"I had both burner phones," Bowman explained. "And she was with us the whole time. How did she alert them to where we were?"

"She had her smart watch in her bag. Turned it on and sent a text. She kept sharing her location with them as you drove." Carmen's anger was growing. "We never should have changed the plan so hastily. This is what happens. You can't trust anyone because you don't know what is being used against them. Lou had powerful leverage and now everything is compromised."

"What do we do?" Bowman asked. "What now?"

"You can't go to the airport with Emelia. Her picture will be plastered everywhere until we can show the authorities that she's not kidnapped but rather fleeing an abusive situation with her mother. There are channels we can go through for that, but public transportation and travel options will be very limited. I'll send a helicopter for you."

"What?" Bowman scoffed.

"We have an associate who lives about twenty-five miles from your location on a private compound. He has a helicopter pad. I'll make arrangements for your transport."

"Transport to where?" Nick asked. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"You know where," Carmen said emphatically. "Just wait for me to text you an address. Make sure you aren't being followed." She disconnected the call and Nick sat staring at the phone.

“We need to get clear of this area,” Bowman said, his eyes darting back and forth between the road ahead and the rearview mirror. “And we need to see if they have any other way of tracking us.”

“How could they?” Sarah asked. “We’ve switched cars. We left Carry behind.”

“Did she give you anything?” Nick asked, turning to look in the back seat. “Is anything in this car from her?”

“This sweatshirt,” Sarah said, remembering how kind she thought it was that Carry was being so generous in the midst of something so precarious. In fact, it was hitting her now just how stupid she’d been. How blindsided she was. Lou had been wrong about plenty but about this he was right. There was no room for trust in this world. It was a myth. Something made up to make people feel like humanity was salvageable. It wasn’t.

“Get rid of it,” Nick said, pressing the button to roll his window down. “Give it to me.”

“It’s a sweatshirt,” Sarah said, twisting her face up. “You think it’s got a tracking device in it?”

“We’re done taking chances,” Nick replied firmly. “Give me the sweatshirt.”

She pulled it over her head and slipped it off. With a huff she handed it over and watched Nick throw it out the window.

Emelia’s small voice grew louder. “That’s littering. Litterbugs.”

“It’s okay,” Sarah said, patting her leg. “Are you feeling any better? Nick told us you were feeling sick.”

“This driving is making my belly hurt,” she said, clutching her stomach. “It’s too twirly and fast.”

“We have to drive fast right now,” Bowman explained. “But when we get a little farther, I will slow down.”

“Carmen sent the address through,” Nick said, programing the information into the GPS. “We need to head there now.”

“She really has access to a helicopter? Who is this lady?” Sarah asked.

“She’s married to my brother.”

“I thought you said your brother was—”

“I have a lot of brothers,” Nick said with a funny smile. “This particular brother, Brian, took over running this operation.”

“How does it all work?” Sarah asked, still reeling from the devastating truth that Carry had betrayed her. There would be time down the road where she would find some morsel of empathy and rationalize how Carry’s brother was in danger. Right now she was too angry to care.

“Many years ago, the founder of the organization was in the position to help someone she cared about flee violence. She realized the resources available to people in dangerous situations could not overcome the hurdle of being up against a person in power. There are channels and resources for people, but what happens when the people making the rules and enforcing the laws are the ones you’re running from? Gloria took her substantial wealth and decided to try to even the playing field.”

Sarah nodded, but really it was still too much to take in. It required believing there were that many good people in the world. Enough to combat the bad ones. Right now, that seemed impossible.

Nick turned in his seat and smiled at Emelia. “Have you ever been in a helicopter before?”

“Helicopter?” Emelia asked curiously, her mispronunciation reminding Sarah just how innocent her daughter was. How much life she still had ahead of her. “No, I haven’t.”

“You’re going to love it,” Nick promised, clapping his hands together as though they were off to some exciting adventure.

Bowman lowered his voice and looked at Sarah in the rearview mirror. “If you think her stomach is uneasy now—”

He rolled his eyes and winked at her.

Sarah patted her daughter's hair. "Hopefully they have a cleaning crew in this organization."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Bowman

His prediction had proven true. The quick ascension of the helicopter had Emelia's stomach turned and quickly emptying into one of the motion-sickness bags. She looked so tiny and frail as she clung to Sarah. It made getting on the next flight even harder.

"Can we get some Dramamine or something?" Sarah asked as they waited in the car on the runway. Bowman had never driven a car right onto the tarmac before. He felt like at any moment security might come over and demand they leave.

"There is some on the plane," Nick explained. "And everything else you might need. A change of clothes. Food. Hygiene products. You can shower. Change. Eat. Regroup. Whatever you need."

"That's handy," Bowman said as he stepped out of the car and reached for Emelia. She was wrung out and looking at him with sad eyes he could hardly stomach. That's the power children have. He'd run through a brick wall for her right now if he had to. Anything to take her sorrow away.

"This is the main transportation of the Kinross organization for emergency extractions. We grease a lot of palms to make sure when we take off no one asks who was on the flight and they incorrectly document the flight plan after we land safely. We have people in nearly every airport who support our efforts."

“How can you get that many people to be loyal to you?” Sarah’s question was heavy with accusation as they walked up the metal steps to get on the plane.

The interior was impressive. Plush leather seats and a warm atmosphere that had obviously been designed to be calming and comforting.

“Honestly, many of them were clients at one point or their mother or sister was. They’ve been saved by the kindness of others willing to risk themselves or their careers. They want to be part of something that actually makes a difference. There are good people in the world. Plenty of them.”

“Until they get in some hot water themselves,” Sarah said, gesturing to where Bowman could put Emelia down. “Everyone is great until they have to be otherwise. It’s human nature to save your own neck when push comes to shove.”

Nick chuckled. “I grew up in South Boston. I ran with a very tough crowd and made lots of enemies. There were plenty of nights I almost didn’t make it home, but I knew without a doubt, if I called, my brothers would be there. They’ve put their bodies between me and a punch. They’ve bailed me out of lock-up. They’ve been my alibi and my shoulder to cry on. I know that sometimes it can feel like it’s you against the world. Especially when shit happens like what Carry did. I’m not saying you’re wrong to be cautious. I’m cautious as hell. But there are plenty of people who aren’t like her.”

“And Lou was playing the long game,” Bowman said, fighting the urge to look impressed. “He cultivated that relationship for years, paying out all that money, never knowing if you’d ever go back to her for help. He’s a mastermind.”

Sarah only nodded as she buckled her daughter in and then herself. Nick was busy gathering some things up and moving expertly around the jet.

“Here is the liquid Dramamine, a ginger ale, and some crackers. It’ll be a long flight. You should try to get some sleep, Emelia. Want me to put your seat back?”

“Yes please,” she murmured as her mother performed some magic to get her to drink the liquid down.

Nick laid the seat back to a nearly flat position and handed her a blanket. “We’ll be there before you know it.”

“Where is there?” Sarah asked, extreme exhaustion framing her beautiful eyes. Her bruises were darkening and spreading, and with every centimeter they grew so did his desire for revenge. They’d escaped Lou and his men. The plane would be in the air in a few minutes and they’d disappear and be out of Lou’s reach. But the desire to make the man pay would not diminish with the miles put between them all.

“Canada,” Nick said almost apologetically. “We have some family up there. They have a farm. It’s remote. They’ve recently built some housing on the property so they could assist the organization and be a spot people could flee to. You’ll be the first family to arrive there.”

“How did they get involved?” Bowman asked, his guard still up.

“It’s Carmen’s family farm. She ran for her life when she was younger and recently reconnected with her sisters who were still living there. They’ve had their struggles but they found their purpose when they found each other again.”

“And they want us there?” Sarah sounded skeptical. “Just showing up on the doorstep?”

“I left there not long ago,” Nick said with a smile as he took his seat across from her and buckled in.

“You liked it?”

“Hated it,” Nick admitted. “I’m a city guy. It was too peaceful for me. Sprawling land. Horses. They have a little boy there about Emelia’s age. His name is Sammy. He’s a great kid.”

“Horsies?” Emelia asked, her eyes closed.

“Yup, and they’ll teach you how to ride. And you can fish in the pond. They have fun festivals in town and lots of things

to do outside. You'll love it."

"I want to ride a horse, Mommy." Emelia said. She snuggled the blanket tighter.

"We'll see," Sarah said. "Get some sleep."

A few moments later Emelia's tiny snores were at a slow peaceful rhythm. Sarah tipped her head back with respite.

"How are we going to get into Canada without our passports? And I don't have a thing with me. No money. Nothing."

"It'll be taken care of," Nick said, beaming with pride, but Bowman understood it wouldn't relieve Sarah.

"I'm not trying to be a charity case." Sarah bit at her lip. "How is this sustainable? I can't very well just depend on other people and their money forever."

"It's a process," Nick said, less enthusiastically this time. "It doesn't happen overnight. There are all sorts of resources for starting over. For making a new life for yourself. Canada isn't a permanent stop. Those arrangements will be made later, once a threat assessment is completed and Carmen and Layla can get a better understanding of how far Lou is willing to go to try to track you down."

"To the ends of the earth," she sighed. "The man is like a dog to a bone. No, like a shark to chum. He'll come. It won't matter where we are."

"The Kinross family has been up against worse," Nick said, tipping his head back confidently. "He's met his match. Brian, my brother, and Carmen travel the world helping people get out of these situations. Tray and Lauren run the entire program, following in Gloria's footsteps. You've got Kenan, my other brother, and Layla, who run the operations of the retail empire. I would trust everyone involved with my life."

"And my sister," Bowman said, trying to gently remind her how connected they were to all of this.

"Cleo." Sarah said her name in a whisper. "Your twin."

"Yes. She trusts them."

“More than that,” Nick explained, “she’s living their mission. Cleo and I were up in Canada together. She’s unstoppable and brilliant. The skills she has as a lawyer could move mountains and she chooses to be a soldier for the Kinross family.” Nick’s gaze fell on Emelia and then back at Sarah. “And that’s how we grow our network. That child is going to grow up with everything she needs and without ever having to worry about the beasts outside her window. And some day she may want to help the next person who needs it. When you’ve got your feet back under you, perhaps you will too. That’s how this works. That’s how this grows. It’s contagious in the best way.”

“When has it failed?” Sarah asked as the engine of the plane roared to life and they began to taxi to the runway. “You can’t save everyone.”

Nick nodded somberly. “That’s true. But that won’t keep any of us from trying.”

The plane took off and Bowman hadn’t realized he was holding his breath. This was real distance between Lou and Sarah. A whole different country. A place he’d never think to look and they were finally on their way. Until that moment, he hadn’t actually let himself believe it was possible. As they soared toward the clouds and Emelia cooed, he filled his lungs for the first time in what felt like months.

“Is everything okay?” Sarah asked, touching his hand gently.

“It’s going to be.” He smiled back. “Finally, I think it’s going to be.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sarah

The car ride from the airport felt longer than the flight, though she knew it hadn't been. So many unexpected feelings rose within her but the most prevalent was shame. She was mortified to be arriving here under these circumstances. She cared so deeply for Bo and now people associated with his family would see her this way. Penniless. Weak. Running away.

For all the bad that had come with being married to Lou, she was never any of those things. Just being on his arm made her someone people saw as strong. They wouldn't cross her or put her down. She was powerful by proximity and now she was nothing.

"I know it seems like the middle of nowhere," Nick apologized. "But there is enough in town to get what you need when you need it. Plus the farm provides a lot too."

"We're grateful," Sarah said through a smile, realizing too late she'd sounded anything but. And that was even worse than being nothing. Being a rude nothing.

The woman waiting at the front gate was young and bouncing slightly with nervous energy. Hiding behind her leg and peeking out curiously was a little boy. This had to be Ronnie and Sammy.

“Welcome,” she said, waving her arms animatedly. “Oh my God, that was so awkward. I’m sorry. I don’t know why I did that.” Ronnie covered her face and shook her head.

Sarah couldn’t help but smile. “We appreciate the warm welcome,” she said, trying to coax Emelia to take a step forward, but she’d assumed the same position as Sammy.

“We haven’t done this before,” Ronnie said bashfully. “We’re very happy for the company though. Even if we’re cringy and weird.”

“Do you ride horses?” Sammy asked, his face half buried in Ronnie’s side. “We have horses.”

When Emelia didn’t answer, Sarah spoke up. “We’ve seen horses pulling carriages in the city but we’ve never ridden them. Emelia really wants to try.”

He shrugged, trying to play it cool. “I could show you.”

Emelia nodded and looked up at her mother, awaiting some kind of direction or permission.

Ronnie clapped her hands together and swung the gate open for them. “Your house is on the back of the property so you will have plenty of privacy when you want it. It’s well stocked with food and clothes that should accommodate what you need. There are toys and some stuffed animals. Comfy beds. Only two though. I hope that’s okay.” Ronnie looked back and forth between Bowman and Sarah and then her cheeks flushed pink. “You can all work it out, I’m sure.”

“It’ll be perfect,” Bowman said. “How is security here?”

“You can chat with Carter about that when he gets home,” she explained with a sweet smile. It was clear she didn’t want to spook the children. “But I can promise you, it’s robust. Sammy and I will show you down to the house and let you settle in. If you want to join us for dinner, you are welcome, but we understand if you’d rather have some time to yourself.”

“If we’re not intruding, we’d love to join you.” Sarah fidgeted nervously, knowing the bruises on her face and the knots in her hair would keep anyone from believing her current relaxed disposition.

“It’s pretty quiet out here,” Ronnie sighed. “We like lots of people around our table.”

Nick folded his arms across his chest as he looked down at Sammy. “I’ve been practicing my domino skills. You’re not going to beat me so quickly this time.”

“Where is Cleo?” Sammy asked, looking past all of them, seeming to hope she would appear.

“She’s working,” Nick said with a commiserating pout. “You know she’s a busy lady, but she told me to make sure you’re not cheating to win.”

“I never do,” Sammy said, stomping his foot. “Cleo is the one who cheats.”

“She does?” Bowman asked with a chuckle. “My sister was always a rule follower when we were growing up. She used to enforce them pretty heavily.”

“Cleo is your sister?” Sammy asked, exploring his face closer now.

“Yes. We’re twins actually. Just not the kind that look exactly the same.”

Sammy’s eyes went wide with excitement. “This is my sister,” he said, beaming with pride. “Ronnie is my sister.”

“She’s not your mom? Where is your mommy?” Emelia asked, looking thoroughly concerned.

“Every family is a little different,” Ronnie swooped in quickly with an explanation. “As long as you have people around you who love you, that’s all that matters. Now let’s go check out the house.”

Sarah took her daughter by the hand and tried to imagine this as a walk toward their new life. Striding confidently toward whatever might come, hand in hand. And when Bowman’s arm draped over her shoulder it felt even more promising. Maybe her self-worth was rattled. Her life in shambles. But Ronnie was right, being surrounded by love still meant a whole hell of a lot.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sarah

The small house was cozy. The sunsets were epic. Town was quiet and the horses were entertaining. The two weeks had passed at a breakneck pace, each day full of new and interesting things to explore.

She'd expected it to be awkward living in the same house as Bowman. Lou had been the only man she'd ever lived with. But Bowman went out of his way to make it comfortable. He slept on the couch, insisting the girls each take a bed.

They'd found a way to live in this limbo where no talk about the future ever happened. No deep questions about what comes next. They woke, walked the property, helped around the farm, watched Sammy and Emelia play, got to know Carter and Ronnie. It all worked, but only because no one had upended the delicate balance by trying to force some sort of clarity to what came next.

Sara had known that would eventually come to an end but as they sat around the table waiting for the call to connect, she was sorry it was happening so soon.

"Fred has the kids down at the blueberry bushes picking some fresh ones for pancakes tomorrow," Ronnie clarified just before Lauren picked up the phone.

"Hey all," Lauren said, sounding light and breezy, even though Sarah was sure it wouldn't stay that way. She'd only

dealt with Carmen and Brian so far, but understood that Lauren was really running the show. And when she'd requested this call, Sarah knew it couldn't be good. "Thanks for calling in. I know it's stressful not knowing exactly what's coming next."

Bowman cleared his throat. "It's actually been very peaceful. This place is beautiful."

"We'd like to keep it as peaceful as possible for you but we have to handle a few tough decisions today. I'll lay it out for you as transparently as possible so you have all the information you need to weigh your options."

"I appreciate that," Sarah said, feeling her chest flutter with nerves. She didn't want to decide a damn thing right now. Couldn't it stay just like this forever?

"It's what we do," Lauren said in a singsong voice. "Now, as you are aware, when you fled with Emelia there was an Amber alert triggered. Our lawyers have worked on your behalf to communicate with the police, and the judge assigned to the case provided you with a fifteen-day emergency custody order. The sworn statement you provided swayed the judge, but it's temporary."

"The fifteen days are almost up?" Sarah asked. "What happens then?"

"There will be a hearing. Now don't worry, you don't need to attend. Our legal team has filed all the appropriate paperwork to keep you from having to appear in person. But the hearing will be vital to determine your options going forward."

"How so?" Bowman asked, his back rigid with tension.

"Our goal is to have Lou's parental rights terminated due to him being an imminent threat based on his past abuse. But what would be more effective and safer for all involved is if Lou is arrested and charged with something that could land him in jail for a substantial amount of time."

Bowman grimaced. "There's been a long line of people before you trying to put that man away. He's always able to

work the system.”

“We need something concrete,” Lauren said, her voice dropping an octave or two. “Proof of the pattern of abuse.”

“That’s the problem,” Sarah reported somberly. “I’m the one person who should be able to prove what was happening —”

Lauren cut in. “But you’re the one who worked so hard for so long to make sure no one ever knew about it. That’s very common and not something you should be too hard on yourself about. I wouldn’t expect that you’d have retained any evidence. That would have likely put you in grave danger if it was discovered. What we need to do is try to think of alternative sources for proof.”

Sarah didn’t need to think about it. She knew exactly who held the key to finally taking down Lou. To setting her free.

“King,” she said softly, her words growing louder as she gained the confidence. “He’s Lou’s right-hand man and he saw a lot of what went on between us. If anyone held on to any proof it would have been him.”

“Hmm,” Lauren said, sounding like her interest was piqued. “Even if he didn’t have any direct proof, a sworn statement from him could go a long way.”

“He’ll never do it,” Bowman cut in. “The guy sat by for years watching Lou hurt you and did nothing. He doesn’t have the character to do the right thing. If he did, he’d have done it years ago.”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Sarah hummed. “Their lives have been interwoven since they were children and King felt beholden to Lou.”

“I don’t care what his excuses are, he stood by.”

“Actually he didn’t,” Sarah corrected. “King did plenty to defuse bad situations, take Emelia somewhere safe, and this last time, he got into a fist fight with Lou so I could get away.”

“That’s something,” Lauren agreed. “We can have our legal team reach out to him and see if he’s willing to make a

statement.”

“I have to go see him,” Sarah clarified. “If we are going to have any chance at all of King doing this, it’ll be because I was able to look him in the eyes and ask him myself.”

“There are appropriate channels we need to follow—”

“I understand that, I’m just letting you know the only shot we actually have is going to be a conversation face to face between him and me.”

“Sarah,” Lauren sighed. “You’ve just finally gotten yourself in a stable position and a good distance away. We can’t support you returning home for this. The risk is too great and we’ve already maximized many of our resources to assist in your safe departure the first time. I don’t think going back is a good idea.”

“It’s the only way.”

Sarah closed her eyes and reached for Bowman’s hand. He obliged and she knew

already that he agreed even if he was worried.

“I can keep her safe,” he assured them. “But I think she’s right. The only way to truly stop Lou is to make sure he faces charges that stick. King is the only one left who can do that.”

“Because I failed.” Sarah nibbled at her lip and thought of how close she’d come to doing what the police had wanted from her. But in the end, she wasn’t brave enough.

“They failed you,” Bowman corrected. “They wanted you to put your life on the line and hardly offered you any form of protection in return. There are plenty of ways to pull off an operation like that and they failed. Now we know why.”

Lauren seemed concerned. “Right, and we have no idea how deep this goes within the police force there. That makes our ability to assist you very difficult.”

“Can Emelia stay here?” Sarah asked, her eyes filled with desperation as she looked at Carter and Ronnie. “I know it’s a lot to ask.”

Carter leaned forward in his chair. “Of course she can stay. You won’t be long and when you come back, you’ll have everything you need to finally move forward.”

She appreciated his optimism in this never-ending cycle of bad things that kept piling on. Lauren spoke quietly to someone else in the room and then back to all of them on the phone. “I can get you transport back into the city and out if you can do this in less than twelve hours. It has to be in and out.”

“King is either going to do this or he won’t.” Sarah tapped the table nervously. “Staying longer won’t convince him one way or another. It’ll come down to whether he’s finally ready to cut ties with Lou. I know it sounds crazy, but he’s a victim in this too. Lou is a master at manipulation. King had no one growing up. Lou treated him like family at first and made him feel like he’d finally found a place in the world. He could be useful and appreciated. Lou turned and convinced him he was only good for one thing. Cleaning up messes, intimidation, and risking his freedom all the time. There is a chance, just like me, he’s ready to be free of it all.”

“Let me start making calls,” Lauren said, sounding like she already had to move on to the next task. “I’ll send details when I have them. If you’re right and King is ready to turn over some evidence, our legal team will act on it immediately. We’ll utilize it for protective orders, emergency custody arrangements, and hopefully to work with the district attorney to bring charges against him.”

“And then what happens for Sarah and Emelia?” Bowman asked. He’d clearly been sitting on that question since the start of the call. “They’re relocated? Is it like witness protection?”

“It depends on the outcome of this. If Lou is neutralized as a threat then just some distance and resources for a new start can be enough. If not, we have locations that are completely secure. Protection there is the number one priority and though it can feel a bit suffocating at times, in certain situations it’s our best option. We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

Ronnie was looking empathetic. “That’s where my sister Carmen was. At one of the more secure locations. The person she was trying to flee was the son of a powerful diplomat. She knew that would be her only option. But it meant cutting off complete contact with us and staying there until he could be brought to justice. That was a long process, and afterward, Carmen wasn’t sure she had a family or home to come back to. She started working at the facility instead. It was a long road back for her. Now she’s one of the people keeping the organization growing and thriving. I’m proud of her.”

“I’m thankful for her.” Sarah stood from the table and pushed the chair in. “I’m going to go spend some time with Emelia if you’ll excuse me. Maybe we’ll be cleared to go in the morning.”

“She’ll be safe here,” Carter promised. “And with Sammy around she won’t have a quiet minute to herself to worry. He’ll have her in the barn, down by the pond, out in the hay bales. There won’t be a dull moment.”

“I never thought she’d take to a farm.” Sarah laughed. “We’ve spent our whole lives in the city. She used to hate getting her hands dirty. I’d have to carry wipes around everywhere in case she got the smallest bit of dirt on her at the park. Now she’s out there digging in the dirt and running through the woods. I see a completely new and peaceful side of her. Like she’s a little tree that’s been fighting through winter her whole life and finally has these little buds popping out in her soul. She’s blooming here.”

Sarah felt some of that coming to life in herself. The air here was different. Lung-filling and crisp. The song of the crickets and the warm breath of the horses had reminded her what it felt like to witness the curative essence of nature. Now she was pulled to her daughter like a magnet. She wanted to be with her this instant. To pull the straw out of her hair and kiss her sun-warmed cheeks.

As she stepped out of the house and onto the gravel driveway, she saw Emelia and Sammy racing toward the setting sun. This would be what she held on to. The visual of her daughter free and wild would sustain her when Sarah had

to walk back into the lion's den. She'd already done the most important thing in the world. Saved Emelia.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Bowman

If he could have thought of one other way to make it work, he'd never have agreed to the plan. It was truly a last-ditch option and the energy in the car was tense.

"I'm going to call him and see if he'll meet me," Sarah said, clutching the cell phone tightly in her hand. "I don't know how the two of them left it, but normally this time of day King would be checking in on the employees at the recycling plant. It's a big operation and can't go without some oversight for more than a day or two."

"Try him," Bowman said, turning the radio off. There was no reason for music at a time like this anyway. There wouldn't be a song in the world that could calm them.

The phone rang five times, and he was certain it would go to voicemail. His brain was already working through the next move. But surprisingly, at the last second someone picked up.

"King," he said, his voice raspy with annoyance.

"King, it's me," she answered, the shake in her hands increasing with every word. "Please don't hang up."

"You're crazy to call me. You better be on the other side of the world right now."

"I'm in town," she admitted. "Can we meet?"

"Sarah, what the hell are you doing?"

“You know why I’m back here.”

“I did what I could for you. I gave you a chance to run. If you chose not to take it, you’re crazy. Think about Emelia.”

“Emelia is safe. She’s far from here. He’ll never find her.”

“If he finds you, he’ll make sure you tell him where she is. You think he couldn’t break you, but he will. Leave. Leave now before you lose the chance.”

“I need to talk to you in person,” she said again. “You can’t keep going like this. He knows you let me go on purpose. He’s stopped trusting you. You know what happens then. Now is your best shot at getting out. Meet with me.”

“Getting out,” King chuckled. “You were married to him. For you getting out is just leaving. I’m in a lot deeper than you ever were. The only way I leave this situation is in a body bag.”

“That’s not true.” Sarah winced and Bowman knew this was painful for her. “There are options for you. But please, let’s meet. You’ve always tried your best to help Emelia and me without making it worse. Do that one more time. That’s all I’m asking.”

“Paulson’s in an hour. Don’t bring that guy.”

“I’ll be there. Alone. I promise.”

Bowman shook his head as Sarah disconnected the call.

“Not a chance you’re going in there alone. Lou could easily have King followed. There is already some mistrust there. He could lead him right to you even if he doesn’t mean it.”

“I’ll leave the line on my phone open. You can be right outside. But I need to go in there alone.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to be asking a man to betray everything he’s ever done and believed and belonged to. And while I think it would be the strongest power play ever, King will feel weak. Like he’s quitting or failing at something.

That'll be what he wrestles with and he sure as hell isn't going to do that in front of another man."

"You're insightful. You give everything so much thought."

"I'm a broken woman with a hyper-reactive mind that always has to be one step ahead. I think about everyone's feelings and motivations so I can step out of the way of the train that will be barreling toward me. It is not a super power. It's a character flaw at best. I long for the day I don't have to be applauded for my strength and resilience. Do you know how you become this resilient?"

"Practice?"

"Yes. Too much of it. I don't want the first thing people think about me to be how buoyant I am in life's choppy waters. 'Wow, she really keeps getting back up every time she gets knocked down. What a fighter.' I'd settle for being known as quirky. Or friendly. Even adventurous. My legacy right now is basically, 'Boy, she was hard to kill.' Just me and cockroaches cruising around after the apocalypse."

"You're not a cockroach and I see you as more than just a strong woman. You're a gentle mother. A really brilliant storyteller. Those nights we had on the phone, for me, were like listening to a writer eloquently painting this really vivid picture. I love what you do with words."

"I used to think I'd be a writer someday," Sarah said. Her cheeks pinked and her eyes darted away from him. "But now I'm hoping I live long enough to have a someday."

"You should write. Even if it's just for you. This story, all you've been through . . . people should hear it. I grew up in a dangerous and dysfunctional home and time in foster care too. I worked in law enforcement and dealt with plenty of domestic cases. Yet, it wasn't until I talked to you so deeply that I realized how impossible a situation can actually be. Leaving isn't a verb in your case. It's a nuanced, insurmountable journey and you highlighted it all perfectly as we talked. I think a lot of people could benefit from hearing your story. Maybe it's something Carmen or Lauren would like to be a part of."

“Maybe,” she answered in that playacting kind of way people do when they don’t believe in their own dreams.

“First things first, I guess. Where is Paulson’s? Is it a bar or something?”

“It’s a dance studio. Emelia took classes there for a little while. King would pick us up when the weather was bad or if Lou thought I needed someone stalking me. But it’s a smart choice for a meetup location. Lou never came to the classes and never even knew where she danced. If you asked him now he’d likely have forgotten she danced at all.”

“She had the snowflake recital, right?” Bowman laughed. “Where she bumped into the cardboard snowman and tipped him over into the audience.”

“Yes,” Sarah laughed, clutching his arm. “It was pitiful and adorable all at once. She gave it a shot but she really didn’t fall in love with dance. Now that I see her up at the farm, I realize she’s really well suited for nature. I didn’t grow up with any of that, so I never thought to see if she liked it. I always put her in the same things I did when I was her age. Dance was certainly not her thing. She and I were laughing about that a couple of days ago.” Her face fell gravely serious and he knew what kind of mind-controlling demon had just popped up in her.

“You’re going to hear her laugh again. You’ll see her on the tire swing and you’ll read her all the best bedtime stories.” He reached over and squeezed her knee gently. “You’ve got the rest of your life together.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Sarah

Paulson's dance studio was just as she remembered it. The flurry of families piling inside the large lobby would make the perfect cover. She and King would look like a couple of parents waiting impatiently for their child to finish class.

She took a seat at a small round table for two in the corner of the room. A few moments later, though she hadn't noticed where he came from, King sat across from her.

"I have ten minutes," he said gruffly. His dark sunglasses were doing a pitiful job of covering up the bruises around his eyes.

"Those from Lou?" she asked, pointing up at the discolored skin. "Mine have finally healed."

"I had to let him get a few good blows in on me if I was going to give you enough time to get away. Why in the hell did you come back here?"

"You need to make sure that Lou goes to jail for the rest of his life. If you don't, it'll be nearly impossible for Emelia and me to stay on the run. He'll fight me for custody. He'll hunt us down. He won't stop unless you stop him."

"It doesn't work like that." King was leaned back in his chair, his arms crossed over his chest. "If I turn Lou in for anything, he'll turn around and give them all the dirt on me. There's plenty and you know it."

“I know you’ve done things for Lou over the years that have been illegal. I also know you have a line. One you’ve never crossed. I’ve watched you try for years to guide Lou. To de-escalate his insanity and talk sense into him. You’ve been masterful at it. The only one who’s ever gotten through to him. You’ve never hurt me or Emelia. You’ve done what you could to protect us.”

“Some shit job I’ve done at it,” King said. The guilt on his face was unmistakable. “Do you know how hard it’s been to sit back and not knock his head off his shoulders for the way he acts toward you.”

“It’s never been fear that’s kept you from doing just that,” Sarah said with a gentle smile. “You knew that if you tried to stop him and I didn’t have a real plan to get away from him for good, all you’d be doing is poking the bear. He’d have fired you or killed you and who knows what the next guy would have been willing to do to Emelia and me. You found plenty of ways to get him to leave us alone without making it riskier for us. But now we do have a way to leave. Leave for good. And if there is irrefutable evidence that Lou is violent and a criminal, I can get him out of my life in a real legally binding way.”

“You know I have evidence.” He set his jaw tightly, looking as though he was fighting to keep the words in. “I’m the one who handles the security footage at every one of our facilities and all of his properties. I erase what needs to be erased and since you know he loves blackmail, I hold on to footage that can incriminate his perceived enemies if they are dumb enough to do something in front of our cameras. Lou didn’t realize that applied to him too.”

“You have video evidence of his violence?” Sarah leaned in and lowered her voice as a couple of young children in leotards fluttered by them and squealed.

“Hours of it,” King replied with a prideful smile. “He’s the one who taught me about having leverage, he just never assumed I’d do the same to him. The problem is for every ounce of evidence I have on him, he’ll have the same amount on me. I’ve been in tough positions for him and had to make

some dark choices on how to clean up his messes. Turning him in will mean turning myself in too. And if I go to prison labeled a rat, I won't make it a week before I'm killed."

"What about immunity," Sarah suggested, as if she knew anything besides what she'd seen on crime television shows.

"There are cops who want Lou behind bars and then there are loads that need him right where he is. They know he's their meal ticket. I could go to the district attorney with what I have and ask for immunity, but I'd be unlikely to get it. My hands are just too dirty and there aren't enough people in this community I can trust even if they promised me something. I'd be signing my own death warrant."

"I know people who can help." Sarah hadn't really discussed this with Lauren or Carmen in detail but she could see it would have to come to fruition if any of this was going to work. "That's how we got out of here in the first place. They could help you get to safety too. I know it."

King was shaking his head and looking up at the mural on the ceiling. "Maybe jail is where I'm meant to be, even if I get killed in there. Maybe that's justice. I can't sleep most nights, knowing what I've done and who I've hurt. All for a guy who I thought was—" He pounded his hand on the table and people turned their way.

Sarah smiled in a *nothing to see here* kind of way as if King had just told some sweet little story with too much emotion. "You think I don't know what that feels like?" she asked. "I was married to him. I thought he was strong and protective and ambitious. And he was those things. But I've learned the duality of life. Two things can be true at the same time. He can want to protect everything but still be the one to hurt me. What was he to you?"

"I had nothing. No one. Lou's mother came to drop off a notebook I'd left at their house. We were in seventh grade and I'd accidentally left it behind after Lou and I were working on a project together. I was so embarrassed when she saw my apartment."

"I know your childhood was hard."

“Lou’s mother realized we didn’t have any heat in the dead of winter. She checked the cabinets and the fridge. Appraised the piles of dirty laundry waiting to be taken to be washed. We walked out of there that afternoon and everything started to change for me. She made sure I ate. Washed my clothes. Bought me new ones too. I never left their house without a plate of food and a kind word.”

“And Lou?”

“He turned into exactly what his mother wanted him to. The world she’d grown up in where brutality was necessary and only the strongest survive. When Lou’s parents emigrated here, they didn’t leave those beliefs behind. They carefully cultivated their son’s vicious cruelty. Not maliciously because they thought they were equipping him for the best life possible. The same way some people put together college funds, the Rossi family was planning his future by making him the way he is today.”

“And you admired it?” Sarah asked. It was a question she’d always wanted to pose but never felt like she had the right to. Now there was no room left for holding back.

“Completely. I listened to every story they told about the old country and how things were. They believed everyone was one breath away from a lie. One step away from a fight. Being ready or better yet, striking first was what they preached. That’s why when I realized Lou trusted me, it was a powerful thing. He didn’t trust anyone. I had nothing, and then suddenly I had that.”

“You can see how twisted that is now, right? They made him into the monster he is and you were just part of the plan. I know you were searching for something, and guess what, so did they.”

“I won’t blame my choices on them. The money was easy. I was built for this lifestyle. I could turn off every emotion. Risk it all to get a job done. I became a pro at intimidating people into paying or keeping their mouth shut. I could clean up any mess and change any mind. When it came to something for Lou or his family, I never said no. Not until—”

“Until what?”

“I guess the spell was broken at some point. He wasn’t just this brilliant calculating boss who could turn a grand into ten and a competitor into an employee. I knew he was always cruel, but the first time he tore you down in front of a bunch of us at the office, something changed. That was something his parents hadn’t taught him. His father revered his mother and put her needs and wants above his own. Always. There was never a disrespectful word between them.”

“I remember that day.” She sighed and covered her face for a moment. “I came in to surprise him with a lunch I packed. It was his mother’s idea. She helped me cook one of his favorite dishes and gave me a basket that had been in their family for generations. I’d told her that Lou had been on edge lately, and she was certain this would help.”

“You walked in and he shouted like you’d just tossed a grenade at him. He called you a bunch of names and told you that the office wasn’t a place for you. That showing up without calling was disrespectful and packing that lunch for everyone to see made him look weak. You were in shock. I’ll never forget the look on your face.”

“I was shocked too, but also felt guilty. Like he was right and I had really screwed up. No one said anything. No one told him to chill out or back off, so that told me I was the one who was out of line.”

“I talked to him after you left and told him he was out of line. He agreed and said he felt like shit about it. Blamed the stress of some legal trouble we were trying to get out of at the time. I remember he had Sally in the front office send you flowers.”

“I loved them,” she remembered, feeling embarrassed by how she’d fallen for the abuse. It was a cycle. Building tension. Explosive anger. Love bombing and apologies, then a little bit of peace until the tension would seep back in. “I’d never actually gotten flowers like that before. The vase weighed a ton. The blooms were so vibrant.”

“I thought I’d really made an impact with that conversation. Like he was going to take my advice and not fly off the handle at you anymore. But now, looking back, we both know that was just the start of it.”

“And now we can finish it all. Come with me.”

“There is something I need you to know.” King lowered his voice and shifted uneasily in his seat. “When I was standing outside that door it might have felt like I was keeping you in there, but really I was keeping him out. You were safe in there. He’d have to come through me to get to you. Maybe it seemed to you like I was being cruel.”

“I don’t blame you for any of this.”

“I could have done more. Every time he—”

“There’s an elephant in the room you’re too kind to point out, so I will. I haven’t spent the last ten years trying to get away from him. Up until recently I couldn’t imagine my life without Lou. That’s what codependency looks like. That’s what abuse will do. You knew I wasn’t going to leave. If you’d have tried to get me to, you’d have failed. And if you’d have fought him for me, you’d be gone. You did everything you could, considering where I was in my life, King. But now you can do more. That’s what I’m asking you.”

If there was relief, he didn’t show it. “Whoever is helping you is not going to extend anything to me. You and I are different in this scenario. There are surely limits to who they help and why. I’ve made my own choices in this.”

“Come talk to their legal team. Bring what you have. They’ll do everything they can to make sure you come out of this as unscathed as possible. I can’t tell you how far-reaching their network is. You could end up on some beach somewhere living your best life. And you’ll know that you freed Emelia and me from him in a real way.”

“What’s the next move then?” King cleared his throat and rubbed one hand over the stubble on his cheek. This was a man who was always clean-shaven with neatly groomed hair

and a crisp white button-down shirt. She was noticing for the first time how uncharacteristically frazzled he looked.

“Bring what you have to an address I’ll text you. Turn over your evidence. Then we’ll ask them to help you too. You can start over. Get as far away from him and his mess as possible. Then he’s in prison and we get our lives back.”

“This is the only life I’ve ever known. My skills aren’t exactly in high demand in corporate America. I know how to do a handful of things that most people aren’t willing to do. I don’t know how to be anything else.”

“We’ll sort all of that out.” It was over-promising, and he knew it as well as she did. Carmen and Lauren had made no promises about what would happen to King if he could provide evidence against Lou that would put him away for a long time. It wasn’t presented as some deal to broker or anything they could exchange. She had to have faith that people who’d dedicated their lives to helping others would be able to see King was worthy of their offerings.

“I’ll get the videos and anything else I have on him. Tell me who to meet and where to meet them. It’ll be more than enough to put Lou away for a long time.”

“Emelia loves you,” Sarah said, tears filling her eyes. “I wish I’d done a better job picking the life she would have. But for everything I screwed up, you were always someone she could count on.”

“This guy,” King said, narrowing his eyes. Changing the subject was likely out of self-preservation. If he didn’t want to get emotional, she knew damn well he couldn’t talk about how much he cared for Emelia. “The cop. What’s the deal with him? You do understand that getting you to turn on Lou would have been a tactic he was using to get what he wanted. For every bad cop Lou has in his pocket, there are plenty higher-ups who want to see him put away. Your boy would have seen you as a career-making strategy.”

“Bowman is the reason I finally felt strong enough to leave. Maybe at first it started as his desire to get some charges to stick on Lou but that changed pretty quickly.”

“He was the one you were always on the phone with at night?”

“You knew?” She covered her heart with her hand. She’d worked so hard to make sure she was being as inconspicuous as possible. The part of abuse people don’t talk about enough is the cold shoulder. The withholding of attention and love. For all the suffocating control Lou had over her, there were also long spells of being completely and intentionally ignored. That had made all her phone calls with Bowman possible. But she hadn’t realized King knew about them.

“I covered for you plenty.” King’s expression was gentle again. Dangerously close to being emotional once more. “As often as I could. He had no clue you had that phone or that you were talking to anyone all those nights.”

“I’ve never properly thanked you for everything you’ve done for us over the years. All the things I didn’t see with my own eyes but knew you did.”

“You thanked me,” King corrected. “We’ve always had those moments. Those looks where I knew you knew. We never talked much about it, but I feel like maybe we had our own language.”

“Well, I’ll never be able to thank you for what you’re about to do.”

“Live a good life. Laugh. Eat where you want. Go to the park with Emelia whenever you want. If I know all of that is happening it’ll be thanks enough. I’ve always thought of you like a sister. And I need to know my sister is living her best life.”

“I will be. Trust me. I’m finally ready.”

The hug they exchanged had a finality she wished it hadn’t. He held her tighter and longer than she expected. A goodbye. A long, probably forever, goodbye.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Bowman

The pain in their voices, even over the phone, was impossible to miss. He'd had an opinion of King before and it crumbled away the longer he listened. There had been an element Bowman had found unforgivable. How could this man have stood by and let Emelia and Sarah constantly feel Lou's wrath? Now that question was answered and it was something Bowman already understood but hadn't applied to them for some reason. King hadn't helped Sarah leave sooner because she wouldn't have gone.

"He's going to do it?" Bowman asked, opening the car door for her. "That's great."

"Great," she sniffled as she sank into the front seat. He took the opportunity as he rounded the car to get back in to see her more clearly. The sadness was thick like fog around her.

"It'll do exactly what we need and he's the only one to be able to make that happen. This is good news."

"I have no idea if they'll actually help him. I might have just completely sold him out. He could end up in jail or if Lou finds out first, he'll be killed. I shouldn't have put him in this position."

"There is no other choice. And it sounds like he knows that too. He's willing to do what needs to be done for you and Emelia. That's his decision and he's made it."

“Have you updated Carmen already?” Sarah asked, rubbing at her tired eyes. The travel. The stress. The fear. It was constantly crushing down on her; he could see the toll it was taking.

“I did. The legal team is ready. They’ve done some looking into the local politics and power structures. They’ve isolated a few people they know for sure can be trusted with the evidence and utilize it to prosecute Lou.”

“Trust,” Sarah scoffed. “I’ve never extended that to many people in my life, but now I’m more skeptical than ever. I still can’t believe Carry would betray us like that.”

“But you don’t think King will?” He’d been convincing but the reality was King had been Lou’s right-hand man since before they were men. At a minimum the guy had to be torn. Debating with himself about the next right move.

“I want to believe I know his heart well enough to be sure he wouldn’t. But I guess it’s a risk.”

“One we have to take.” Bowman put his hand over Sarah’s as they pulled out of the parking lot. “And if he does screw this up, it’ll just give more of an excuse to take care of Lou my way.”

“You won’t have to. King will come through. I just know he will. Then we’ll finally be able to start a life together.” Her hand tensed under his. “Or I mean we can—”

“I want that too,” he cut in. “The time we spent on the farm was the closest to pure happiness I’ve ever felt. If not for this looming and complicated situation back here, I’d have been completely content for the first time in my life. I want a future with you. No doubts. No hesitation.”

“Oh, to be a man,” Sarah giggled. “I’m a person who regularly says *no worries* when in fact I have all the worries. An abundant load of worries. But I believe you when you have no doubts or hesitations. You men are all simple creatures at heart.”

“I can’t help it if loving you is simple for me.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek.

“Love,” she gasped, leaning away so she could get a better look at him. “You’re throwing around the L word? That’s bold.”

“It doesn’t feel bold. It feels true. But I don’t want you to feel any pressure to reciprocate. You’ve got a long road ahead of you. There’s going to be healing and backsliding and a good chance you’ll not recognize the woman you are a month from now. Or a year.”

“Maybe you won’t love that woman.” She drew in a deep breath and looked out the window.

“I will love every upgrade. Every breakdown. All the failures and fears. I’ll love you when you hate everything. I’ll love you when you find the rest of yourself. Every ideation. Every version of you, I will love.”

If he’d been asked a few months ago if he’d be waxing poetic over a woman, he’d have laughed. Bowman was loyal. He was tough. He’d do anything for the people he loved. But that action would rarely extend to verbalizing his feelings. That kind of vulnerability had never been something he understood or did well. There was always a way to show someone you loved them without having to find a way to tell them.

That’s how he knew Sarah was different. He didn’t practice this speech or mull over whether or not he should tell her at all. It rose from a place in him he hadn’t known existed. Like the reflex jolt of his leg when a doctor would tap his knee with that tiny hammer. It was an impulse. Automatic. Biologic.

“I’ve waited a long time to have someone say something like that to me. There has always been one thing I’ve coveted and you’re giving it to me.”

“What’s that?”

“Radical acceptance without a single string attached. No asterisk.”

“I’d rather live an imperfect life with you than not have you at all.” She answered with only the gentle wiping away of a stray tear on her cheek.

Bowman pulled the car into the rental lot and checked his watch. “Carmen said she’ll be contacting us shortly with flight information. We might as well return the car and grab a ride share to the address she gave us.”

“Wouldn’t you love to pull back the curtain on their operation? You walked away from your apartment so they’ll handle that and all your things. School for Emelia. They somehow have a way to tie up every loose end.”

“It sounds like they’ve had a lot of practice figuring it all out.”

“I guess there’s never really a shortage of bad people doing cruel things.”

“The worst kind of job security.” Strolling into the car rental return office Bowman was trying to see all of this as the start of something. King was going to live up to his word. They’d fly out of this hellhole and back to the farm. He let himself imagine a reunion with his sister. Maybe she’d leave Portland and come to the farm since Nick was there too.

The paperwork was finished and the ride-share ordered. They’d be wheels up soon.

“Sir!” A wiry man in a mechanics uniform was jogging into the lobby, waving his hand. “You left this in the car.” His sewn-on nametag read Dale and his face was red from chasing after them.

There was a beat-up stuffed animal half flopped over his hand. Sarah’s visceral reaction was all Bowman needed to put the pieces together.

“It’s Emelia’s?” he asked, grabbing her by the arm and moving her swiftly behind him. The entire place was glass. Anyone outside would have a clear shot at either of them from here.

“The one Carry said Lou had taken,” Sarah breathed out.

“It’s not yours?” the mechanic asked, his pock-marked face twisting with confusion. “It was in the trunk. I was just checking the car back in. Maybe the people before you left it in there.”

“Get me the keys to a car you have outback and a way to get to it,” Bowman ordered. “Now.”

“You want to rent another car?” the clerk behind the desk asked.

Sarah reached for the stuffed animal and clutched it to her chest. “How did he know where we were?”

“King?” Bowman boomed as he slammed a hand down on the counter. “Don’t make me ask again. Keys. Something out back.”

“Is everything all right?” the clerk asked, her eyes wide with worry. “Are you robbing us?”

“I’m in danger,” Sarah explained frantically. “This stuffed animal is a message. A deadly threat. My husband . . . if he’s here, he will kill me.”

“Oh.” Dale lit with recognition and his nostrils flared angrily with sudden understanding. “My father was a piece of shit like that. Lisa, give me the keys to the Mustang. I just finished an oil change on it. It’s in the garage. You can drive it straight out of there and down the employee entrance ramp.”

Bowman took Sarah by the hand and tugged her along.

“Is he here?” she asked, a shake of emotion in her voice. “He’s here?”

“He could have left the stuffed animal at any time today. We ate. We were out of the car multiple times.” Bowman clicked the button on the key fob and the lights on the Mustang came to life.

Dale was still on their heels. “Once you’re ready I’ll open the overhead door. You’ll take the small road to the left then you’re only a mile from the interstate.”

“Thanks,” Bowman said. He slapped Dale’s back gratefully. “You can’t take that.” He pointed to the stuffed animal.

“Mr. Snuffles?” she asked nervously.

“He might have tampered with it in some way. It has to stay here.”

“I can hold on to it,” Dale offered. “I don’t know where you’re headed or what’s going on but this thing will be here if you ever think it’s safe to come back for it. Or I can send it to you.”

Sarah winced as she handed it over. “It’s my daughter’s favorite.”

“It’ll be safe here.”

Bowman had to usher her to the car and open her door before she snapped out of the sadness that had enveloped her.

“King,” she whispered when he fell into the driver’s seat and the engine roared to life. “This means Lou must know I met with King. He’s in danger now.”

“Or he’s the one who tipped off Lou.”

It was a five-speed car and Bowman was happy for it. There was nothing like a solid clutch and the revving engine of a Mustang to blaze the way out of a tight situation.

“There’s no way. He wouldn’t have met with me if he was going to betray me. It’s why I needed to come here. I had to look him in the eye. And I know what I saw. We need to warn him.”

“Not a chance,” Bowman asserted. “The only people we’re warning are Carmen and Lauren. They can’t very well have their legal team meet with this guy. They need to know we’ve been compromised. It’ll change things.”

“No,” Sarah pleaded, clutching her chest as if it were about to explode. He imagined that was exactly what it felt like. “Please let me call him.”

“Sarah,” he grimaced. “I can’t—”

“This is the moment I need you, Bowman. The time when things are falling apart. I’ll never be able to live with myself if I don’t warn him and something happens.” She took a few frantic breaths. “Plus, he’s the only person who has what we

need. If there is a chance we can still salvage what we planned we need to try.”

He was impressed by her shifting tactics. In the height of panic, she knew logic would be the most effective way to sway him. And she wasn't wrong.

“Call. Keep it short. Very short.”

“Pick up,” she whispered as she waited for the line to connect. It didn't. Voicemail. Three more attempts ended the same way.

“They can trace him,” Sarah said. “If you call Carmen, she'll be able to narrow down where he is. That's how you found me, right?”

“We are not going to find King,” Bowman said, cutting his hand through the air. “We're getting on whatever aircraft gets us out of here the fastest. We're getting back to the farm and to Emelia.”

“He'll kill him.”

“King understood that was a possibility and he showed up anyway. Judging by your conversation and if you're right about him, he'd want you to go. I know I would.”

“There has to be something we can do.”

The phone rang and she bobbed it for a second as she tried to catch her breath.

“King?” she asked as her free hand clamped down like a vice on Bowman's forearm. “Are you alright?” Switching the call to speaker phone she looked over helplessly at Bowman.

“He knows,” King said unemotionally. “You've got to get out of here now.”

“How does he know?”

“Someone spotted you at the airport. He's got people on the lookout for you everywhere.”

“No one was tailing,” Bowman corrected adamantly. “I'm positive.”

“They weren’t,” King agreed. “But from the airport it can be easy to track traffic cameras. They got your plates from the cameras by the rental car facility and he had someone track your locations from there.”

“He knows we met?” Sarah asked biting down hard on her lip to keep it from quivering. “What did he say?”

“If he knows, he wasn’t letting on. But that’s not unusual for him right before he eliminates a threat. He never likes to raise any suspicion in the person he’s going to deal with. I’m supposed to meet him at the house in an hour. He knows you switched vehicles and he’s trying to get the plate of what you’re in now. So like I said, you need to go.”

“Come with us,” she demanded. “Right now. Just get what you can for evidence and come with us.”

“Sarah,” Bowman said with a gravely serious tone.

“He’s not wrong,” King replied. He sounded like a defeated man now. “You’d be insane to trust me at this point. It’s just as likely that I tipped Lou off. Maybe all of this is an elaborate scheme to get to you.”

“It’s not.” Sarah squeezed Bowman’s arm again. “I know that it isn’t.”

“You were just talking to me about how easy it is for people to deceive each other. That no one can really be trusted. You know that’s true.”

“King, I’d bet my life on you right now. Come with us.”

“You’d be doing exactly that. Think about Emelia.”

“I am thinking about her,” Sarah choked out. “I want her to know that her mom was willing to risk it all on a friend. On someone she believed in. What kind of person would I be if I left you behind right now? We know what will happen.”

“We’d need to clear this with Carmen,” Bowman interjected, trying to pump the brakes on the abrupt changes. “Remember what happened with Carry. That was a shift to the original plan. It was hasty and proved to be a terrible decision. Carmen will never go for this.”

“Then we all leave a different way. We can just drive. Give them some time to come up with some other solution.”

“I got the tapes,” King said as if this was no big deal. “Just tell me who to turn them over to and get out of here.”

“No.” She gnashed her teeth. “Come to us. We’ll find a way.”

Bowman checked his phone and sighed. “King, there’s a high rise on Lindell Ave. The Wesley Executive Apartments. Tell the doorman to take what you have and give it to the tenant in apartment Nineteen C. That’s all you need to do.”

“King, don’t. Please. If you turn that over and don’t get out of town you know what will happen. We can meet you there.”

“Tell Emelia I said hi,” King said. “Take care of yourself, Sarah.”

The call dropped abruptly and Sarah cried out.

“He understands what’s at stake,” Bowman said, grateful as hell that King hadn’t put them in a terrible position. He’d been man enough to make the tough choice so Bowman didn’t have to be the bad guy. “King is a grown man. He can take care of himself.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks as a flood of sobs bubbled up. “I can’t believe he’s doing this. He has a chance to get out of this. To come with us.”

“He doesn’t,” Bowman said. “I’m sorry to have to say it, but you know as well as I do that King can’t just hop on the same jet as us, go to the farm, and live happily ever after. There is no way to know for sure that he’s not a threat.”

“How about when he turns over enough evidence to incriminate Lou? Then will you believe he’s worthy of saving?”

“It’s not about being worthy,” Bowman corrected. “It’s about risk. And right now, we’ve taken more than we should have. I need to call Carmen.”

Sarah only waved her hand dismissively and turned to look out the window. Her heart was breaking and he wasn’t doing

enough to keep it in one piece.

“Carmen,” he said, not putting this call on speaker phone. “We’ve got a problem.”

“My least favorite way to start a conversation.”

“Lou knows we’re in town. He had someone at the airport who spotted us. Traffic cameras are compromised and he was able to keep a lock on us without someone tailing us. We can’t be sure if he knows she met with King. If he does, he’s playing it cool until he can do something about it.”

“Where are you now?” Carmen’s voice was flat and unemotional, kicking in to business mode.

“We changed cars. At this point I don’t think he has our plate number and I’m staying off the main roads with traffic cameras. We need a way out of here.”

“Working on it,” Carmen said, now a flurry of unknown voices coming over the phone. “We knew this would be more challenging. We have some options for you. They’re not pretty.”

“We’ll take what we can get.”

“What’s the status on King and the evidence he has?” Lauren’s voice cut in. “Did you get my message regarding a drop off location?”

“Yes and he’s on his way there now with video and other forms of evidence to drop off. He said it should be more than enough to put Lou away.”

“Once it’s secure, our team will work quickly. Is King willing to make a statement, go on record?”

“Honestly, I think his cover is blown,” Bowman reported somberly. “If he can get those tapes dropped off without incident, he won’t have much time after that to get himself to safety. There will be a target on his back.”

“When we view the tapes, validate their credibility, and ensure they’ll rise to the legal standard we can try to offer some resources to King.”

“He’ll be dead by then,” Sarah said, leaning to the phone that was pressed to Bowman’s ear. “King will be the whole reason that Lou goes to prison and I get my life back, but he’ll have to pay the ultimate price. How can that be fair?”

Bowman looked at her empathetically. “Let us know where to go next and if you hear anything from your people at the drop-off location King is heading to. Keep us updated.”

“Will do,” Carmen said. “Keep an eye on your phone and stay off those main roads. We’ll get you out of there as soon as possible.”

Sarah couldn’t look at him when he ended the call. She just pressed her head against the glass of the car window and quietly cried. There was nothing he could say to comfort her. But there might be something he could do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Bowman

Carmen had gotten creative. The last helicopter ride had been harrowing with Emelia feeling sick and all their nerves raw. He didn't expect this would be any different. Except for the fact that he wasn't going.

The whir of the helicopter blades was deafening as it landed on the large pad on the roof of the hospital. A medivac chopper would take them the first leg of their trip and start the journey back to the farm.

"Whatever you do," Bowman called to one of the pilots who had just jumped off to greet him and usher them on. "Don't let her get off. Just get this thing in the air as fast as you can."

"You're not coming?" he shouted back, and Bowman was glad Sarah was still waiting on the other side of the large metal door that accessed the roof.

"I'm not, but if she knows that, she'll never go."

The pilot nodded his understanding and Bowman went to get Sarah. They ducked as she boarded the helicopter and the man buckled her harness into place. She was too distracted by the chaos of it all to notice Bowman was hesitating at the door of the helicopter.

"I love you," he shouted against the noise, "with no strings attached."

“What are you doing?” she asked, waving him to come on. The pilot was back in his seat now and waved Bowman off as the engine roared a little louder.

“I’m going to help King,” he shouted. “You’re going to Emelia.”

“No,” she cried, pulling at her harness and looking desperately at the pilots as Bowman stepped away and ducked until he was clear of them. A second later they were ascending into the sky.

There would be time later for her to forgive him. Once he’d done what he could for King, it would all be worth it.

He raced down the stairs of the hospital and spilled out into the street. He saw the helicopter cutting through the sky and away from the city.

“Carmen,” he said breathlessly when she answered the phone. “Has King made the drop yet?”

“No,” she answered. “You’re not on the helicopter?”

“Sarah is. Get her back to the farm. I need to see what I can do for King.”

“You two don’t play by the rules and it’s seriously screwing up our process.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t think I could watch Sarah for one more minute, thinking she cost King his life. There has to be something I can do.”

“The process,” Carmen groaned. “He drops the evidence. We vet it. Our lawyers work with the prosecutor. The wheels of justice finally begin to turn.”

“He’s going to be crushed by those wheels.”

“And maybe he should be,” Carmen cut back, seeming to speak more freely now that she knew Sarah wasn’t in earshot. “The man has surely done some vile things. There is no way he can be that high up in a criminal organization and not have blood on his hands. If he gets caught up in this legally, so be it.”

“Sarah trusts him.”

“There is something you’ll never understand about the position Sarah is in right now. I unfortunately know it all too well. Every piece of navigational equipment inside that woman has been knocked around to the point she doesn’t know up from down. It’ll take intensive healing for her to be able to trust her gut again. I care about what happens to Sarah and her daughter, but she’s not objective enough right now to know who deserves what.”

“I agree,” Bowman replied reluctantly. “And from your standpoint, you should be guarded and protective of that. For me, the man who hopes to be able to look her in the eye again someday, I need to do this. She needs me to.”

“Fine. You know where King is going to be. Don’t bring shit to my doorstep. That apartment building is a secure location, but I don’t need a shootout. That medivac helicopter will be back on that roof in two hours. You should get on it.”

“I will.”

Carmen hung up before he could make any more promises. Driving the Mustang had its advantages as he weaved in and out of traffic on his way to the meet-up spot. King would be there. He would show up. He had to.

As Bowman rounded the last corner and the entrance to the building was in sight, his phone rang again.

Carmen didn’t bother with a greeting. “He just dropped off. The package is secure and it’ll be processed from there. He should be leaving the lobby now.”

“I see him,” Bowman said, squealing his tires as he screeched to a stop in front of the entrance. Carmen had already hung up on him again.

“Get in,” Bowman said, through the half open car window.

“I’ve got to go meet Lou,” King replied, looking distracted.

“No, the odds are he knows what you’ve done. Going back to see him will be a trap. You know that.”

“I do.”

“Then why are you going?”

He leaned down to get a better look at Bowman. “I have a code. It’s been hard to keep in the line of work I’m in, but I do the best I can. I don’t kill people in cold blood. Even people like Lou who deserve it. But tonight, he’ll give me a reason to defend myself and I will. And with that, I’ll end it. I’ll end him.”

“Not if he gets the jump on you,” Bowman argued. “You have no idea what he has planned.”

“Then he’ll win our little duel and the court system will get him. Either way it’ll be over.”

“She doesn’t want you to die.”

“She should.” He cracked his knuckles and kept his eyes scanning the sidewalk in either direction.

“But she doesn’t. Sarah is going to need as much support as she can get. If you die, she’ll spend the rest of her life blaming herself.”

“Then let me go so I can kill him.”

“I’ll drive,” Bowman suggested. “You’ll have a better shot if you’re not going in alone. I can hang back and see what his play is and back you up if you need it.”

“Did she leave town?” King asked, narrowing his eyes. “She better not be hanging around for you.”

“She left. She’ll be pissed as hell at me, but I wasn’t going to leave you high and dry. There has to be something we can do.”

“You have to hang back,” King ordered, his face gravely serious. “If any of our guys spot you at all, you’re dead.”

“I’m just there in case things go sideways.”

“We’ll be out-gunned. Out-manned.”

“That’s never bothered me before. I can handle myself and I’m guessing you can too.”

King only nodded. “You know the house address?”

“Yeah.”

“There’s a blind spot out where the garbage gets picked up. It’s around the north side of the property. You can wait there.”

“You’re not trying to screw me over, right?” Bowman scrutinized King, looking for a tell.

“I guess I could ask you the same thing.”

“I think we both want what’s best for Sarah. That’s got to be enough to go on right now. We know having Lou out of the picture is all that matters.”

“We might not be calibrated on what that means though,” King chuckled humorlessly. “You got that cop blood still running through your veins. Serve and protect. I’m more focused on neutralizing the threat.”

“We’re more in line than you might assume. Here,” Bowman handed over another burner cell. “My number is in there. Just call and leave the line open when you go in.”

“What’s the code word going to be?”

“We don’t need one,” Bowman explained. “I’ll know when to come in.”

The ride was silent as Bowman sat alone in the car. He knew everything that happened from this point on would be on him. He’d made the choice not to leave. The decision to follow King right now. He’d have to live with the consequences.

He connected his earpiece to the phone and listened as King entered the house. “Lou, where you at?”

“Kitchen,” Lou called back.

Bowman was ready for the worst. Would it just be one shot? An earth-shattering noise that would upend everything and devastate Sarah?

“We’ve got nothing,” Lou barked. “They swapped cars and we can’t get a plate. I can’t track them. Where the hell have you been all day. If I lose her again the odds of tracking her down get slim.”

“You’ve got contacts everywhere. How far can she really get? She’s got no money. Nothing at all with her.”

“Someone is helping her,” Lou growled. “My contacts at the airport say she and that guy flew in on a private jet. But for some reason they couldn’t access any information about it. Not the flight plan. Not who owns it. Nothing. Whoever she’s hooked up with is well-connected. That’s why we need to do something now.”

“Maybe it’s time to focus back on business. You’ve been all over the place. Missing meetings. Blowing off our contacts. Sarah can’t stay gone forever. She probably just needs to clear her head.”

“This is on you.” Lou’s voice dropped and so did Bowman’s stomach. “You let her get away in the park and then you let her run off from my car. It’s almost like you want her to go.”

“She had a plan at the park we didn’t know anything about.”

“You knew Carry lived close by. You knew she was a contact of Sarah. That should have been the first place you went. By the time we got there, Sarah had already left and Carry had clammed up.”

“There were cops everywhere looking for me. She gave my description as an attempted kidnapper who tried to grab her daughter at the park. I couldn’t exactly hang around. Plus, the day you had her in the car, you were throwing punches at me. I didn’t start that shit.”

“You’ve always had a thing for her,” Lou said, and for the first time Bowman could hear the heavy slur in his voice.

“You’re drunk,” King said, sounding annoyed. “Go sleep it off.”

“Go to hell,” Lou boomed. “You always get in my way when it comes to my wife. You love her, don’t you?”

“Just because I don’t want to see you smacking her around doesn’t mean I’m in love with her. I’m actually a real man

who thinks hitting women is for pussies. Your mother would roll over in her grave if she knew you were a wife beater.”

Bowman could hear it now. King wasn't on the defensive, he was on the attack. Goaded Lou into a rage.

“What did you just say?”

“Your mother would be disgusted with how you treated your wife. Only weak men have to do that shit. That's what she would say to you.”

“All these years,” Lou snarled. “I've taken care of your ass since you were some scrawny unloved poor kid with nothing. That car you drive. The meals you eat. The power you have. I gave you that. Now you want to come around here and tell me how to live my life? You'd be nothing without me.”

“I think I'd have figured it out on my own,” King chuckled. “You think you're so powerful. You don't hear what people say when you leave the room. How they really see you. The only thing you've got going for you is ruling with an iron fist. You don't have anyone's respect, only their fear. And even that is waning lately.”

“Get out,” Lou boomed. “Get out of my house. I'm done with you. You're incompetent. You let my wife and kid get away.”

“They're not prisoners, you asshole. They shouldn't have to run for their lives.”

Bowman heard a scuffle. What sounded like shoving and maybe some punches being thrown. Then the one thing he hoped he wouldn't. The pop of a gun. One single shot. Then nothing. The line cut off.

Jumping from the car he drew his weapon and approached the front door with caution. There were already men charging into the house.

“Police,” Bowman announced even though it was false advertising. “There were shots fired here.”

King stumbled out of the kitchen with a butcher knife lodged in his shoulder and a gun still in his hand.

“We need to go,” he stuttered, throwing his arm over Bowman’s shoulder and leaning heavily on him.

The men who had come spilling in from the yard looked dumbfounded and stared at King.

“He stabbed me,” King yelled back. “Check the tapes. I had no choice. You want to kill me for that in front of a cop, go ahead. But I’ve been loyal to that piece of shit for years and it got me nothing but trouble and a knife in me. He’s not worth dying for.”

Bowman kept one eye on the confused men and dragged King from the house and back to the car.

“Is he dead?” Bowman asked as he lowered King into the passenger seat. “Did you kill him?”

Sirens were wailing in the distance and Bowman knew they’d have to go. King needed medical attention and Bowman needed to catch that helicopter that would hopefully get him back to Sarah.

He sped away from the house and to the hospital. At least King was alive. He was losing a lot of blood but still conscious.

“He’s not dead,” King finally sputtered out. “I shot him in the gut. It’ll be painful as hell, a slow death if it kills him.”

“He came at you with the knife?”

“I had a grip on the arm that would have reached for his gun. I pushed him against the counter with the knives. All I needed him to do was come at me like that. I pressed my gun to his gut and blew him backward. It’ll all be on the security footage. I didn’t have a choice.”

“We’re going to get you fixed up,” Bowman promised, wishing he had his blue lights right now.

Pulling in to the entrance of the hospital he barely slammed it into park before jumping out and yelling for help. There was a stretcher. A flurry of medical staff. Loud orders of what to do next. And then nothing. Just Bowman standing outside the hospital, waiting for something to happen.

Unease coursed through his body as he looked up at the night sky. King's blood was on Bowman's shirt and hands. For the first time in ages, he had no idea what to do next. He wanted to be told. For it to be obvious. Crystal clear.

Then as he closed his eyes, he heard it. The whir of the helicopter landing on the hospital roof. A sign he couldn't ignore.

Chapter Twenty Three

Sarah

The farm felt too vast without him. Like the whole place was an echo. She couldn't find the edges of her own life. Anything to hold on to.

"You having anything to eat today?" Carter asked, a breakfast sandwich wrapped up in a napkin in his hand.

"I had coffee," she replied as she wrapped her arms around herself. "I haven't had an appetite."

"We'll get word soon." Carter handed over the sandwich. "Ronnie finally has the biscuit recipe worked out perfect. Maybe try to have a little."

"I shouldn't have made Bowman feel like he had to help King. I practically forced him to stay there and get involved. That was too much to ask."

"It sounds like you didn't know he was staying at all. He's the one who didn't get on the helicopter. And we know he's all right. Carmen said it's a fluid situation but that Bowman wasn't injured."

"Did he kill Lou? What happened to King? What does a fluid situation even mean?" She took the food from his hand to be polite but couldn't imagine eating it. Her stomach was in knots with worry.

“It wasn’t something Carmen could talk about on the phone. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t know how to just sit around and wait,” she admitted with a little sob in her voice. “Emelia is off picking me some flowers. Not a care in the world. I love that for her. But I can’t even breathe.”

“Breathings overrated,” Carter chuckled. “Just one of those things our body does.”

“It seems pretty important right now actually.”

The front gate made a very distinct noise. It was grinding kind squeak whenever it was opened to let a car pass through. It called to her like a dog whistle now. It could be Bowman. This could be over.

“Wait,” Carter called to her back and she ran across the field and up the hill toward the gate. Maybe it was a delivery. Someone coming for their riding lesson. But there was the smallest chance it was Bowman and that kept her feet pounding against the earth toward the gate.

And it was him. She saw his profile as the car turned in and she knew Bowman was here. Alive. With answers.

“Bowman,” she called, waving her hands wildly, the breakfast sandwich flying off in little pieces as she did. His face broke into a smile at the sight of her.

“You look like a crazy person,” he laughed, pulling the car up beside her. “Is that a biscuit?”

“It used to be.” She leaned in through the open window and kissed him. “You should have gotten on the helicopter. That was a terrible thing to do to me.”

“I know. I’m sorry. If I’d have told you I was staying you would have wanted to stay too. I figured you wouldn’t jump out of a helicopter just to prove a point.”

“What happened?” her eyes were filled with tears at the prospect of bad news. Or what kind of news could really be any good at this point?

“King was stabbed and Lou was shot.” She appreciated his candor. Not burying the lead with any flowery assurances that everything would be all right.

“Are they ok?” Perhaps, considering all that had happened, she shouldn’t have been asking about how Lou was. She should wish him dead. Him leaving this planet was her best shot at a good life. But that wasn’t what she wanted.

“King was being rushed into surgery when I left. I couldn’t stay. Last I heard he was stable. Carmen said I needed to get out of there and let them handle the fallout from this. If I’d have gotten caught up in it then things would have gotten even more complicated. I don’t know about Lou. He was shot in the stomach. I haven’t heard anything else.”

“When will we know?”

“I’m not sure.”

“And what happens now?” Sarah brought her hands to her cheeks feeling dizzy. Like the world had started spinning too fast on its axis.

“We just wait. But Lauren did say you and Emelia were not in imminent danger right now.”

“That’s got to mean Lou’s dead.”

Bowman only shrugged.

“Hey,” Carter said, running up to greet them. “I just got an update. Lauren called.”

“Is King going to make it?” Bowman asked, looking deeply worried.

“Yes. She said he’s out of surgery and doing well. He’s expected to make a full recovery. She’s having him transported to a private rehab facility to get him some distance from all of that.”

“And Lou?” Sarah asked, choking on the words.

“He also was rushed into surgery. The bullet in his stomach impacted his spine. He’s paralyzed, but alive. The evidence that King turned over was sufficient and has been

given to the appropriate legal parties. Lou won't get out of this. Once he's recovered enough, he'll be going away for life. You won't have to worry about him again."

"King made sure of that," Bowman said, touching her arm gently. "Did Lauren say what will happen with him? He won't face any prosecution, will he?"

"I've got faith in the team," Carter said. His noncommittal answer spoke volumes. "Emelia will be glad to see you, Bowman. Why don't we go get the kids."

"We'll catch up," Bowman said, taking Sarah by the hand.

"Are you ok?" She scanned his face, wondering now if he'd been hurt in some way and just hadn't told her yet.

"I don't want to dictate what you do next."

"Ok," she said, her heart thudding.

"But I didn't get a chance to reconnect with Cleo. She's out in Portland and I would really like some time with her. It doesn't have to be right now. Emelia is happy here. At some point, when we're ready to move on, Portland might be nice."

"I'd really like a chance to get to know her." Sarah smiled and rose to tip toes to kiss his cheek. "And I wouldn't hate the idea of being on the complete other side of the country. The distance would be nice."

"Really?" Bowman looked flushed with relief. "I don't want to ask too much."

"I don't care where we go, as long as we go together. I'm done waiting for the next awful thing to happen. I'm going make sure my future is full of promise. I'll hide away if I need to, but I'll never hide from you."

"You'll never have to." He pulled her into his arms and she melted against him. "Oh, one more thing." He released her from his grip and she was sad for it. Colder. Missing his arms already. But the reason he let her go was worth it.

"Carmen had this brought to the airport. Hardly made it there in time. It was a miracle. I have no idea how she did it."

He'd disappeared, leaning into the backseat of the car and emerging with a stuffed animal and a grin.

"Mr. Snuffles," Sarah cried.

"He's been fully scanned for any type of tracking device."

"Mr. Snuffles has been through hell." Sarah clutched him tightly to her chest. They'd all been through hell.

"He's home now. And we'll never let him go again." He touched her cheek and promised her with his eyes that she would have a beautiful life. That he'd make sure of it. And she believed him.

EPILOGUE

King

This was not the hospital room he'd remembered when he'd lost consciousness. Something was different. Very different.

"You've got a nice view." There was a young woman with a streak of purple in her hair standing at the foot of his bed.

"Where am I?" He moved both his arms, wondering if he was cuffed to the bed. They wouldn't be wrong for doing it. He'd lived his life in a way that often ended up in some sort of cage or chains. But to his surprise the only thing holding him in place was the IV in his hand.

"The location doesn't really matter at this point. I'm Carmen."

"I've heard about you." King tried to sit up and then winced with pain.

"Getting stabbed can do a number on you."

"Is Lou dead? Emelia and Sarah. How are they?"

"Lou is alive, but he'll never be the same. And whatever he does regain will be all he has when he spends the rest of his life in prison. You made sure of that."

"He came at me—"

"I don't care." Carmen folded her arms across her chest. "You solved a lot of my problems. You don't have to justify anything to me. I understand that sometimes it takes tough

tactics when you're dealing with someone like Lou. My role has limitations. The organization I work for has a process. Rules. Guard rails."

"You don't like that?" He was getting a sense of the situation suddenly.

"It works ninety percent of the time."

"And the other ten percent?"

"It fails miserably and people get hurt."

King nodded. "What is it I can do for you?"

"Do I have that look? Like I need something?"

"Yes." King nodded. "And I'm a captive audience. It's not like I can leave."

She tilted her head to the side and appraised him critically. "I saw the video footage of the shooting. It was like a dance and you were leading. You held his gun hand against his body and waltzed him right over to the counter where the knives were. You put them right within his reach. You knew what you were doing."

"Did it look that way?"

"Probably not to anyone else, but to me, I could see it."

"And?"

"It tells me you were willing to get stabbed, maybe even fatally as long as it meant you could shoot him. That's insane."

"I wasn't really interested in going to jail for the rest of my life for murder even if I deserve to go away. Self-defense works out better for me."

"You could have died."

"If I could shrug without blinding pain I would."

Carmen's expression softened. "We can help each other out."

"I'm listening."

“Everyone I work with. All the people making decisions and keeping us compliant and doing things the right way. They don’t actually understand what it’s like. The knife’s edge people are standing on.”

“You do.” He didn’t pose it as a question. It was written all over her face. “It’s frustrating as hell to have to work within the rules when there are so many people to help.”

She nodded.

“You need someone who could work outside the process?”

“Sometimes.”

“But off the radar too? The board of directors wouldn’t exactly approve.”

“Not at all.”

“You have a job in mind already?”

“You’ve got some healing to do first.” She gestured at his wrapped stab wound. “When you’re better we can talk.”

“You’ll change your mind by then.” He narrowed his eyes at her. “You’re already wondering if you should be here at all. You’re risking a lot.”

“I’m risking everything.”

“Then there must be a damn good reason.” He looked over at the chair for her to sit down. “Tell me what you need.”

Reluctantly she obliged. “I lived in Italy for a while. Years. Hiding out. I met a lot of people. Some that changed me on a DNA level. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yea,” he chuckled. “But probably not in the same way. I’ve been changed by people but not for the better.”

“When I left there, but before I started doing what I am now, I took the vigilante route. It was foolish and dangerous.”

“Did it work?”

She grinned. “It did.” Shaking the smile away she recentered herself. “But I learned better ways. Things that

keep as many people as possible safe. The process and the rules exist for a reason and they are right.”

“But when they fail?”

“More should be done.” Her eyes darted away.

“Who needs more done?”

“Her name is Bailey. She talked me off the ledge many times. We’ve been through it all together. Hurting. Healing. Reentry into the real world.”

“Where is she now?”

“She went back.” Carmen pinched her fingers to the bridge of her nose. “The way we do things, that rarely happens. We deal in only extreme situations where normal channels of justice are unlikely to work. The abuser is a person of power or has wealth and resources. We’re never the first line of defense, but we’re normally the last and it sticks. By the time someone is with us they want to leave. They want the person to be convicted and pay for their crimes. The new life is the goal and there isn’t any looking back.”

“But sometimes they go back?” King felt a pang of understanding that made him squirm. The loyalty he felt to Lou was strong. When you have no one else, the people who accept you feel like the only ones in the world. But maybe there was a way for him to make up for the things he’d done. This could be it.

“It’s harder when they are your parents,” Carmen sighed. “Her father was in prison. Her mother never was. They live on a commune. A restrictive, controlling, cultlike atmosphere that Bailey had once been so glad to be free of. I know how bad it was there. She talked about it in group therapy all the time.”

“So why can’t your people get her out then?”

“Rule number one, we don’t kidnap people.”

“That’s a pretty good rule,” he chuckled.

“Someone has to be willing to leave. Anxious to leave. Ready. The last time I heard from Bailey she was trying to convince me she was right where she was supposed to be. She

didn't want out. No one on my team would be supportive of trying to extract her without that.”

“Maybe they're right.”

“This is the part they don't get because they haven't lived it. This is the thing you can't put into words and get someone to understand.”

King was not guided by any rules or bylaws. “I'll go get her. Just tell me where she is and give me some resources. Tell me where to bring her.”

“You can't just grab her and leave,” Carmen huffed, her eyes wide with exasperation. “I don't want to just yank her out of her life against her will.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I want her to want to leave.”

“I don't know what the means.”

“You could go there and see what's going on. Maybe talk to her. Convince her—”

“Let me stop you there. If I've given you the impression that I have some magic with people, you've been misled. I have very few tactics. Only a couple tools in my toolbox. They work. But none of them are gentle negotiations with hugs and flowers.”

“You know people.” Carmen walked to the window and stared out. “You read them. You were two steps ahead of Lou. Maybe you've been relying on those tactics because of the world you were living in. But if you were in a different environment, I think you could find new ways to get things done. You could help Bailey.”

“You want to believe that. It's dangerous when people convince themselves of things.”

“That's not what's happening. I've got a job that needs to be done, I believe you can do it. Are you willing to try? Because if not there might be some detectives who want to talk to you about your previous crimes.”

“Wow.” King was impressed and he knew his face showed it. “Blackmail?”

“No. Reality. I’m willing to make a few backroom deals to make sure you’re seen merely as a cooperative civilian who did the right thing and turned over incriminating evidence in order take a very bad man off the street. If I don’t make those calls, the investigation will deepen. I can’t be sure they’ll find anything on you. Maybe your hands are clean.”

“Maybe pigs can fly.”

“It’s up to you. The decision is yours.”

“Where exactly is this commune?”

“No place you’ve ever heard of before.”

“I’m supposed to just show up?”

“This is what I do for a living. You’ll have a complete cover story. Plan. Resources. Not for taking her out of there against her will.”

“No kidnapping.” He pretended to make note with his uninjured hand. “Got it.”

“You’ll deal with me. Only me. This can’t get out. I’m a part of something now. It’s bigger than just what I want.”

“Yet here you are.”

“Two things can be true at once.”

“That’s the hard part of life, I guess. When they let me out of this place, I’ll be at your disposal and it’ll be discrete.”

There had been a lot of missing pieces in his life. Things he’d never been taught. A world he’d never experienced because he’d lived only as Lou’s employee. For once, the expression on someone’s face made perfect sense to him. Carmen was relieved. Wholly and completely reassured.

“I’ll send you the details. Until then you’ll have everything you need in this facility while you recover.”

“I appreciate the chance. I’ve never had one before.”

“No one’s ever given you a shot at a job?”

“No one’s ever given me a chance to be the good guy.”

“Then you better prove me right.”

The End

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