

She must fight harder than ever  
to save the innocent life within.



EPISODE TWO

# VICTIMS NO MORE

*Daddy Dearest*



BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE COWBOY GANGSTER SERIES

# CJ BISHOP

# VICTIMS NO MORE

## *Daddy Dearest*

EPISODE TWO

No More Victims series

*A Phoenix Club series*

## CJ BISHOP

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## VICTIMS NO MORE: DADDY DEAREST (NO MORE VICTIMS BK 2/EP 2)

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)



*Momma?*

Franny took an involuntary step back and was halted by her father's hand pressing firmly against her lower back. The woman walked closer, and Franny tried to retreat but there was nowhere to go as her father held her in place. Even if she could've run... there was no escape, not inside the apartment. It was a *prison*—bars and all.

“My baby.” Her mother brushed her fingertips along Franny's cheek. “I was heartbroken when you ran away. My little girl... out there on the streets alone... with so many dangerous men lurking about.” She sighed and gently pinched Franny's chin, lifting her face. “I know they hurt you, baby. You should have stayed with me. I took care of you, didn't I?”

Franny shook, tears welling thick. “No,” she choked. “You *didn't*. You're the same as them. You let men hurt me—just like they did.”

Her mother smiled and shook her head. “I never let anyone hurt you, darling. The men you *entertained* were nice men.”

*Nice?* Franny had never met a *nice* man until Emmy and Oliver took her in. And then her dads...

“I want to go home,” she whispered, tears straining her voice. “Please... let me go home.”

“You are home, dear,” her mother cooed. “We're a family again. You, me, and your father. Everything is going to be as it was before. I promise.”

Franny glanced up at her father. She didn't remember him being around before she ran away, it was only her and her mom. Had he been there... somewhere... helping her mom *rent* her out to men? She'd figured out fast that her dad wasn't a good man, but she hadn't thought he was a part of her abuse from before. Somehow... that made him even more frightening and cemented in the reality that she was *trapped*—really *trapped*.

“Before we can get back to normal,” Russell spoke up, his fingertips pressing against Franny's back, “there is a little matter we need to address.”

Cold shivers swept through Franny. *The baby... he's talking about the baby.*

The woman pressed her palm to Franny's belly. “Ah, yes... the little bun in the oven.” She tsked. “Sweetie, how could you let this happen? You should've been more careful.”

Franny blinked; was she serious? *More careful?* The young girl trembled. “They... they *raped* me,” she whispered, tears spilling out. “I wasn't on a *date*.”

Her mother sighed. “Well, how it happened doesn't matter now. All that matters is that we take care of the problem so we can get back to our normal routine.”

Franny swallowed. “Norm... normal routine? Wh-What's that?”

“We'll talk about that later.” Her father addressed the woman. “Did you bring the magic pills?”

*No.* Franny shrank back but, again, met the resistance of her father's hand.

“No,” her mother said. “I'm out. But I made a new friend who can take care of the problem for us.”

“A new friend?”

“A doctor,” the woman explained and shrugged. “Well, he used to be a doctor until he was caught in some shady practice. He lost his medical license but still has medical know-how.”

“He can perform the abortion?”

“Yes.”

“Safely?” Russell pressed. “If he injures her...”

“She’ll be fine. He knows what he’s doing. This won’t be his first *back-alley* abortion.”

“Where would he do it?”

“He has a small, private facility set up,” the woman said. “With the recent attack on legal abortion, he’s going to clean up with all the women seeking abortions anyway they can get them.”

Russell nodded. “Get things set up with him as soon as possible. The sooner we get rid of the baby, the less risk to Franny.” He stroked her hair. “We don’t want anything to happen to our little beauty.”

“Of course not.” The woman cupped her face and kissed her between the eyes. “Pretty little girls are a goldmine.”

Franny’s stomach lurched and she tore away from the two adults, racing to the bathroom. She vomited into the toilet and sagged to her knees, hugging the seat, sobbing.

*I’m sorry, angel... I can’t protect you. I can’t... save you...  
I’m so sorry...*

...

“Eat up, darling. You need your strength.”

Franny stared at her plate. The thought of eating even a bite made her aching stomach pinch and revolt. She *did* need to eat—for the baby.

*What does it matter? They're going to kill your baby.*

Even in the face of that terrifying reality, she couldn't disregard the life growing inside her. Maybe help *would* come. It wasn't easy to believe, but help had come before, even when she'd had no hope at all. No one was looking for her then and still, she was found.

Now... her dads were looking for her, and their friends. Surely the cops, too. It was a cop who had found her the last time. He had cared about her and the other girls. Cared about all the kids out in the world in the clutches of traffickers. He would help look for her again, wouldn't he?

But none of that mattered if they didn't find her *soon*. Her parents meant to schedule the abortion as soon as possible.

Franny blinked and a tear rolled down her cheek. She picked up her fork and poked at her food then took a small bite and forced herself to swallow. Her parents' voices dulled in her ears. She didn't want to listen to their conversation or hear what they planned to do to her. She thought about her baby... and home. Her mind drifted away from this hell, and she imagined how life would have been with her dads and her brother, Maddy... and her baby. Her heart broke for the fragile life inside her. If she had to come back to this hell... why couldn't it have been *after* the baby was born? They wouldn't have taken the baby, too. Only her. And her child would be safe with her dads.

*Why God? Why did you let them get my angel, too? Why didn't you save her?*

Tamara's bitter voice drifted through the back of her mind — *'Because it was never supposed to live. It's a monster baby and an abomination to God.'*

Franny struggled to hold it together. The fork trembled in her hand, her eyes swimming. Was that true? God didn't care? Maybe he didn't care about her, either... because she wanted to save the baby. Maybe that's why she was back here—God was punishing her.

And if he was punishing her... then help wasn't coming.

...

"Do you think there's any real chance we'll find her?"  
Rodriguez entered the pub ahead of Matteo.

"I don't know," Matteo said. "It's a long shot but we can't give up."

"I didn't say anything about giving up," Rodriguez mumbled. "I'm just not sure they should get their hopes up. For all we know, she might not even be in the city anymore."

Matteo sighed. "Sometimes, hope is all a person has to keep them going."

"I wouldn't know about that." The younger man passed through the shadowed entryway of the pub.

Matteo didn't question his statement as he considered the source of his friend's pain and bitterness. Losing Greco, the love of his life had turned Rodriguez's world upside down and he was still recovering. His heart went out to the young man. Greco's loss had hit them all hard—but no one harder than Rodriguez. It was a slow healing process, but Matteo held onto the hope that Rodriguez's new friend from the island mission

might play a part in putting the young man's heart back together again, one shattered piece at a time.

Halting at the pub entrance, Rodriguez asked, "What's the guy's name?"

"Enzo," Matteo replied. "Clint said he was one of Lazarus' men. Said he has eyes and ears all over the streets down here."

"Isn't Lazarus the one who ran the underground fight pit? Who sold Cory and Maddy to the island traffickers?"

"He wasn't directly involved in that," Matteo said. "Or so he claims. But the fact is, he has people all over the shit side of this city."

Rodriguez nodded and walked into the pub and approached the bar, Matteo on his heels.

"What can I getcha?" the burly bartender asked.

"Is Enzo here?"

The big man shrugged, his eyes dull beneath a heavy brow. "Don't know any Enzo."

Matteo came closer and leaned on the bar. "We're friends of the cowboy. He's looking for a lost kid and thought Enzo might know something."

"The cowboy..." The man narrowed his eyes. "Last I heard, he tried to kill the big boss."

Rodriguez chuffed. "The cowboy doesn't *try*. If he'd wanted the man dead—he would be *dead*."

The bartender grunted.

"Until Enzo turns up." Matteo took out his cell phone. "Why don't you take a look and tell me if you've seen the girl?" He brought up the girl's photo and showed the man.

The bartender started to lean forward when chaos erupted in the backroom behind the bar. A man bellowed and shit crashed to the floor seconds before a teen boy burst through the swinging door, made a beeline around the front of the bar, collided with patrons, racing for the front entrance.

“Stop that little bastard!” A tall, wiry man exploded from the back room wearing a white apron, fist shaking the air, face red with fury.

Matteo turned around and the kid bulldozed into him, though he didn't think it was as much intentional as it was the boy just wasn't looking where he was going—frantic to escape. The cell phone slipped from Matteo's hand upon impact and struck the floor. The kid went down as well, catching his foot on Matteo's boot. He landed on his belly and Matteo heard the air burst from his lungs. The boy lay immobile for a few seconds, his face just inches from the phone displaying the young girl's photo, then scrambled to his feet as the cook came around the far end of the bar. An apple and a couple of biscuits tumbled from the kid's ratty jacket which he hurriedly snatched up and raced for the door.

“Stop that fucking thief!” the cook railed in hot pursuit of the teen.

Matteo stepped in front of the man, halting him in his tracks. “What all did he take?” Matteo tugged out his wallet. “I'll cover it.”

“That's not the point,” the cook snapped, spitting his words. “He's a fucking *thief*. This isn't the first time he's stolen shit from my kitchen. When I catch him—*he's* going into my fucking pot!”

“He's a street kid,” Matteo said. “He's just hungry. It's not like he's cleaning you out. He just took an apple and some biscuits. What's the big deal? I said I would cover it.”

The cook snarled at him. “He come in here again and I catch him, he’ll have a place to sleep and food to eat because I’ll turn his thieving ass over to the cops who’ll throw his ass into juvenile prison where he *belongs*.” The man whirled around without taking Matteo’s money and stormed back into the kitchen.

“Pleasant fellow,” Rodriguez mumbled.

Matteo picked up his phone.

“Can’t blame Rio,” the bartender muttered. “That kid is always sneaking into his kitchen and stealing shit.”

“Maybe if he offered the boy some food now and then,” Matteo said, “he wouldn’t be so hungry and have to steal.”

“He ain’t Rio’s responsibility. And those street rats are like stray dogs—you start feeding them and you never get rid of them.”

“They’re *children*,” Matteo stressed. “Not stray dogs.”

“Same difference.”

“*No*,” Rodriguez growled. “It *isn’t*.”

“The girl.” Matteo thrust the phone at the bartender again. “Have you seen her?”

“No.”

“Look closer,” Matteo demanded. “Remember her face and ask around.”

“What’s in it for me?” the bartender drawled.

Matteo exchanged a look with Rodriguez. “You *don’t* get a visit from the cowboy—*that’s* what’s in it for you.”



“Where did you go?” Horatio was waiting for Max when he walked through the door.

Max removed his jacket and hung it up. “To see Clint.”

“Why?”

“I had to.” The two men walked into the kitchen. “I couldn’t just... do nothing.”

Horatio nodded and silently prepared them both a cup of coffee. “What did he say?” he asked quietly.

Max cradled the warm mug in his hands. “He has men looking for her.”

Growing still, Horatio whispered, “He does?”

“If anyone can find her, it’s them.”

Swallowing thickly, Horatio asked, “And if they can’t find her?”

“They *will*,” Max insisted gently and set aside the coffee, and hugged his husband. “Our girl is coming home.”

Horatio held him tightly and pressed his face into Max’s neck. “What is happening to her out there?” He trembled. “I can’t take the thought of it.”

“Don’t think about it,” Max whispered. “Think about us finding her and bringing her back. That’s all, nothing else. Otherwise... it’ll break you down and Franny needs us to be strong and not give up hope.”

“What do we do? Just *wait*? I don’t know if I can handle that without going crazy.” Horatio drew away from Max and

sat down, cradling the warm cup of coffee between his palms. He looked lost and that broke Max's heart.

Taking a seat beside him, Max said, "I want to talk to Detective Jordan."

"The cops are already looking for her," Horatio murmured.

"Jordan was on the team that found Franny the first time. I'd feel better if we had a cop who was more personally invested."

"Personally invested?"

"Jordan has worked with Clint and Cochise. He cares about the children out there in the world."

Horatio rubbed his eyes. "Franny's lucky to have a father like you."

"Why me?"

Quietly clearing his throat, Horatio stared at his coffee, eyes damp. "Because you're strong," he whispered. "You've always been strong."

Max squeezed his wrist. "You're strong too."

"Not like you." Horatio swallowed. "You were strong from the beginning." His throat worked. "I wasn't. And I think... I think the only reason I have any semblance of strength at this stage of my life..." He raised tear-filled eyes to Max. "... is because you're here with me." He sniffed. "If I had to go through this alone... with Franny missing... I-I wouldn't make it."

Max slid his chair closer and cupped Horatio's face. "I've told you before and I'm telling you again; you were never *weak*. Your father was wrong about that. It was *you* who had the strength to hold onto our love all these years, never giving up on us. I never stopped loving you, but I gave up hope. If

you had as well... we wouldn't be here now, married... *together.*" He kissed Horatio softly on the mouth. "You are the reason we're happy—your perseverance of heart. And nothing takes more strength than that."

Horatio hung his head, breath unsteady. "I don't feel strong now... not knowing where our little girl is or what she's going through."

"I don't feel strong either," Max admitted with a tremor. "No parent feels strong at times like these. But true strength is there whether you feel it or not. Being afraid for Franny doesn't mean you're weak, it means you're human—and a caring father." He hugged Horatio's head, sliding his fingers through his hair. "We're going to get through this. *Franny* is going to get through this... and come home to us. One day soon, it'll all be just a bad memory that we put behind us. And we'll move forward, all of us... together."

...

"May I be excused?" Franny lowered her eyes to her plate, her meal only half eaten. "I... I don't feel so good. I want to lay down." Her breath held, waiting for their answer. She prayed they would let her escape to her room, away from them. *Escape?* Her room wasn't an escape, but rather a prison within a prison. For now, though, it was all she had... her only refuge... as unsafe as it was.

"You really should eat more," her mother suggested.

"I-I feel sick," Franny whispered.

"I understand." The woman reached over and patted her hand. "But we'll take care of that real soon, then no more

morning sickness... or any time of the day sickness.” She laughed lightly. “So silly that they call it *morning* sickness.”

Franny shrank into her chair, her heart sinking at the memory of talking with Horatio about her pregnancy sickness. *I want to go home... I want my dads.* Would she ever see them again? They were looking for her, she knew that much... but how would they find her? What if her parents took her out of the city—or *sold* her to someone who took her away? Her dads would never find her then.

“Go on,” her father said, flicking his fingers. “Get some rest.”

Franny didn’t give him a chance to change his mind and left the table. Once out of the kitchen, she ran to her room and closed the door. But with no lock, she couldn’t keep her parents out. The closed door was merely an *illusion* of safety. She would never be safe in this place.

Sitting on the end of the bed, Franny’s eyes drifted to the window and the steel bars imprisoning her inside this nightmare. She thought about the boy and wondered where he was now... and if he even understood how desperately she needed his help. He seemed to know... but what could he do? Would he find a cop and bring them to the apartment?

The door opened abruptly, and Franny gasped, jumping a bit. Her father loomed in the doorway, staring at her with a look that prickled her skin. “I almost forgot.” He reached into a pocket and withdrew a scrap of paper. Franny’s eyes widened.

*The* scrap of paper—the one she’d written the note on to the boy. Her fingers squeezed the edge of the mattress; when had he found it?

“What’s this?” He waved the paper back and forth. “Who’s it for?”

“N-No one,” Franny rasped. “I...I...”

“I...I...” her father mocked, his eyes narrowing. “You what?” He looked at the hurriedly scrawled note. “It says to call the number written here and tell them *Franny* needs their help.” He huffed. “Is this the faggots’ number? You want to leave your *real parents* and go back to those perverts to be raped and sodomized? Did your time out there fuck you up that much—that you *like* it?”

Franny’s defense of her dads overrode her fear of her father. “My dads *never* did that to me,” she whispered tightly, gripping the bed. “They were *good* to me.” Tears filled her eyes. “They *loved* me.”

The man snorted. “Sweetie, you need to wise up if you’re gonna make it in this world.” His focus returned to the note. “*Who* did you show this to? ‘Cause I know you didn’t write it for yourself.”

Her eyes flitted unbidden to the window and the man’s stare followed. He crossed the room and looked out into the alley below. “Did you have a visitor while I was gone?” he murmured.

Franny tensed as the boy’s face rose in her mind. “No,” she whispered.

Her father turned around, brow pinched. “I don’t know that I believe you.” He sighed and returned to the bed. “*Who* did you show this to?” He thrust the note at her. “Tell me right now or there will be consequences.”

The man loomed over her, his very presence a threatening force. Franny shrank away, her hands instinctively cupping her stomach protectively. “I-I...” she stammered, her breath

hitching. “It... it was no one. Just... just a homeless boy... he... he couldn’t even read... or hear.”

His frown hardening, her father asked sharply, “What do you mean—he was *deaf*?”

Franny nodded. “He couldn’t tell anyone.” Her voice broke with emotion. “No one’s coming.”

“And you’re *upset* about that?” The man seemed genuinely offended. “You felt you needed rescue from your parents?” He huffed. “*We* rescued *you*—you ungrateful little wench. And the first thing you do is seek help from some fucking *street rat*?” He growled and raised his hand to backhand her.

Franny gasped and cowered on the bed, hiding her head in her arms. “I-I’m sorry,” she whimpered. “I won’t... I won’t do it again... I-I won’t. I promise.”

The man lowered his hand without striking and nodded. “No, you will not.” His voice lowered to a calm pitch that frightened her more than his angered tone. “Because I’m going to show you what happens to little girls who break the rules.” He crumpled the note and tossed it on the bed and left the room, closing and locking the door after him.

Franny broke down, sobbing into her arms. As a chill set in, she crawled under the blankets in her dress and stared at the window... the cold steel bars. The emptiness and despair of her former existence, when the traffickers had her, set in. She was lost and no one would find her this time.

A warm, fresh tear dripped out and seeped into the pillow.

*I wish I was dead.*

Death was better than whatever *punishment* her father had planned for her. She knew... because she knew men like her father. The monsters who kept her in a dog kennel and sold her to other monsters... were men like her father.

He would give her whatever lesson necessary to make sure she never disobeyed him again.

. . .

Russell Pritchard wondered if he'd made a mistake bringing Deidre home. After less than twenty-four hours spent with Franny, he began to have doubts about their plans for the girl. Deidre wanted to pick up where they left off before Franny ran away. Understandable; the young girl had made them a nice profit. But Russell wasn't so sure he wanted to share his daughter. There was something special about his little girl... that he wanted all for himself.

Something Deidre wouldn't understand—and certainly didn't possess within herself. The woman was long since spent. She retained some nice features and her skill in bed still got him going. But it was simply *physical* satisfaction. He craved more.

And he discovered it in Franny. She ignited something inside him. Bathing her earlier... caressing her tender skin... he'd nearly lost control. But had he let himself go, he would've damaged her. He didn't want to rush it. Yes, there would be pain for her even if he took his time, but pain was good.

Still, there was Deidre...

He hasn't shared his "budding" desires with her. She believed he desired only her. Would his want for Franny make her jealous? Franny—a younger, sweeter, *prettier* version of Deidre. She would have every reason to be jealous. For a woman like Deidre, though, jealousy could be dangerous. She was impulsive, erratic, and violent. What would she do to

Franny if she thought Russell preferred their daughter over her?

*She won't do anything—because I won't let her.*

For now, she didn't need to know. And when Russell chose to tell her—she could deal with it or get the fuck out. Frankly, Russell preferred the latter. The idea of it being only him and Franny was greatly appealing.

The thought ignited a heat to spread through his loins as he entered his bedroom.

“This is going to be wonderful.” Deidre lay naked on the bed, a grin on her face. “Our little family back together again.” She crawled forward when Russell paused at the end of the bed. “I've missed our little breadwinner.” She unfastened his pants and yanked them off his hips, freeing his erection. “Mm. All ready for me, huh?” She stroked him slowly and kissed his stomach. “Can't wait to start bringing in the cash again.”

Russell drew a deep breath and released it slowly. He tilted his head back and closed his eyes as the woman took him in her mouth.

Deidre pulled off a moment later, panting softly. “How soon can we start?”

He opened his eyes and looked down. “Start what?”

“Putting Franny to use, of course.” She laughed lightly and sucked the tip of his erection. “Momma wants her bling-bling.”

Russell sighed and shoved her mouth back down on him. “Now, stop talking and finish the job.” He closed his eyes again and imagined a much softer mouth pleasuring him.

*Putting Franny to use.*

Russell shivered.



*Soon... very soon.*

“Assholes,” Rodriguez muttered. “Should’a capped them.”

Matteo smiled. “If we capped all the assholes in the world, we’d be facing a serious population shortage.”

“And that’s bad because...?” The younger man strode forward a few paces, his back to Matteo. “The fewer people the better,” he added in a mumble.

Catching up to him, Matteo gripped his shoulder with affection. “Maybe you’re not ready to be back out here.” Rodriguez was like a younger brother and Matteo loved him as such. And shared his pain as well.

“Why?” Rodriguez didn’t look at him. “Afraid I might snap and blow away some assholes? Seems like a *good* reason for me to be out here.”

Matteo sighed. “There’s a process to grief,” he spoke low. “Taking time out for yourself might not be a bad thing. You haven’t really done that yet.”

“Time out to do what?” Rodriguez stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets and hung his head, staring blankly at the sidewalk as he walked forward. “*Reflect* on the fact that he’s gone and he’s not coming back? Thanks, but I got that fucking *memo* when he died in my arms because some *asshole* shot him.” His stride quickened and he moved ahead of Matteo again.

*He’ll be all right, he just needs time.* Matteo hoped to hell that was true. Not everyone survived grief. He thought about Carmen, who he was fast falling in love with. What if

something happened to her? Would he come back from that? The thought made him sick to his stomach. Rodriguez was dealing with more than just the *thought* of losing the love of his life—he was *living* the nightmare. As much as Matteo sympathized with his brother, he couldn't fully comprehend the hell he was going through.

Picking up his pace, Matteo fell in beside the younger man once more. “Have you, uh...” He cleared his throat. “... spoken to Shane lately?” Shane; the man Rodriguez had met on the island. The man who had shone a tiny ray of light into Rodriguez's dark world. All of Rodriguez's family were quietly hoping and praying Shane was the beacon he needed to find his way back. But no one was ready to out-and-out say so. Not yet. It was too soon... the young man's wounds were still too fresh and raw. But Matteo didn't see the harm in mentioning the man's name now and then... just so Rodriguez wouldn't forget he was out there.

The slight tension that crept into Rodriguez gave Matteo a wisp of hope. “No. Why?”

“No, I was just wondering...” Matteo's words trailed off and his steps slowed.

“What is it?” Rodriguez asked.

“Not sure...” Matteo mumbled, brow cinched. “I think maybe... we got a tail.”

“Who?”

“Keep moving. He'll show himself.”

The two men continued forward.

“The kid from the pub,” Matteo spoke low.

“Why would he follow us?”

“I guess that’ll be our first question.” Matteo cut onto a side street and Rodriguez followed. They halted just around the corner of a large brick building and waited. Minutes later, the boy crept around the corner and Matteo grabbed him before the kid even saw them. He pushed him against the wall without hurting him and held him there. “Why you following us, kid?”

The boy stared back, eyes bulging with fear. He didn’t answer as his entire body went rigid with terror.

Matteo eased his grip. “We’re not gonna hurt you. We just want to know why you’re tailing us. What do you want?”

The kid remained silent and looked at Matteo as if he were speaking a foreign language. Nothing in his young, dirty face indicated he understood a word Matteo was saying.

Matteo thought of the boy Axel had brought home from the excursion to Canada. He frowned. “Can you speak?”

No response.

Releasing the boy, Matteo took a step back; what was wrong with the kid?

“Are you hungry?” Matteo took out his wallet. “Do you need money for food?” He produced a few bills. “Do you need a place to stay?”

The boy’s eyes lit up a little when he saw the cash and hesitantly accepted it when Matteo offered it to him. His filthy hands shook as he stuffed the money inside his ratty jacket. Matteo expected him to run off after he got the cash, but he didn’t move.

“I don’t know how else to help you if you won’t talk to us.”

Slowly, tentatively, the kid raised his hands and placed them over his ears... and shook his head.

“Shit,” Rodriguez whispered. “Is he... deaf?”

“I think that’s what he’s telling us.” Matteo didn’t know sign language and suspected the kid probably didn’t either. He dug out a scrap of paper from his wallet and scribbled down three words; *Can you read?*

The boy frowned and looked confused.

*Shit.* Matteo sensed there was something else the kid wanted besides the cash, but how the hell was he supposed to figure out what it was? Matteo rubbed his eyes, struggling to come up with a solution. He took out his phone. Maybe if they brought the boy to the foster house, Emmy and Oliver would know what to do. The boy was living on the streets and that was no place for a kid. He started to make the call when the boy hesitantly stepped forward... and pointed at the cell phone.

“What...?” Matteo eyed him and slowly held out the device. “My phone?”

The boy touched the cell and then pointed back the way they’d come. He repeated the gesture with added assertion when the two men exchanged a confused look.

“What’s he trying to tell us?” Matteo mumbled.

Rodriguez stared at the kid for a moment then abruptly grabbed the phone and brought up the photo of the missing girl and showed it to the boy. “This?” he asked anxiously. “Have you seen her?”

The boy pointed at the photo and nodded vigorously.

“Jesus,” Matteo breathed. He gestured to the kid. “Can you show us?”

Suddenly uncertain, the boy glanced at the two men, a wary look seeping into his eyes.

“He doesn’t know if he can trust us,” Matteo murmured. “Maybe he thinks we want to find her for the wrong reasons.”

“How the hell do we convince him otherwise?” Rodriguez wondered with frustration.

“I don’t know. But if he’s seen her, then at least we know she’s still in the city... and probably not too far away. Street kids tend to be territorial. This is part of that territory, obviously, since this wasn’t the first time he stole from the pub.”

Rodriguez dug out his phone. “I’ll call Clint.”

...

Horatio sat anxiously at the counter as Max spoke on the phone. Maddy and Savannah joined him, both watching Max, tension on their faces. No one spoke until Max ended the call and gripped the cell phone in his hand, eyes unfocused for a moment. Horatio’s fears escalated and then faltered when Max blinked and met his stare.

“That...” He cleared his throat. “That was Clint.”

His pulse unsteady, Horatio whispered, “What... what did he say?”

*Please, God, don’t let it be bad—please!*

“Cruz’s man, Rodriguez, called him. They might...” His eyes swept over the three of them. “... have a lead.”

“They think they know where she is?” Savannah asked with a mix of fear and hope.

“Maybe.”

“What lead?” Horatio rose slowly from the stool. “Is... is it reliable?”

Max slid his hand over his mouth. “Clint didn’t go into details. He wants to check it out first, see if it leads anywhere.” He sighed. “I don’t think he wanted to get our hopes up in case it was a dead end.”

“Then why call now, before they checked it out?” Horatio wondered.

“Because I asked him to call if they learned anything,” Max murmured. “Anything at all. And he gave me his word he would. Clint’s a man of his word.”

Maddy asked, “How long until we find out if the lead is good?”

“I don’t know,” Max whispered. “Soon, I think. Cruz’s men are looking into it. If it’s something, then Clint and the others will join them and decide their next move.”

“What about Detective Jordan?” Horatio asked. “Should we still contact him? Or wait until Clint calls back?”

Max shook his head. “If they find Franny, Clint wants Jordan involved. Better him than the other cops.”

“Why?” Savannah frowned. “What does it matter?”

Max and Horatio exchanged a look. They both knew what Clint and his men meant to do to Franny’s father—in the abstract—especially if the man had abused her or... let others abuse her. Until they got her back, they wouldn’t know for sure what had happened to her while in Russell Prichard’s *care*. Under such circumstances, it was best to have a “friend” handling the legal side.

But should they tell that to Savannah? The young woman wasn't oblivious to how the gangsters dealt with bad men—they had made hers and Abel's dad disappear after they learned he'd raped Noel. She knew they did something to him, and she didn't care.

Sighing softly, Max seemed to make his decision. "In case things go... bad. With Clint and his men being who they are, they would prefer to avoid the law. They've worked with Detective Jordan before, with the trafficked kids, and they trust him."

Savannah nodded silently, then pursed her lips. "What are they going to do to Franny's dad?" she whispered.

"We don't know," Horatio admitted. "It will depend on what he's done to Franny." His throat pinched and eyes burned, the very thought of his young daughter suffering abuse again breaking his heart... crippling his mind. He was aware his deep inner anguish reflected on his face when he looked at Max. His husband hurt when Horatio hurt, and it reflected back to him from Max's eyes.

"Do you think..." Savannah teared up. "Do you think he... hurt her? Like those other men...?" Her words stuttered and caught with each syllable as if she understood that simply mentioning the possibility wounded the two men.

Swallowing thickly, Horatio slid his arm around her. "We can only pray that hasn't happened."

The girl hung her head, her chin trembling. "I'm so scared for her... and the baby."

"We all are, sweetheart," Max said quietly and stepped closer, kissing her head. "But we have to keep faith that she'll be returned to us safe and... and untouched." He cleared his



throat and raised the cell phone. “I’ll call Jordan,” he whispered with a rasp.

Horatio fought his emotions, blinking back tears. Just hours of not knowing where Franny was or what was happening to her felt like days, *weeks*. How did parents stay sane when their children went missing *for years*? Horatio couldn’t do that; he couldn’t *survive* such extended emotional trauma without losing his mind... without losing himself.

Watching Max as he made the call to the detective... Horatio knew he wouldn’t survive, either. He was strong—stronger than Horatio—but he loved hard. Anyone who loved that hard always paid the price when those they loved were in jeopardy.

If Franny didn’t come back to them... they would both pay that unbearable price.

“Tamara?” Emmy knocked softly on the ajar door. “Are you feeling all right?” She entered the bedroom and walked to the foot of the bed where the young woman sat cross-legged, flipping through a magazine. Her eyes were vacant, not seeing the content as she turned the pages. “You didn’t come down for dinner.”

“Wasn’t hungry,” Tamara mumbled, not looking up.

Emmy nodded and sank onto the mattress. “We’re all worried about Franny. It’s okay to admit that you are as well.”

“I’m not,” she replied dully. “What’s happened to her was inevitable.” Her voice remained low, barely audible, and emotionless. “It’s going to happen to all of us eventually. It’s our fate.”

A tremor ran through Emmy. “No, sweetheart, it isn’t. What happened to all of you was a horrible thing, but you’re safe now. And it will never happen to you again.”

Tamara slowly raised her eyes, a cold emptiness resonating forth. “You told Franny the same thing. Her new family told her the same thing. It didn’t stop it from happening. No one can escape their fate. None of us will escape it.” Something flickered behind her eyes. “It already came back and took Amber... then Franny. The only mystery now is... who it will take next.”

Chills prickled Emmy’s skin; the girl seemed so... *certain*. But Emmy wouldn’t buy into that thought process. She couldn’t. She had to believe these kids were *safe* in her home.

*Amber wasn't safe.* And Franny? She wasn't safe here *or* at her new home. No one had been able to protect either girl. Suddenly, it felt as if *all* the children were at risk.

"You know I'm right," Tamara whispered. "I see it on your face."

"No." Emmy shook her head, regaining her composure. "I don't believe that at all. What happened to Amber was a tragedy... but sadly, such dire actions are common among sexual abuse victims. And Franny was abducted. It isn't *fate*. These things happen and we deal with them. They will find Franny and bring her home to her family. And I have faith that she will be okay and nothing truly bad will have happened to her."

Tamara looked at her dryly. "Faith?" She scoffed. "Really? Then why are you so scared?"

"Because I'm a human being," Emmy said gently. "We worry, even amidst faith."

"Then it isn't really faith. If it was, you wouldn't be worried."

Emmy gazed at the girl with sympathy. "It's okay to feel, sweetheart. To care. And to... lean on others. You don't always have to be so tough and... emotionally isolated."

"Yes, I do," Tamara returned dully. "Relying on anyone but yourself makes you weak... and stupid."

*What happened to you?* Emmy wondered with an ache in her heart. Did this "philosophy" stem from something more than her abuse by the traffickers? God knows that would be enough. But it felt as if it were coming from someplace... deeper. Perhaps something happened before she fell into the hands of the traffickers. Tamara wouldn't talk about her life before or how the traffickers acquired her.

“Caring for others and letting them care for you...” Emmy murmured, “... makes you strong.” She reached over and squeezed the girl’s leg. “One day, you will see that it’s true. Because I won’t stop trying to convince you until you do. We will never give up on you and never stop protecting you. What happened to Franny... or Amber... will not happen to you.” She swallowed as her eyes misted. “*I promise.*”

Tamara sank back away from her touch and lowered her eyes. “Shouldn’t make promises you can’t keep.”

Rising from the bed, Emmy smiled warmly. “I’m not.”

...

*Faith.*

Tamara stared at the door and then threw the magazine across the room. They were goddamn fools. Franny wasn’t coming back. And even if she did, she would kill herself like Amber—because a *second* dose of brutal abuse always sent them over the edge. Tamara had been teetering on the edge for a while now. It was only a matter of time before she took the plunge, she knew that and accepted her *fate*.

*What happened to Franny or Amber will not happen to you—I promise.*

“She promised.” Tamara snorted, lacking humor. “You’re all stupid and naïve.” She left the bed and walked to the window. Gathering all the abused kids into one house simply created a *buffet* for the perverts out there. They would come in, one by one, pretending to care and give a shit about these poor abused souls... take their pick of the litter... then walk out and do whatever the hell they wanted with their *purchase*.

It was no different than it had been with the traffickers. This was simply a prettier setup. Emmy and Oliver didn't even know they were doing the same thing, but they were. More "fathers" would show up, like Franny's dad. More *uncles and aunts*, maybe some *cousins*. All laying claim to this one or that one, bringing with them the "proper" paperwork to prove their identity.

No one was safe. One day, Emmy and Oliver would understand that, but by then it would be too late. The children would be gone—*taken*—by imposters. Lost again to the darkness of the world... never to be found.

Tamara felt no satisfaction in being right—as Nina had accused. But there was no point in pretending this place was a safe haven... or that one even existed. Evil men would always win. That's what happened in an evil world.

Having *faith* was pointless when God didn't exist. She had believed once, a *long* time ago. She'd prayed, had faith, *trusted* God to save her. He hadn't. So, either he didn't exist... or he just didn't give a fuck. Either way, he was useless to her, and she wouldn't waste her time believing he'd had a hand in her "rescue" now or that he would keep them safe in this house. Amber *gutted* herself in this house. She wouldn't be the last.

Maybe *Tamara* would be next.

...

"Em?" Oliver entered the study and stopped short. "Are you all right? What're you doing in here?"

Emmy sat behind the desk, the dim lamp barely lighting up her face as she hung her head. "Is it our fault, Oliver?" she

whispered, a tremor in her voice.

“Is what our fault?” Oliver came to her and kneeled on the carpet, taking hold of her hands. “What do you mean?”

Tears filled her eyes as she looked at her husband. “Franny. Amber.” She sniffed. “Amber was in a dark place, and we didn’t even see it. I-I thought she was okay. I really did. All my focus was on Franny. She seemed so fragile and vulnerable and... and lost. Maybe if I’d paid closer attention to the other girls...”

“Don’t, Em.” Oliver hugged her, his embrace strong, comforting... but the chill inside her remained. “Don’t do this to yourself. Amber hid her pain. She fooled everyone.” He leaned back. “And is what our fault concerning Franny?”

“Her father,” Emmy said thickly. “*We* let him back into her life. Why couldn’t we see what a bad person he was?”

“Because he was a great actor,” Oliver said. “He played on our emotions. He played *his part* so well. And he had the proper paperwork, proof of identity.”

Emmy leaned against his shoulder and buried her face in his neck. “We should’ve just told him she wasn’t here,” Emmy choked. “Franny was in a good place. We shouldn’t have let him upset that. We knew Franny wanted to be with Max and Horatio. If we had sent him away... Franny would still be safe at home. *We* told him she was here. And now she’s gone.” Emmy hugged his head and sobbed. “What if he... he’s doing horrible things to her. We all promised her that she was safe now, that those things would never happen to her again. We *promised*, Oliver.”

“Hey.” Oliver stroked her hair. “This isn’t our fault. It isn’t Max and Horatio’s fault. We were legally obligated to tell him the truth about Franny. He made us believe that he didn’t know

about her former abuse, or that she even existed until now. We didn't know he was a bad person.”

That's what terrified Emmy; they didn't know. What if the next person that came to them about one of the children was also bad? What if they were just as good at playing their part and fooled them again? What would happen to the next child that left their house?

...

“What did you say to Emmy?” Kelly burst into Tamara's room, startling the other girl.

Tamara strained up on the bed, a hard frown pinching her brow. “What're you talking about?”

“I know she came up here to talk to you,” Kelly said. “And now, she's down in the study, upset and crying. *What* did you say to her?”

“Why do you think it's something I said?”

“Because you're *mean*,” Kelly snapped. “And you get your kicks from upsetting others. It's always a shitty thing to do, but it's *extra* shitty to do it to Emmy. Did you say something about Franny?”

Tamara exhaled and shrugged. “Maybe. But I didn't say anything that wasn't the truth.”

Kelly fumed. “What supposed *truth* did you tell her?”

“I just told her it was inevitable what happened to Franny, and it was going to happen to all of us eventually.”

“What...?” Kelly was stunned, though she shouldn't be. “*Why* would you say that to her?”

“Because it’s the truth,” Tamara shot back defensively. “Do you really think we *escaped*? Any of us? This here, this place, it’s like a... a *pause*. The calm before the next storm. We will *all* end up back out there, being used and sold, over and over again until we’re used up and thrown away.” Her eyes burned. “Because *that* is our *fate*. Because there is no *God*. Because we are *already* dead... and this is *hell*. Eternal fucking *hell*.”

Kelly’s vehemence toward the other girl withered and she backed away, trembling. “No,” she rasped. “That isn’t true. We *are* safe here.”

“Tell Amber that when you visit her grave,” Tamara murmured. “And Franny...” She tsked. “Oh wait, you can’t tell Franny, because she’s *gone*. Back out *there*.” She jabbed a finger at the window. “Living her *fate*.”

Kelly swallowed. “She’s coming home. They’re going to find her and she’s gonna be all right.”

An eerie laugh chortled out of Tamara. “You’re all living in LaLa Land. Franny ain’t ever coming back. They’re gonna fuck her five ways from Sunday and kill her monster baby. Even if she’s found... she’ll still be lost.”

“Why’re you so awful?” Kelly whispered, a quiver in her voice. “That’s a horrible thing to say.”

“Truth *is* horrible. That’s why people fabricate prettier truths, ones they can live with. Because they’d rather live with a beautiful lie, than the ugly truth.”

Kelly shook her head. “No,” she said thickly. “This *ugliness* you spew out, that’s just your twisted version of the truth, of the world.”

Eyes heavy with cynicism, Tamara mumbled, “And you think the world is a *pretty* place? After the disgusting things



those men did to you... again and again and again?"

"I'm not saying there isn't ugliness in the world," Kelly whispered. "Of course, there is. But there's beauty in it, too. Emmy and Oliver proved that, and so did the men who rescued us. Not everyone is evil. Not everyone wants to hurt us. If you insist on believing that... then the evil of this world has already defeated you."

Kelly left the room before the other girl could respond.

Wil's cell went off in the middle of dinner. He checked his phone. "I should take this." He left the table and walked into the living room. "Max Raines?" It took a moment for Wil to place the caller. "Clint's friend."

"Yes." Max hesitated. "Clint asked me to call you... hoping you could help."

"Help how?" Wil listened as Max explained the dire circumstances—and why the cowboy had requested his involvement. The young girl was missing again? He'd just found her about a month ago, living in a fucking *dog kennel*. Wil remembered her well... so frightened and lost. The thought of her back out there in the hands of a horrible man tore at his heart. *And pregnant*. He hadn't known she was pregnant when his team found her and the other girls.

"I realize you don't know me very well," Max replied thickly, voice straining with emotion. "But we need your help. Please..."

Frank appeared in the living room doorway and paused, watching Wil.

"I'll do what I can," Wil said. "See if I can take the case."

"Thank you." Genuine gratitude resonated through the phone.

"I'm glad to help," Wil murmured. "If something comes of their lead, contact me immediately."

"Of course."

Frank entered the room when Wil ended the call. “Who was that?”

“A friend of Clint’s. Max Raines. He runs The Phoenix Club. We met him at the kids’ funeral.”

Frank nodded. “I remember. Nice enough fellow.”

“Yeah.” Wil stared at his phone, troubled by the call.

“What did he want?”

Sighing, Wil explained the situation. “That little girl...” His throat knotted. “I thought she was safe now. I really believed her life would be better from here on out.” He hung his head and rubbed his eyes. “I didn’t know she was pregnant. And now she’s lost again. That poor child.”

Frank rubbed his mouth and asked with a note of uncertainty, “And if the cowboy finds her first... what do they want from you?”

After a slight pause, Wil replied, “They need to fly under the radar of the law. It’s in their best interest if their... participation... is kept quiet.”

“So, they want you on the case so you can *fudge* the details?” Frank looked concerned. “Is that in *your* best interest? You’ve been involved with them twice now. And one of those times, you got the shit beat out of you.”

“That was a *consensual* beating,” Wil reminded. “It had to look like I resisted.”

“And what if you *had* resisted? Do you think the outcome would’ve been any different? Those agents would’ve still beaten you, and you know it.”

Wil sighed. “I understand your concerns, I do. But I’m in no danger of bodily harm this time.”

“Maybe not,” Frank said. “But what about the danger to your job? If it ever comes out that you’ve been covering for the Sanitini family... you can kiss your career goodbye. And you wouldn’t only get fired, but your good name would be trashed as well. You’d be marked a dirty cop and might even go to prison. Are these people worth jeopardizing your career, your reputation, and your family for?”

Walking closer, Wil cupped Frank’s neck with both hands and kissed his mouth. “*Nothing* is more important to me than my family. The boys, you, Vanessa... you’re all at the top of my list. And of course, my career is very important to me as well. But you must understand, these men are helping *children*. The things they do can’t be done out in the open. The authorities can’t know they’re involved.”

“*You* are the authorities.”

“I am,” Wil murmured. “But I’m also a father and a human being with a conscience. David and Robby were rescued from traffickers—rescued by Clint and his men. If they hadn’t taken them down... these boys would still be caught in that nightmare. And it should come as no surprise that if Tad was ever taken—I would want him back by any means necessary.” His eyes stung at such a terrifying thought as losing Tad. “This young girl, Franny... she has two very frightened fathers asking for my help. Asking me to act as a shield for Clint and his men as they do whatever they have to, to get that child back home safe.” His throat worked. “If it was Tad, you would understand.”

Frank nodded. “I would,” he whispered. “And I understand now.” He hugged Wil, holding him tightly. “But you can’t ask me not to worry about you because that isn’t possible for me.”

“I would never ask that of you.” Wil kissed his neck then drew back and kissed his lips. “Never.”

. . .

It was dark when Clint and Cochise met up with Matteo and Rodriguez after the two men informed the cowboy that the kid remained hesitant to take them to Franny. Maybe bringing the Egyptian along hadn't been the best idea; he was quite frightening and intimidating in appearance alone. They wanted to make the kid trust them—not scare the hell out of him.

But Cochise was there, so they would have to work around that.

“This way.” Matteo led the men into an alley where a young boy in his early-to-mid teens waited fearfully beside a dumpster. He looked like he'd been living on the streets for some time; ratty clothes, dirty hair that needed trim, worn-out shoes where his toes poked out some of the holes, and a layer of filth on his skin that would take much bathing to scrub clean. The kid's dirty clothes hung on a skinny frame that indicated he wasn't getting nearly enough to eat.

Clint walked over and looked the boy in the face. The kid's slightly sunken eyes darted to the cowboy's face and away again.

“He's deaf,” Matteo said. “At least, we're pretty sure he is.”

The kid shivered from the bitter chill settling into the evening air, his thin sweatshirt unable to thwart the winter cold. Clint removed his jacket and wrapped it around the boy then gripped his shoulders. “The girl,” he said, and produced his phone, bringing up the photo of Franny. “Where is she?”

Something... warmth and sympathy?... crept into the boy's eyes when he looked at the photo. Tears shimmered.

“We need to find her,” Clint pressed, aware his words meant nothing if the kid truly was deaf. “Show us.”

The boy glanced at each of them, recoiling just a fraction when his eyes swept over the Egyptian. Sometimes his “scariness” worked against them, rather than for them.

“Okay...” Clint stepped back and shocked the other men by taking a selfie. He presented his picture to the boy, offering him the phone. “Take this to the girl, show her my picture. She knows who I am.”

The kid frowned, uncertain, as he took the phone. He didn’t move, confused by what Clint wanted of him. How did he make the boy understand?

Matteo came closer. He pointed to Clint’s photo and then to the photo of the girl on his cell. “Go to her.” Matteo gestured away from them. “Show her...” He touched the girl’s picture again. “... *his* photo.” He indicated Clint’s selfie pic. Matteo repeated the gestures until the boy seemed to pick up on what he was asking.

Nodding slowly, his uncertainty holding, the boy inched around the gangsters and crept toward the alley opening, watching the men anxiously. Clint gestured that they would wait there.

When the kid disappeared around the corner, Rodriguez asked, “Are we going to follow him?”

“No,” Clint said.

“What if he doesn’t come back?” Matteo asked. “He might get caught trying to show your picture to the girl... if he even understood that’s what we wanted of him.”

“He understood. And we don’t need to follow him.” Clint looked at Cochise. “Can I borrow your phone?” The Egyptian nodded and handed over his cell.

“What’re you doing?” Matteo frowned.

“My phone has a tracking app,” he mumbled as he sent out a call. “Axel insisted, after all the shit that’s gone down these past few months.” He focused when the call was answered. “It’s me. I need you to do something for me.”

“*What?*” Axel asked from the other end. Concern seeped into his voice. “*Is everything all right?*”

“So far,” Clint said. “I need you to track my phone.”

“*Your phone? Did you lose it?*”

“No. I’ll explain later. I just need you to track it and let me know where it ends up.”

“*Ends up?*”

“It’s on the move. I need to know its final destination.”

“*All right. I can do that.*”

“Thanks. Call me back on Cochise’s phone.”

“*Okay. I love you. Be careful.*”

Clint glanced at the three men watching him. He cleared his throat and mumbled, “Me, too. And I will.”

Axel chuckled. “*I’ll accept that for now.*” The call ended.

The Egyptian stared at Clint as he lowered the phone. “Why didn’t you tell him you loved him?” His mouth twitched. Matteo smirked but held his tongue. Rodriguez offered a weak smile that lasted only a moment before fading away.

Clint grunted at Cochise and waited for Axel to call back.

•••

Franny lay on her bed, trying to sleep, but also afraid to drift off for fear her father would come back to her room and...

She shivered. The way he looked at her and the things he said to her before her mother arrived terrified Franny. She knew that look well, had seen it in the faces of the scary men who had abused her. Soon, her father would do the same things to her.

Despair pressed down on her, and she hugged her belly, tears draining onto the pillow. When she went to live with her dads, she believed that her life would be good from then on. For three weeks, it had been. She was still in the process of coping with her past abuse, but she'd been getting better.

She stared across the shadowed room at the barred window, eyes swimming. Maybe the good stuff with her dads had been the dream and now she was awake... back inside her living nightmare. Her palms flattened against her stomach; how could she just give up? Her baby needed her to be strong, to *fight*. But she didn't know how to fight. She was a prisoner inside this apartment and there was no way out... no one who knew where she was. How would anyone ever find her?

*The boy knows where you are. He knows you need help.*

But who would he tell? *How* would he tell someone? Who would even pay attention to a deaf street kid? Franny realized she was clinging to that tiny thread of hope that somehow, he would find a way to help her. But the thread grew thinner by the minute. Any moment now, it would snap and leave her in utter despair.

Franny choked on a sob and turned over, burying her face in the pillow to muffle the growing sobs. Her arms remained wrapped around her stomach as she cried harder, frightened



for her baby. How could she protect her child when she couldn't even protect herself?

"I'm sorry, baby," she sobbed into the pillow. "I don't know what to do. I don't know how to save us."

Her sobs slowly subsided and she lay trembling, her breath hitching against the pillow. *I have to try and get out... when they go to sleep. I have to try.* So what if they caught her—she had nothing to lose. They were going to do terrible things to her whether or not she tried to escape. And her baby would not survive if Franny did *nothing*.

Now, she needed to stay awake—until her parents fell asleep. Then she would make a break for it. She looked across the room. *If I can get out of the bedroom.*

She sank down on the pillow again, scared sick at the thought of trying to escape, but more afraid *not* to try.

*If you're there, God... if you're really there... please let me know I'm not alone.*

Something ticked on the window.

Then a soft *tap-tap-tap*.

Franny slowly sat up, her heart beating fast. She crawled off the bed and walked hesitantly to the window and looked out, her face close to the glass—then jumped back, hands clamping her mouth to silence a yelp when the homeless boy suddenly appeared in front of her and gripped the bars.

"You're back..." Franny choked back a sob and flattened her palms on the glass. "I-I didn't know if you would come back." Even if he couldn't help her... she felt better knowing she wasn't alone. *Thank you, God.*

The boy dug in his pocket and, to Franny's surprise, pulled out a cell phone.

Had he stolen it from someone and brought it back to her so she could call for help?

Hope sparked inside her, then fizzled when she remembered the window didn't open. "I... I can't open the window." Tears filled her eyes.

The boy pressed the phone to the glass between the bars. Franny blinked in shock at the photo on the display. Jade eyes stared back at her from beneath a firm brow, shadowed by the brim of the cowboy hat. Franny trembled, her throat working.

*The cowboy.*

Drawing back, the boy pointed at Franny and then to the photo.

Franny nodded. "I... I know him."

The boy touched his eye... and pointed at Franny again.

She hugged herself as shakes gripped her body. "He's... looking for me?" Is that what the boy was trying to tell her? Was it that hard to believe? Her dads would have *everyone* looking for her... wouldn't they? And the cowboy... Maddy had told her stories about him. He had rescued most of the kids at the foster house.

*He'll find you—he won't give up until he does.*

She suddenly felt certain of that. And if the boy had his phone... did the cowboy *give* him the phone? Why hadn't he just brought the cowboy with him?

"Go get him," Franny whispered with a sob, pointing at the photo. "Please, go get him—"

The boy abruptly disappeared—*yanked* away by unseen hands.

"Hey." Franny pressed against the window, her pulse escalating as fear gripped her. "What..." She heard a struggle

on the fire escape and her father's face appeared as he restrained the boy. He glared at Franny and then dragged the boy away, back down the metal steps "Wait." Franny smacked the glass. "No. *No. Don't hurt him! Please!*"

The bedroom door swung open, and Franny gasped. Her mother stood in the doorway, a dead smile on her face. "Don't worry, darling," she drawled. "We won't do anything to him that we wouldn't do to you."

When Axel called back, Clint scribbled down the location of his phone.

“Be careful,” Axel cautioned. “You don’t know what you’re walking into.”

“We’ll be careful,” Clint assured him. He said a quick goodbye and headed for the mouth of the alley. “They’re only three blocks away.”

The other men followed. They took both vehicles and parked on a side street one block from their destination then went the rest of the way on foot.

When they arrived at an apartment building, Matteo asked, “Do you know which apartment they’re in?”

Clint shook his head. “It only gave the address of the building.” It wasn’t a large building, only two floors, but finding the right apartment could be a chore. Rather than entering the building through the front, he walked around the corner and into the dead-end alley that ran alongside the structure. “If the boy saw her, it was from outside.” He glanced at the dumpster. “Homeless... foraging for food...” he mumbled. “I’m betting he saw her from this alley.” He turned his attention to the apartment building and the rusted metal fire escape scaling the side. “There. He saw her through one of the windows on this side of the building.”

“That narrows it down some,” Rodriguez murmured.

Cochise looked around. “So, where is the kid? He should be here. He wouldn’t have gone inside.”

“No, he wouldn’t.” Clint frowned, his concern for the boy climbing a notch.

“Maybe he took off,” Matteo said. “If someone saw him... like the girl’s father.”

“Why wouldn’t he just come back to us, then?” Rodriguez posed.

Clint’s gut warned of foul play. If that was the case, then they had *two* kids to find. “We’ll check the fire escape and the apartments facing this side.”

The cowboy started up the metal steps first, followed by Matteo. Cochise and Rodriguez waited on the ground, keeping watch.

Clint paused at each window on the way up. Most of them looked into bedrooms. He halted at one of the windows on the second floor of the building. “This is the one,” he told Matteo with confidence.

“How do you know?”

“It’s the only one with bars.” He indicated the other windows. “Someone installed these for their own purposes.”

“This is a bad neighborhood,” Matteo pointed out. “It could be they did it to feel safe.”

“Could be,” Clint muttered. “Or it could be they didn’t want someone to escape.”

“Makes sense, too.”

Clint leaned close and peered through the bars. The room was dark, he couldn’t see a fucking thing. He chanced using a small flashlight and shone the light through the window. The room was empty, though the bed looked slept in. He listened for sounds and heard nothing. The beam of light traveled around the room and came to rest on a piece of clothing on the

floor. Clint squinted, a girl's blouse. *Like the one Franny had been wearing when she was taken.*

His unease deepened as he stepped back.

"I don't think anyone is there." He rubbed his mouth. "But I think Franny has been here."

"You saw something?"

"Her shirt. The one Maddy said she was wearing. It fits the description."

"What do we do?"

"Find the front door and let ourselves in."

The two men headed back down the steps.

"If the boy has your phone, but he isn't here..." Matteo said. "... why is the app saying the phone is here? Do you think he might be locked up somewhere inside the apartment? Maybe with the girl?"

"Maybe," Clint mumbled. He wasn't sure he believed that, but they had to check.

The four gangsters circled back to the front entrance of the building and climbed the stairwell to the second floor.

Clint paused when they entered the hallway, determining which apartment faced the alley. "That one." He pointed to the door at the far end of the narrow corridor and strode down the hall. The door was locked, as expected. He glanced at the other men then knocked, rapping his knuckles hard on the door. No sound from the other side. Clint knocked a couple more times before moving back. The others stepped out of his way as he kicked the door in.

The men drew their weapons as they cautiously entered the dark apartment. Clint felt for a light switch inside the door, found it, and flipped on the lights. They were standing in the

small living room adjacent to the kitchen. Both rooms were vacant.

Clint walked into the kitchen and halted; his focus immediately drawn to the table—and his cell phone. His nerves growing taut, the cowboy approached the table and picked up the device.

“Is that your phone?” Matteo joined him.

“Yeah.” Clint turned it on. A photo of Franny and the boy appeared on the display, both frightened and in tears. *Fuck*. “They have them both,” he mumbled, stating the obvious.

The men made a quick sweep of the apartment but found nothing of use in determining the kidnapper’s destination.

“We should have followed him,” Rodriguez spoke low.

“Yeah,” Clint mumbled. “We should have.” They could be anywhere now, going anywhere. And no fucking clue left behind.

“I don’t think the man is alone,” Cochise said. “I found some women’s clothes in the other bedroom and some... woman stuff in the bathroom.”

“Maybe we should ask the other tenants if they saw anything?” Matteo suggested.

Clint grunted. “No one will open their doors to us. Not at night in this neighborhood.”

“Then what do we do?”

Clint stroked his jaw. “They won’t open to us, but if a cop was knocking on their door...”

...

“You’re going out now?” Frank asked with concern.  
“Where?”

“An apartment building in the Bronx.” The cowboy’s call was urgent—they needed him there immediately.

“The Bronx?” Frank followed him to the front door. “You said you were in no danger of bodily harm this time.”

“I’m not. Clint and his men are waiting for me. They’ll be there.”

Frank sighed, taking little comfort in that fact. “I want to go with you.”

“I need you to stay with the kids.”

“I can call Vanessa, and have her come over.”

“No,” Wil said. “There’s no time. The kidnapper just took off with the girl, and now a young boy as well. Time is critical.” He kissed Frank. “I’ll be home soon.”

Frank looked anxious. “You better be.”

Wil smiled and kissed him again, more deeply this time. “I promise.” He knew the follies of a cop making such promises, but he had to trust that this time, he could keep the promise. If he let his mind go anywhere else, he couldn’t function. The thought of not making it back to Frank and Tad and the boys would cripple him.

With great reluctance, Frank let him go.

When Wil arrived at the apartment building, Clint and the Egyptian were waiting for him out front along with two Hispanic men. Wil was sure he’d seen them before but didn’t know them by name. The cowboy didn’t waste time by making introductions. He led Wil straight up to the second floor. The other three men followed but remained at a distance when Clint and Wil approached the first door.



Clint stepped to the side, out of view of the peephole, and nodded at Wil.

Brandishing his badge, Wil knocked on the door. When he heard heavy footsteps from inside the apartment, he held up his badge. “Police.”

Low swearing from the other side. “What do you want? I didn’t do anything.”

“I just need to ask you about an incident that happened earlier in this building.”

“I don’t know anything,” the man returned gruffly.

“Please open the door, sir.”

Silence—then the lock disengaged, and the door eased open a few inches. A scruffy, bulky man peered out, towering over Wil, and looking none too friendly. “What incident?” he grumbled.

“I’m looking for a missing girl and boy...” He held up Clint’s phone with the photo of both kids. “They were being held in the apartment down the hall. Did you see either one of them? Or the adults who lived in that apartment?”

“No,” the man grunted without looking at the phone and stepped back. “I didn’t see anyone.” He started to slam the door when Clint moved swiftly and kicked the door, knocking the man back. “Stay out here,” he ordered Wil as he drew his weapon, “you don’t need to be involved in this part.”

Wil retreated a few paces and glanced at the other men who came down the hall. The Egyptian followed Clint inside and the door slammed shut behind them.

Anxiety knotted Wil’s guts and he looked uncertainly at the other two men. One was in his mid-twenties and the other

maybe closer to thirty. The older one nodded and held out his hand. “Matteo,” he offered pleasantly.

“Wil.” Wil cleared his throat and shook the man’s hand. “Wil Jordan.”

“Nice to meet you, Detective Jordan.” He nodded at his younger friend. “This handsome gent is Rodriguez.”

The younger man offered Wil a weak smile and a nod. He didn’t offer to shake and stared at Wil with empty eyes. Wil recognized the look; he dealt with far too many grieving folks in his line of work. This young man had lost someone close to him, Wil would wager on it. His heart went out to him. It wasn’t easy... maybe impossible... to fill the hole left by the loss of a loved one.

The apartment door opened minutes later, and the two gangsters emerged. Wil looked for blood and saw none. Catching the uncertainty on Wil’s face, Clint said, “He’s fine. He was telling the truth. He didn’t know anything.” He motioned to the next door down the hall.

Wil nodded and walked that way. He didn’t want to know what had gone on in the previous apartment or how they knew for sure the man wasn’t lying.

...

Two doors down, an old man opened the door a crack when Jordan knocked. His aged face was tense as he peered out into the hall. Spying Clint, and then the other three men a few paces away, he practically trembled in his shoes.

“How... how can I help you?” His quiet voice shook when he spoke to the detective.

“We’re looking for two missing teens.” He held up the phone with the kids’ photo. “They were being held in the apartment at the end of the hall by a man and woman. We believe they fled the apartment this evening, quite recently. Did you see or hear anything?”

The old man stared at the photo and swallowed thickly. “No,” he rasped and lowered his eyes. “It... it’s just me and my young granddaughter here. We keep to ourselves. I’m sorry, I can’t help you.”

Jordan nodded and glanced at Clint, silently inquiring if the cowboy had any questions for the old man. Clint shook his head despite the “niggle” in his gut. He couldn’t determine if the unease was the result of the overall situation... or something more specific. But he wasn’t going to charge into the old man’s apartment and scare the shit out of him and his granddaughter.

The remaining tenants provided no help. Clint hadn’t expected much from them but couldn’t leave any stones unturned. He didn’t want to return to Max and Horatio empty-handed. But there was nothing to take back to them.

*Fuck!* If they had just followed the kid, the girl would be safe and on her way home.

“There’s nothing here,” Clint growled at the other men. “No one saw anything. Put out the word that we’re now looking for a *couple* with two young teens, a boy and a girl.” He sent the photo of the two kids to their phones. “The detective and I will go speak with Max and Horatio.”

“What’re you going to tell them?” Matteo asked.

Clint exhaled hard. “Fuck if I know.”

“We’ll tell them the truth,” Jordan said. “The good news is, Franny is still alive. And I’m hopeful that nothing has

happened to her yet. If she was taken for trafficking purposes, then it's unlikely any transactions have been made yet. It hasn't even been twenty-four hours. And now, they're on the run."

"What if they panic and try to get rid of them?" Matteo asked with concern.

"I don't think that'll be the case with Franny," Jordan said. "The boy? That's hard to say."

"Talking is getting us nowhere." The *niggle* remained in Clint's gut. "You two, get back out on the streets."

Matteo and Rodriguez nodded and immediately headed out.

"Wait for me outside," Clint told the detective. "I'll be with you in a minute."

Jordan left the apartment building and returned to his car.

"What is it?" Cochise asked.

"Maybe nothing," Clint muttered. "Maybe something."

Russell lowered the handgun a fraction when the old man stepped back and closed the door. He smiled. “Nice job. I think they believed you. Lucky for you and...” He glanced behind them. “... your pretty little girl.” He motioned him back into the living room with Deidre and the other kids. “Now, we’re just going to sit tight until they leave the area, and then we’ll be on our way. No harm, no foul.”

The old man’s granddaughter rushed over to him and flung her small arms around his waist, her chest hitching with sobs. She was a pretty little thing with flowing golden locks and stark blue eyes... soft pouty lips... and couldn’t be more than nine or ten. *Ripe for the picking.*

“Everyone behaves and no one gets hurt.”

Sinking anxiously into a well-worn armchair, the grandpa gathered the young girl in his lap, holding her protectively.

Russell flashed a friendly grin. “What’s your name, old timer?”

“Charles,” he mumbled.

“And your pretty little girl?”

The old man met his stare—*firmly* for a moment—then lowered his eyes. “Hannah.”

“Well, Chuck... you don’t mind if we hang out here with you and your lovely Hannah for a bit, do you?” He squinted and absently twisted the weapon in his hand. “We can all get to know each other.” He smirked. “One big happy family.”

Charles didn't reply and held his granddaughter more tightly.

"How old is she?" Deidre asked.

The old man's eyes darted her way. "Ten," he whispered.

"She bleeding yet?"

"What?" Charles stared at her, mortified.

"You know..." Deidre smiled and cocked her head.

Cinching his arms around the young girl, Charles averted his eyes without answering the question.

Deidre laughed lightly. "She's worth more if she isn't bleeding yet."

Russell saw where she was going with this. It would be simple to knock off the old man and take the fresh little girl for themselves. Deidre was right—a young, pure girl would fetch a nice price. And that pretty face and blue eyes... and blond silky hair... was worth a mint in their world. It seemed a shame to leave behind such a treasure.

*As opposed to the dirty boy.*

He glanced at Franny and the boy, huddling together at the end of the sofa. The street rat wouldn't bring them much, not *as is*. Maybe if they cleaned him up. Russell stood. "You. Up." He gestured to the boy. "You don't mind if we use your shower, do you, Chuck? Where is it?"

The old man looked at the older kids and nodded down the hall as he hugged his granddaughter closer to his chest.

Russell chuckled and turned over the handgun to Deidre. "Watch them. I'm gonna get this boy cleaned up before we slap a price tag on his ass."

. . .

The boy's terror and confusion radiated from his face when Franny's father grabbed his arm and jerked him forward.

Franny stood up. "What're you doing? Don't hurt him." She started to follow them when her mother ordered her back.

Russell halted and cocked his head at Franny. "No, it's okay. She can come along. I might need her help."

Unsure what he meant, Franny went with them, moving forward to grab the boy's hand. The man ushered them from the small living room and into the short hallway. He checked the doors until he found the bathroom.

"Inside."

Franny stepped through the door, drawing the boy after her.

"Turn on the water," her father ordered. "Nice and hot. Gotta scrub the grit and grime off his ass and see what we're working with."

When Franny moved to the tub, the boy excreted a muffled whimper that sounded like a small animal in distress as Russell roughly removed his clothes. The boy fought him, tears streaming down his dirty face, but he was no match for the grown man. Russell pushed him down and yanked his pants off his feet. The boy gasped and cried and curled into a ball to hide his nakedness.

Franny cried with him. "Stop it!" she yelled at her father. "You're scaring him!"

Russell laughed. "He should get used to it. Fear will be a part of his life from now on. You of all people should know that." He gripped the boy by the arms and forcefully lifted him

into the tub and turned on the shower. That *burning* look came into Russell's eyes as he stared at the boy's nude body, the hot shower washing away the dirt and filth.

*Don't rape him—please don't rape him!* Franny didn't know what to do if her father attacked the boy. She stood paralyzed beside the tub, chest heaving, heart in her throat as tears ran down her face.

Panting lightly, Russell turned his smoldering eyes on her. "Get in there with him. Clean him up. From head to toe. *All* of him." He panted a little harder. "*Now.*"

He wanted her to get *naked* too? She hesitated, terrified of removing her clothes, remembering the bath from earlier.

"Take off your clothes," he rasped, "Or I will take them off for you. Your choice."

Franny ducked her head and sobbed, her hands shaking as she slowly peeled off the dress and then her underclothes. One arm folded over her small breasts while she covered herself down below with her other hand.

"No need to be modest, darling," her father murmured, his eyes burning hotter. "Not with me. And I'm sure the boy thinks you're quite lovely." He touched Franny's bare arm and she flinched. "Now, get in the tub and wash him."

Franny glanced at the boy who leaned against the wall, hugging himself in a death grip, his eyes squeezed shut. Franny's chin trembled harder. *I'm so sorry this is happening to you. It's my fault. If you hadn't tried to help me...*

She climbed in and picked up a bar of soap but faltered before touching him.

"Go on," her father urged, breathing faster.



Franny tried not to acknowledge the growing bulge in the man's pants but couldn't avoid noticing it. Her stomach knotted with nausea. Would he rape them *both* before this was over?

Moving close to the boy's back, Franny cried softly, "I'm so sorry." He flinched when she touched the soap to his skin but didn't fight her as she began washing his shoulders and back.

"That's it," Russell breathed. "Wash him good. Get that ass good and clean."

Lowering her eyes, Franny tentatively scrubbed the boy's backside, her hands hesitant as she touched him so intimately.

The man groaned. "Now the front."

She gently turned the boy facing her and stared into his frightened eyes, both crying silent tears. Her gaze begged his forgiveness as she washed between his legs, handling him as tenderly as possible. Franny struggled to close her ears to her father's heavy breathing and the sound of him rubbing himself through his pants.

"Put his hands on you," he rasped thickly. "Then get him off." He flashed a dark, lustful grin. "I know you know how. Show me what you can do, sweetheart."

Franny felt sick. This nightmare was supposed to be over. How had it swallowed her up again? And not just her this time... but this sweet, innocent boy.

...

Max's heart sank when Clint stepped through the front door, followed by detective Jordan. It wasn't their presence

that had such a foreboding effect on Max—but the look on their faces.

*They didn't find Franny.*

*Or they did and...*

No, it wasn't *that*. It couldn't be.

Max halted the two men in the entry hall. “Before you go into the kitchen and include Horatio in this,” he spoke in a hushed voice, “I need to know one thing.” He swallowed a couple of times. “Did you find Franny?”

“No,” Clint said. “The place was empty. But she'd been there, recently.”

Relief shuddered through Max. It wasn't great news, but at least Franny was still alive. As far as they knew. Right now, he could handle anything but losing her in *that* way. He nodded at the men and led them into the other room.

Horatio paced the kitchen and paused when the three of them entered. He didn't speak but just looked at Clint expectantly. Like Max, he was terrified of what they had found.

“They didn't find her,” Max spoke first, going to his husband. “But Clint said she had been there quite recently.”

Releasing a shaky breath, Horatio held onto Max and asked, “Do you think they'll bring her back to that place?”

“No,” Clint replied. “They knew we were onto them. They left in a hurry. They won't be back.”

Horatio pressed his lips tight, his throat working. “Can you... can you find her?”

“On my end,” Jordan said, “I'll make her case a priority. We now know that her father was with a woman, so we know to look for a *couple* with two young teens.”

“Two?” Horatio frowned.

Jordan explained about the homeless boy.

“They have him, too?” Max felt sick—yet harbored deep admiration for the boy’s willingness to help their daughter, despite the potential danger to himself.

Clint nodded.

“Wait...” Horatio tensed. “Her father was with a woman?” The fear in his eyes deepened. “You don’t... you don’t think she was... Franny’s *mother*... do you?”

The possibility sickened Max. He looked at Clint and Jordan.

“I don’t know,” Clint mumbled. “There was nothing in the apartment to identify her.”

“And none of the other tenants knew them,” Jordan said. “They said Pritchard had just recently moved in. No one knew anything about him.”

“What do we do now?” Horatio whispered, wilting onto a stool at the counter. “How are we going to know where they take Franny and the boy?”

“Leave that to us,” Clint said.

. . .

Deidre cast glances toward the hall. The shower was running in the bathroom. Heat burned inside her and not the *good* heat she felt when she wanted to fuck. A different, *searing* heat scorched her gut and surged up into her chest, making her head pound.

*Jealousy.* That's what it was. She knew why Russell took Franny with them to the bathroom. She wasn't blind—she saw the way he looked at her, saw the *lust* in his eyes. A lust she *used* to see on his face when he looked at *her*. Not anymore. Oh, he still liked to nail her and got off when they fucked, but the *fire* was gone... directed elsewhere. *At our daughter.*

Now, she was stuck out here babysitting the old man while Russell played with Franny and the boy in the bathroom. He had made Franny get naked with the boy, she knew this, and probably had them putting on a show for him—*just* him—while he yanked his chain. She'd sensed his possessiveness over Franny as soon as she showed up at the apartment earlier.

Deidre's anger and jealousy burned toward Franny, so fresh and young. That's what Russell wanted. Maybe he was in the bathroom right now *fucking* her—and the boy, too. That was hardly fair. The very *least* he could do was leave the boy for her. But he wouldn't even do that. He'd take *everything* for himself. If she hadn't needed him to get Franny back, she would've gone solo, pimping Franny out herself.

*Yeah, right, you couldn't have done it alone.* Probably true. Russell had all the contacts. Even before, he was the one initiating the sales—behind the scenes. Still, she wasn't happy about him taking so much for himself.

She looked at the old man and the little girl. Who said she couldn't take something for herself, as well? Deidre gestured at the captives with the gun. "Come here, Hannah," she cooed. "Let me get a look at you, angel."

The child clung to her grandfather. The old man stared at Deidre, his body tense and still.

"Come on now, darling," Deidre insisted and waggled the weapon. "Don't make me use this nasty thing on your granddaddy."

“Leave her be,” the old man mumbled with a brittle edge.

Deidre laughed. “You say that as if *you’re* in control.” She caressed the handgun. “But you see, he—or *she*—who holds the gun is the one in control. That’s just common sense.” She snapped her fingers. “Come here, girl... or I’ll shoot your grandpa. Simple as that.”

The child raised her head and looked at Deidre, her face wet with tears, fear in her eyes.

“That’s right. Do as you’re told, and no one gets hurt. I just want to get a look at you, that’s all. I’m not gonna hurt you.”

“Hannah...” the old man protested when his granddaughter crawled off his lap.

“Don’t fret, old man,” Deidre soothed. “We’re just gonna have us a little girl time. Can’t keep smothering her. Gott let her grow up and spread her wings and...” Deidre grinned slyly. “... other parts of her.”

The man straightened in his chair, watching Deidre like a hawk.

“Come here, honey.” Deidre took the child’s hand and pulled her closer. Hannah resisted some, her legs stiff. “Well, look at you... all sweet and innocent and pretty as a picture.” She fingered the girl’s soft blond hair, brushing it out of her damp face. “Yeah, you’re a treasure,” she whispered. “Such soft...” She ran her thumb over Hannah’s full lips. “... sweet lips. The men love that, yes, they do. You’d think the first place they looked was between a girl’s legs, but most of them are sold on the mouth first. And your mouth is absolutely... perfect.”

“Stop it,” the old man growled. “Don’t say those disgusting things to her.”

“Again.” Deidre waved the gun. “The one in control gets to say and do whatever they want.” She smiled at Hannah. “Do you know how much men love little girls like you? Have you ever seen a man’s... *thing*? Do you know what it’s for? It goes right here...” She slipped her hand under Hannah’s dress and ran her fingers up the inside of her leg.

“*Stop* it,” the old man demanded, tears in his eyes.  
“*Please*... stop.”

“I’m just telling her what every little girl needs to know. An angel this pretty... you know the boys—and men—are gonna be after her early on. They already are. Did you see the way my man looked at her?” She leaned forward and curled an arm around Hannah and smiled coolly at the old man. “You do know, when we leave here, we’re taking this little gem with us... right? And once my man gets her alone... he’s gonna teach her how to *take it* in every hole.”

The old man trembled, tears rolling down his haggard face.

“And there’s not a damn thing you can do about it.” Deidre laughed lightly and hugged the girl, pressing her face into Hannah’s silky strands. She closed her eyes and breathed in the child’s fresh, *pure* scent. “Oh, the fun we’re going to have together, angel,” she moaned. “You’ll never be the same again —”

Deidre didn’t see the old man move and only faintly heard the *snap* of her neck breaking and the thud of her body hitting the floor before everything went black forever.

“Are you all right, sweetheart?” Charles squatted next to the dead woman and picked up the gun, checking the clip.

Hannah retreated to the far end of the sofa but nodded at his question.

Motioning her forward, Charles gripped her shoulders. “Do you remember the special hiding place?”

“Yes,” Hannah whispered, trembling. Her teary eyes darted to the body and back to her grandfather.

“I want you to go there now and hide. Don’t come out until I come to get you, do you understand?”

She nodded again. “What... what’re you gonna do?”

He swallowed and glanced toward the hall. “That’s a bad man in there. Those kids need help. I’m going to help them.”

Her chin trembled. “I-I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Charles smiled and kissed her brow. “I won’t, sweetheart. I may be old, but I haven’t lost my edge.” He kissed her head again and ushered her to the front door. “Now, go,” he spoke quietly. “Hide. And wait for me.”

Hannah hugged him. “Okay.” She wiped her eyes and put on a brave face. “Be careful, Poppa.”

“Always am.” He sent her out the door, leaning out to watch her until she reached the stairwell and passed beyond his sight, then he stepped back inside and softly closed the door and locked it. He turned and faced the hallway. Muffled voices drifted from the bathroom.

The old man's normally soft features hardened as he checked the weapon once again and began turning off the lights.

. . .

Franny couldn't stop herself from shaking as she stood in the tub and hugged her naked body, her eyes on her feet. The boy stood beside her in the same state; head down, eyes empty, tears rolling down his face. Neither was able to look at the other out of shame and humiliation over the things her father made them do to each other—while he *watched* and got himself *off*.

Nausea twisted her guts and she wanted to puke. The boy looked ashen and ill as well.

*I hate you!* She silently screamed at her father. *I hate you so much!*

“Let's get you out of there.” Russell grabbed a towel and wrapped it around Franny, taking liberties with his hands as he dried her off. “That's my good girl.”

Franny squeezed her eyes shut, swallowing her sobs. When the cops had rescued her over a month ago, she'd tentatively hoped to never feel *violated* ever again. But she felt violated now. Everything the boy was forced to do to her—it felt like *her father* doing them to her instead. Like Franny, the boy was his victim. She didn't blame the sweet boy who had tried to help her.

Eager to cover up, Franny pulled on the dress again. There were no clean clothes for the boy who had no choice but to put his dirty garments back on. He didn't seem to care as long as he wasn't naked anymore.



Russell exhaled and stared at the boy. “We’ll get you something clean to wear before we rent you out.” He winked and smiled. “Our customers aren’t all that picky, but it’s just good policy on our part.”

Franny was thankful the boy couldn’t hear him. Though his disability didn’t ease the fear radiating from his face; he knew this man meant to send him to hell.

“How about we rejoin our hosts and check out the young one?” Russell chuckled and ushered the two kids out of the bathroom before him. “She’s worth more than both of you combined.” He leaned forward and brushed his lips on Franny’s ear. “Not that I mean to sell you, darling,” he whispered. “You’re my little girl. I want you with me always.”

Chills skipped down Franny’s spine and she wanted to pull away from him, but as before, feared the consequences. The boy walked stiffly beside her, staring at the floor, chin trembling and throat working. Silent tears streamed down his freshly washed cheeks. He wouldn’t look at Franny. Or maybe, he just *couldn’t*. Did he feel like *he* had violated her? None of it was his fault and she wanted so badly to tell him that she didn’t blame him. But if no one rescued them, then what happened in the bathroom wouldn’t matter because much worse awaited them outside the apartment. The day would come real soon when what they were forced to do to each other in the shower would be a *good* memory... in comparison to the horrors they later endured. Franny knew—she didn’t have to imagine. She’d lived that nightmare her whole life.

*Until someone found me and woke me up.*

Now, though, it felt like the time with her dads was the dream... and reality was the nightmare.

“What the fuck?” Russell slowed as they neared the living room. “Why’re the lights off?”

Franny and the boy halted as her father moved around them, calling out to Franny's mother.

The woman didn't answer back from the dark living room.

Russell entered the darkness with caution. "Deidre?" Nothing. "Old man? If you're playing some fucking game with me—I'd advise you *stop* right fucking now. This will not end well for you—" Russell tripped in the dark and hit the floor with a grunt. "*Fuck.*"

Her heart pounding in her ears, Franny reached over and took the boy's hand, squeezing fearfully. What was happening?

The thought hardly passed through her mind when her father gasped and scrambled to his feet. "*Jesus.*" He breathed hard. "Deidre? *Fuck.*"

Franny looked at the boy who heard nothing that was going on in the living room, yet seemed to understand something was happening as he slowly turned his head and tentatively met Franny's wide eyes. The pale light of the bathroom backlit their forms and Franny glimpsed the fear and confusion on the boy's face. She squeezed his hand tighter.

"You old *fuck!*" Russell abruptly bellowed, startling Franny. "I'm gonna fucking *kill you!* But not before I make you watch me *fuck* your little angel six ways from Sunday!"

*Oh God... what happened out there—*

A hand clamped over Franny's mouth, stifling her startled cry, and she and the boy were dragged into a dark room and the door eased closed behind them.

"I'm not going to hurt you," the old man, Charles, whispered in her ear. "But I need you to stay completely quiet."

Franny nodded, her body shaking. The man slowly removed his hand.

“Stay hidden in here and lock the door after me,” he told them. “I’ll take care of him.”

Grasping his arm as he stepped toward the door, Franny whispered brokenly, “Please be careful.”

“I will.” The old man slipped out of the room and Franny hurriedly locked the door.

They were in a bedroom and she and the boy huddled on the bed. Tension stiffened the boy’s body, not just from fear but... the other. Franny’s father hadn’t only forced them to “pleasure” each other with their hands... he’d made them do... everything. She wondered if the boy was even still there *mentally*.

A sudden scuffle broke out somewhere in the apartment and Franny jumped, hugging the boy. Grunts and cursing reached the bedroom... things clattering and breaking as they hit the floor. Charles was an old man. Franny feared he couldn’t hold his own in a hand-to-hand fight with her father—who was much younger and stronger.

*Please, God, don’t let him kill Charles. Please don’t let him get the little girl.*

A gunshot rang out then a hard *thud* as someone dropped.

Franny jumped and gasped and held the boy more tightly, shaking badly as heavy footsteps trolled the hall moments later, coming closer.

“Where y’all hiding?” Russell called out breathlessly. His footsteps sounded *off* as if he were limping. He halted outside the bedroom door and tried the knob, then knocked. “Little pig, little pig, let me in, or I’ll...” He huffed. “Well, darling, you *know* what I’ll do.”

No... Franny ducked her head against the boy's temple and sobbed. For a split second, she thought they were safe, thought Charles would save them. Now...

*Is he dead? What about his granddaughter... where is she?*

"You gonna make me come in after you?" There was no humor in Russell's voice. Rather, frustration and anger. And that heightened Franny's terror. Was her mother... dead? Did Charles *kill* her? "All right," the man snarled. "As you wish."

The door burst open, and Russell stumbled through, nearly going down when his left leg buckled beneath him. He caught himself, switched on the light, and staggered forward. Franny and the boy scrambled off the far side of the bed, cramming themselves into the corner, crying.

"Did you really think that old man could take me down?" Russell panted, his face twisting in pain as he took another labored step. Blood soaked his left leg, seeping from a wound in his thigh.

*The gunshot.* Had Charles *shot* him during the scuffle? Franny didn't see the gun on her father, and she'd heard only one shot.

Russell made his way around the bed and grabbed Franny by the hair, yanking her away from the boy. Franny screamed and collided with his chest. The boy suddenly came alive and sprang forward, trying to free her. Russell backhanded the kid and knocked him against the wall. The boy struck hard and went down, blood gushing from his nose.

Franny looked at him as everything inside her went numb; *we're victims. Weak, vulnerable victims.* Her hand drifted to her abdomen and flattened on her belly. *You can't be a victim anymore... she's counting on you.* Her watery eyes held on the terrified boy, blood running down his chin and onto his shirt.

*He's here because of you. The nightmare will swallow him up if you don't fight! It will swallow you up again—and your baby!*

“I *hate* you,” Franny choked as something inside her broke, releasing a storm of rage. “*I hate you!*” She beat at her father’s chest.

He sneered—until she kned him in his wounded leg. “Cunt!” He slapped her hard and threw her on the bed as he grabbed his thigh.

Franny scooted off the bed and crawled to the boy, pulling him into her arms as she glared viciously at her father. “You’re not gonna get away. They’re gonna catch you and *hurt you.*” She choked on a stiff sob, tears streaming. “Maybe they won’t catch you today, but they *will* catch you.” She rose slowly to her feet, shielding the boy behind her. “Until then... no matter what you do to me... I *won't* be your victim. Not yours. Not anyone’s.” Her chin trembled. “Men like you broke me once but...” She swallowed hard, shaking her head. “... not *ever again.*”

Russell stared at her dryly. “That’s big talk from a little girl.” His chest heaved as blood bubbled out between his fingers. He inched forward and reached out with a bloody hand and grabbed the back of her neck, forcing her forward. “And who are these *saviors* who’re gonna *catch* me? You think I’m scared of them?”

Staring into his bloodshot eyes, Franny trembled and whispered, “You better be.”

...

Russell flinched at the tiny shiver that skittered down his back. The little bitch was actually getting under his skin. Her sudden defiance and *certainty* unsettled him—*where the fuck had that come from?*—but she would never know it.

“Even if they do,” he growled, “it’ll be too late. I’m gonna make sure they *never* find *you*. Or your little boyfriend here.”

Though Franny was shaking, her stare held firm. “They’ll find us... and they’ll find you. You can’t hide from them. They’re *everywhere*.”

What the hell did that mean? Russell couldn’t put down the chill he felt when he heard the men at the door. Not so much the detective but... the other one. He was no cop, Russell was sure of that much.

“Everywhere?” Russell muttered, knowing he needed to get them out of the apartment before the cops came back. Someone would’ve reported the gunshot. Maybe. This was a shitty neighborhood. Gunshots weren’t uncommon in these parts. Even so, he could take no chances. Yet, he stood unmoving as he bled down his leg, *questioning* his daughter. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Franny tilted her face up, the frigid look in her eyes assuring him that her next words were very much *true*. “They’re gangsters. And I’m part of their family now. You *stole* one of their own. Do you know what that means, *daddy?*”

Russell swallowed hard and remained silent. He knew. It meant...

*You’re fucked.*

From the small landing in the stairwell, Cochise had eyes on the apartment. His position afforded him the ability to quickly step out of sight should someone exit the apartment. When he heard the door open, he moved back. Footsteps raced along the hallway, coming in his direction. He drew his weapon and waited.

The little girl came rushing down the stairwell, eyes on the steps, not looking ahead. She plowed into Cochise then reeled back with a gasp, her frightened stare crawling up his massive frame to his rugged face. Another small gasp escaped her when she spotted his weapon and she retreated a few more steps, her small chest heaving. Most folks were terrified at the sight of the Egyptian, but this child's fear stemmed from another source. She was *already* scared when she ran into Cochise.

Like trapped prey, the girl stood tense and trembling, her wide eyes darting in every direction.

Cochise slowly holstered the gun and raised his hands. "It's okay," he spoke low, calmly. "I'm not going to hurt you." He made another quick assessment of her frightened state. "Are you all right?" She had come from the old man's apartment. The old timer had told the detective it was just him and his granddaughter living there. Clint had sensed something off about the man; a *tremor* in his words that suggested perhaps things weren't right in his little world.

*Stay here and watch that apartment, Clint instructed. Keep out of sight. See if anyone comes out.*

The Egyptian had learned long ago to trust the cowboy's gut feelings. Cochise's gut began talking, as well, the minute the old man answered the door.

"Is your grandfather all right?" Cochise asked. "Is someone else in your apartment?" He took out his phone and showed the girl the photo of the two missing kids. "Have you seen them? I'm with the cop who came to your door. I want to take them home."

The girl sniffed, uncertainty etched across her face.

"If your grandfather is in trouble, you need to tell me. I can help him."

The child's chin trembled. "They... they're in there."

"Who? The kids?"

She nodded. "And... and a bad man."

"Is there a woman with him?"

"Yes." The little girl swallowed, her throat working. "But... but poppa... got her."

Cochise frowned. "Got her? What do you mean?"

"She-she's... dead."

Cochise wasn't prepared for that bit of news. "Your grandpa... *killed* her?" Cochise hadn't gotten a good look at the old man, but his impression was one of frailty.

"How did he do that?"

The child flexed her small hands. "He... he used to be in the army. Special forces. He has medals."

Shit. Maybe the *frailty* bit was merely an act put on for the intruders.



“What about the man? Where was he when your grandpa took out the woman?”

“The bathroom,” she whispered. “He took the two kids with him. He... he said he wanted to wash the boy.” She lowered her eyes. “He was scared.”

“The boy?”

She nodded. “And the girl.”

“Did your grandpa send you out of the apartment?”

“Yes.” She looked up, tears in her eyes. “He told me to hide in the special hiding place. He said he needed to help the kids.”

The old man was surely capable of taking down the man as well, but one mishap and this child would be left an orphan. And that wasn't an option.

“Do as your grandpa told you,” Cochise said. “Hide. I'll help him with the bad man—”

A gunshot inside the apartment.

The little girl jumped, terror exploding across her face. She started to race back up the steps when Cochise caught hold of her. “*No*. Go hide—*now*.”

“Poppa had-had the gun,” she stammered, tears welling. “Do you think he shot the bad man?”

“Maybe. But you need to stay safe until I check it out. Go to your hiding spot.”

She moved past him, then faltered. “Be careful,” she whispered with a tremor. “Don't get hurt.”

Cochise tentatively touched her head. “I'll be okay. Now, go hide.” Cochise rushed up the steps, sending out a call to Clint as he went.

. . .

“*Shit.*” Clint motioned to Jordan as he stuffed the phone back into his pocket. “We gotta go. *Now.*”

“What is it?” the detective asked with alarm.

“Gunshots in the apartment.”

“What’s going on?” Max looked frightened. “That was Cochise, wasn’t it? Where is he? Did he find Franny?”

The cowboy didn’t answer as he and Jordan hurried out of the house.

Horatio clung to Max. “I’m scared.” He trembled. “Why didn’t he tell us what’s happening?”

“I don’t know.” Max kissed his head. *Gunshots in the apartment.* His fear escalated.

“What did he mean about the gunshots?” Horatio swallowed thickly. “Is that where Franny is—in that apartment?” He trembled harder. “What if she was...?”

*Shot?* Max couldn’t let his mind go there. They would get their daughter back—safe and sound. He couldn’t believe anything else, couldn’t *allow* himself to believe anything else.

“She’s okay,” Max whispered against his hair, struggling to keep his voice calm and steady. “She is.”

*She has to be.*

. . .

The apartment door was locked. *Shit*. He would have to force his way in. Breaking in *quietly* was the trick. On the off chance that Franny's father had the gun, Cochise needed the element of surprise. And *not* getting his head blown off as soon as he came through the door would be a plus.

He listened at the door but heard nothing from inside. He strained his ears and thought he detected muffled voices from somewhere in the back of the apartment. Cochise gripped the doorknob and hit his shoulder against the door. There was no fucking *quiet* way of doing this. He struck the door again, harder. It held.

"Fuck it," he growled and stepped back and kicked the fucker in. The door slammed open with a bang. Cochise stepped back, weapon raised, then peered inside when he heard nothing. No fucking way the occupants didn't hear *that*.

The apartment was dark, all the lights out. He crept through the door, trying to adjust his eyes to the darkness. He didn't like this; it was much too easy to get ambushed—

"Drop it." The gun barrel touched the back of his head.  
"Now."

The old man.

Cochise lowered the weapon. "I'm just here for the kids," he spoke low. "And the motherfucker who kidnapped them. I have no quarrel with you, old timer." The gun held firm to his head. "I saw your granddaughter. She told me what happened with the woman. I said I would help you take down the bad man."

"Hannah?" the old man growled and ground the gun barrel harder against his skull. "Where is she? What did you do to her?"

“Nothing,” Cochise assured calmly. “She went to hide like you told her.”

“Who are you?” the old man demanded.

“The young girl that’s here... I’m a friend of her family. I’m trying to get her home safe.”

The gun eased away from his head as the older man stepped back. His movements and labored breath alarmed the Egyptian.

“Are you okay?”

“The fucker clocked me,” the old man mumbled. “I winged him, but he didn’t go down. He went after the kids.”

“Where are they?”

“In the back bedroom,” the old man rasped. “He’s with them.”

“Wait here,” Cochise instructed. “Guard the door. If the fucker gets past me, take him down.” He paused, then added, “Try not to kill him, though. We have plans for him.”

“We?”

“My brother and I,” Cochise muttered. “No one fucks with our family or friends and gets the easy way out.”

The old man exhaled shakily. “He wanted to take my Hannah with them when they left.” Quiet rage bubbled beneath the surface. “*Sell* her.”

The child’s face rose behind Cochise’s eyes—such sweet innocence. He tried to block out the nightmare images that bastard intended for her, but they overwhelmed his mind. He thought about Hope... and Zoe... and what this sick fuck would do to them if he got his hands on them.

*He won't. He won't get his hands on another child ever again—because the fucker won't have any hands when we're through with him.*

. . .

Russell swore when the front door busted open.

Franny looked at him with dead eyes. “They’re here.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he snapped and grabbed her hair, yanking her against him, and holding her back to his chest. He drew a knife and touched it to her tender throat, craning her head to the side. “We’re still getting out of here.” He shoved his mouth to her ear, his breath hot. “And once we’re free... I’m going to teach you some manners, teach you to *respect* your father. It’ll be a *hard* lesson,” he panted, grinding his crotch against her backside. “But you’ll learn... eventually.”

Franny swallowed, terrified but angry. “I’ll never respect you—no matter how many times you rape me.” Her eyes shifted to the boy huddling on the floor, nose bleeding. Her father couldn’t take them both hostage and still escape. She felt some comfort knowing the boy would get away with no further harm. *But your baby won’t.* And that broke her heart.

*The cowboy won’t let him take you.* But what if he couldn’t stop her father? He had a knife to her throat—would they risk shooting him?

Heavy footsteps crept down the hall outside the bedroom. Russell backed away from the bed, dragging Franny with him, the blade pressing into her flesh. The footsteps halted at the door. Franny stared across the room, fear bulging her eyes. She didn’t want to die, didn’t want her baby to die—but she would

rather be dead than be with her father and caught in the nightmare again.

The door flung open, revealing an empty doorway. Then a hulking figure appeared, gun in hand, and aimed at her father's head. *The Egyptian*. The cowboy's friend. She'd only seen him a few times, and he kind of scared her—but not now. It was *Russell* who was about to shit his pants. She felt the fear coursing through him and savored it.

*Your turn to be the victim, asshole.*

. . .

“Let her go.” Cochise held the man's stare without wavering. “There's nowhere to go.”

The bastard held his daughter, knife flush with her throat. There was no room for error. One wrong move and the girl would die. From the corner of his eye, Cochise noted the boy on the floor, bleeding. But only from his nose, it seemed. His focus held on the man and the girl.

The man bled from the leg where the old timer winged him, rendering him unsteady on his feet.

“If you harm her,” Cochise warned with a low snarl, “I will skin you alive... very fucking slow.”

The young girl, though frightened, caught Cochise's stare. Behind the fear, he discovered something he hadn't expected to find in such a young, vulnerable child—*defiance*.

“Get out of my way,” the man ordered. The slight *quiver* in his voice tickled the Egyptian's nerve endings; he was scared. *Terrified*. Had the girl told him who they were? He suspected she had. *Good*. Cochise *thrived* on their terror. It used to get

him hard, back in the day. Now, it conjured a different level of *thrill*. Only *Kane* got him hard these days.

“You’re not getting out of here,” Cochise said. “Let her go and I’ll consider killing you quickly.” A lie.

“Fuck you,” the man growled. “You take one fucking step into this room...” He pressed the knife harder against her throat and the girl gasped. “... and I’ll slice her open like a Christmas turkey.”

The girl swallowed laboriously around the blade, tears filling her eyes... yet the defiance held strong. She stared at Cochise. “Shoot him,” she whispered with a rasp.

When Cochise hesitated, her father huffed. “He won’t shoot. He won’t take the risk.”

Unfortunately, the fucker was right; he couldn’t risk the girl’s life.

Gaining some confidence, the man eased around the perimeter of the room with a staggering limp, bringing the girl with him. “Out of my way,” he ordered again, holding the knife firm against her throat. “I’ll kill her before I let you take me alive.” He snorted. “If you don’t believe me...” He turned the tip of the blade into her flesh. “... call my bluff.”

The bastard wasn’t bluffing.

Cochise retreated a few steps, allowing room enough for the man and girl to slip out of the bedroom. Cochise had no intentions of letting him escape but had to let him think he was.

As the girl’s father moved her down the hall with a labored gait toward the living room and the entrance door beyond, Cochise spoke out to the old man, “He’s got the girl. Stand down.” The war vet had the element of surprise and could have taken him out... but the risk of losing the girl remained.

“You still in the game, old man?” the girl’s father chuffed.  
“You’re a tough old geezer, I’ll give you that.”

The man was panting, the pain in his leg and loss of blood beginning to affect him.

The Egyptian only needed one small opening—the slightest shift of the knife away from the girl’s throat—and he would take him down.

But the blade didn’t budge... and remained pressed firmly into her tender flesh, ready to rip away her life at a moment’s notice.



Franny squeezed her eyes shut and tried to hold steady against her father's jerky stride. She felt the sting of the sharp blade as it nicked her skin and drew blood that smeared her throat in sticky wetness. A sudden jerk or involuntary spasm of her father's hand and the knife would slit her throat.

She opened her eyes and saw the front door busted open, and the light of the hallway outside. They were almost out of the apartment. The Egyptian followed close behind, gun aimed at her father's head. He didn't want to risk the shot, her father was right. As they neared the front door, she spied the old man in the shadows of the kitchen doorway, gun gripped in his hands and directed at her father. But he wouldn't take the shot, either. The Egyptian had told him to stand down.

*What if he does escape with me?* He might—if the other men refused to shoot him.

“Just keep your cool, old man,” Russell warned when they passed by the grandfather.

Where was the little girl? Franny wondered again. Hiding in the apartment somewhere? Russell wasn't interested in her anymore, or the boy. He only wanted Franny now.

“Almost there, darling,” he panted in her ear when they neared the front door.

What would the other men do? Just let him take her? She wanted to puke—for real—but fought down the bile rising in her throat. She didn't know how long it would stay down, though, as her stomach twisted and knotted with an unmerciful mixture of fear and “morning sickness”.

Franny's head went light, and dizziness swept over her as nausea welled dangerously.

*I'm gonna puke... I'm gonna puke...*

Russell hauled her out of the apartment and into the hallway, shoving her toward the stairwell. The narrow corridor spun slowly around her as the dizziness worsened along with nausea. Franny's legs weakened and she stumbled, nearly driving the blade into her throat.

"Stand *up*," her father hissed, jerking her upright. "Or I *will* cut your throat and let you bleed out."

He wasn't lying—he would do it—but Franny was beginning to feel disoriented and feverish. "*I... can't...*" she whispered, her voice slurring. "*I'm... sick...*"

"Suck it up, sweetheart," he growled. "You're just gonna have to deal with it—until we dig that baby out of you. Then you'll be back to feeling as good as new."

His words didn't help and only heightened the severity of her condition.

Black spots speckled her vision, and everything blurred. If she fainted—would he slit her throat and make a run for it?

*You can't pass out... you can't... you have to stay awake... you have to protect your baby...*

...

*Goddammit!* Franny sagged a little in his arms, the strength seeming to drain from her body. This was a ploy—to try and get him to leave her behind. Fuck if that was going to happen. He tightened his hold on her body. "Get on your feet,

you little bitch,” he snapped. “Or I’ll gut your belly and leave you alive to watch your baby die.”

She wasn’t far enough along for there to be any “baby” to watch die, but he knew how she felt about the life inside of her. To Franny, the blood and guts would equal the death of her baby.

“*I’m... trying...*” she whimpered as she attempted to hold her head up and not lean into the blade. Her face grew flushed, and her brow glistened with sweat. Maybe she wasn’t faking, but it didn’t matter.

“Try *harder*,” he hissed.

They approached the top of the stairwell. It would be a bitch trying to get down the steps with his gimp leg—much less, Franny’s weakened body. But he had no choice; that big bastard was on his tail.

Russell took the first step down and froze when two other men appeared on the landing below. *The cowboy from the photo*. And the cop. *Fuck!* He eased back up and glanced behind him. The huge fucker emerged from the apartment.

“All of you *back off!*” Russell ordered, panic rising. How the *fuck* was he getting out of this one? His only leverage was Franny. He readjusted his hold on the girl as she began to feel like dead weight in his arms. “I’ll fucking *gut her!*”

The cowboy watched him like a cobra. “You’re not getting out of this building,” he drawled low, a chilling edge to his voice. “How fast—or *slow*—we kill you depends on what you do next.”

. . .

The situation was precarious and dangerous. The man was trapped, and he knew it. Franny was his only leverage and even she seemed a bit of a burden as she sagged in his arms. Jordan looked concerned as he focused on the girl; her face ashen and shiny with sweat, and a smear of blood on her throat. She seemed about to pass out. That could be a good thing... or bad. It was difficult to determine at this point.

The man didn't look so well himself. His leg was bleeding and he looked in pain.

Jordan stepped forward, producing his badge. "I'm Detective Jordan of the NYPD. Release the girl and I give you my word, you won't be harmed."

"Suck my dick, pig," the man spit back. "You really think I'm just gonna give myself up? You really that fucking stupid?"

Tucking his badge away, Jordan sighed. "One of us here is fucking stupid, but it isn't me." He met the man's stare. "Only a stupid motherfucker refuses a life preserver when they're about to drown. Now, you're on your own."

"Fucking right, I'm on my own. And if any of you fuckers get in my way, this girl is *dead*—"

Franny vomited—blowing chunks all over the man.

"*What the fuck—?*" He jerked back on reflex, the knife leaving Franny's throat.

Clint and Cochise fired simultaneously, blowing out both of the man's knees. He screamed and hit the floor as Franny half scooted, half crawling through her vomit to get away from him. She weakly hauled herself to her feet, swaying a bit as she leaned on the wall and looked down at Clint.

"*No!*" her father bellowed in rage and excruciating pain and lurched forward through a mess of blood and vomit. He

caught hold of Franny's ankle. "If I can't have you—*no one can.*" He wrenched her foot out from under her and Franny screamed as she toppled forward and fell onto the concrete steps, cracking her head. She went limp and rolled down the steps, landing at Clint's feet.

Cochise ran forward and cracked the man in the head, knocking him out cold, then hurried down the steps. Jordan checked for a pulse.

"Is she...?" the Egyptian asked, his face a mask of anxiety.

"She's alive," Jordan whispered then took out his phone and called for an ambulance.

Clint sank to his heels beside the child and brushed soiled strands from her pale face. "Don't worry, darlin'," he murmured. "You're gonna be all right. And that man..." His face tightened. "... he's going to suffer for this."

"I got her," Jordan said and motioned up the steps. "Get him out of here before the ambulance arrives. I'll cover the situation."

"The boy is in the apartment," Cochise said. "He needs to see a doctor, too."

Jordan nodded.

The two gangsters returned to the top of the stairwell and hauled the bleeding man out of the building, dumping him in the trunk of their car.

"Before we do anything to him," Clint growled, "I want to know *everything* he did to those kids... just to be sure he gets *everything* he deserves."

...

The old man from the apartment brought the boy to Wil, then went to retrieve his granddaughter from the hiding place. The boy seemed physically all right but for the bloody nose which had stopped bleeding and slight bruising around his nose.

The boy sat on the bottom step near Franny, staring at her worriedly.

“The ambulance is on the way,” Jordan told him, even though the kid couldn’t hear him. When the boy looked at him, Jordan showed him the badge. He couldn’t tell if the badge put the boy at ease... or ill at ease. It was difficult to read him... except for his concern for Franny, which was written all over his face.

The old man returned with his granddaughter and introduced himself. “There’s a body in my apartment,” he told Jordan. “The woman who came in with that man. She threatened my granddaughter’s life.” He looked mildly concerned that there might be repercussions for his actions against the woman.

“A clear case of self-defense against a known sex trafficker who invaded your home,” Jordan said. “Open and shut.” He lowered his eyes to the unconscious girl. “You did this world a favor,” he whispered. “One less monster to terrorize our children.”

. . .

Max and Horatio were at the hospital within twenty minutes of receiving Detective Jordan’s call. Dr. Devlin Grant

was with the detective and met them when they arrived at the emergency entrance.

“How is she?” Max asked, squeezing his husband’s hand.

“She suffered a concussion,” Devlin said. “She’s still unconscious, but her vitals are stable, and we expect her to wake up soon.”

“Can we see her?” Horatio whispered, his throat working as he barely held back his tears.

Devlin nodded. “Of course. Stay with her as long as you want.”

“And her... father,” Max asked Jordan, struggling with the word. “Where is he?”

The detective lowered his voice as they moved away from any possible eavesdroppers. “The men took him.”

“He’s still alive?”

Jordan cleared his throat. “For now.”

*But not for long.* And max was okay with that. More than okay.

Devlin led them to Franny’s room and Max was startled to find a teen boy curled up in a cushioned chair near Franny’s bed, wrapped in a blanket and fast asleep.

“Is that...?” Max looked at Jordan.

“Yes,” Jordan said. “He’s the boy who tried to help your daughter.”

“He refused to stay in his own bed,” Devlin explained. “He wanted to be with Franny. I didn’t see any harm in it.”

“Is he all right?” Max asked. “Was he hurt?”

“Minimal bruising of the face. We think the man may have struck him.”

“And Franny?” Horatio went to the bed and took Franny’s hand, pressing it to his lips. “What did that bastard do to our daughter?” Tears rolled down his face as he stared at their little girl.

“We don’t know everything yet,” Devlin said. “And we can’t know until Franny wakes up.”

Max felt sick at his next question. “Was she... raped?”

*Please say no. Please God, make him say no.*

Releasing a sigh, Devlin cleared his throat. “There are no signs that she’s been sexually assaulted...”

But there was *something else*. Max saw it in his face. “What...?”

“There were... traces of semen inside her.”

“But you just said she wasn’t...”

Devlin shook his head. “She wasn’t.”

“I-I don’t understand what you’re trying to say,” Max replied, his voice growing tense. “Are you implying she had *consensual* sex with a *man*?” He stared at Devlin incredulously.

“Perhaps not a *grown* man,” he murmured and glanced at the boy.

Horatio turned his head. “What are you talking about, Devlin? She wouldn’t...”

“I spoke to the old man,” Jordan said. “He told me that Russell took Franny and the boy into the bathroom and they were in there for a while. He said he could hear the shower



running. Until Franny wakes up, we won't know for sure what happened in the bathroom."

Horatio's jaw clenched, flexing the muscles in his face. "Are you saying he may have *forced* these two *children* to..."

"He was a sex trafficker," Jordan said. "*Nothing* is too low for them."

"*Fuck...*" Horatio choked and turned back to his daughter. He ducked his head and clung to her hand, sobbing quietly.

Max blinked as the room swam. "What's..." He cleared his throat. "What's going to happen to the boy?"

"He was living on the streets," Jordan said. "It's likely he ran away from an orphanage or a foster home. We'll run his photo and see if we can find out who he is. Until then, maybe Oliver and Emmy will take him in. Since he's deaf and can't read, he'll need a special tutor. I'm not sure what that will cost..."

"Doesn't matter," Max replied. "We'll pay for it, whatever the cost." He gazed at the sleeping boy. "He risked his life for our little girl. We're forever in his debt."

Horatio looked at Devlin, despair shadowing his eyes. "The baby...?"

Franny's head felt as if it were filled with lead. She couldn't lift it as she opened her eyes and tried to look around. The room was dim and smelled fresh. Where was she? Franny managed to turn her head a fraction. She was in a bed... and hooked up to wires. A monitor next to the bed displayed numbers that kept changing. Something kicked on and pressure began squeezing her left arm, tighter and tighter. She gasped—and someone *gently* squeezed her hand.

“Franny...”

*Daddy?*

Her chin trembled and tears filled her eyes when she saw Horatio at her bedside, holding her hand. “Daddy...”

He swallowed thickly as fresh tears formed. “I’m here, sweetheart. We’re both here.”

“What...” Franny tried to move her left arm. It felt like it was squeezing in half.

“It’s all right, darling.” Max appeared behind Horatio. “That’s just the blood pressure cuff. The pressure will stop in a second.”

He was right. A low hiss, then the cuff deflated.

“Where...”

“You’re in the hospital,” Max said, his words thick with emotion. “They brought you in last night. Do you remember what happened?”

Franny sank against the pillows and stared at the ceiling, her fingers drifting to her throat and nicks left behind by the knife blade. “He... he had a knife to my throat,” she whispered. “I-I remember... feeling really sick... like I was gonna pass out.” Her brow pinched as the memory went hazy. “I can’t...” She looked at her dads. “I can’t remember...”

“It’s okay,” Horatio murmured. “You don’t have to think about it right now. Just rest.”

But Franny wanted to know. “What happened? Why am I here?”

“You... fell down the stairs,” Max told her.

She stared at him. No, she didn’t *fall*... she was pushed. The memory came back into focus.

*If I can’t have you—no one can.*

Her father made her fall.

“He did it,” she whispered shakily. “My... that man... he made me fall.”

Max sniffed and nodded. “Yes,” he rasped.

A sudden panic gripped her. “The baby... is my baby...”

“The baby is fine,” Max assured, and tears shimmered. “You’re both going to be fine.”

Horatio pressed her hand to his lips. “I was so scared for you.” Warm tears wet the back of her hand. “When he took you... he pulled out our hearts.”

Behind him, Max nodded as a tear escaped and ran down his face. “The thought of not getting you back,” he whispered, “it was unbearable.” He swallowed. “You’re our little girl. Our daughter. And we love you so much.”

Franny broke without warning and sobbed. Both men came to her and held her.

“I... I love you, too,” she choked on her sobs. “So much.” She hugged them tighter. “I knew you would find me... I knew you wouldn’t stop looking.”

“Never,” Horatio said thickly, trembling with emotion. “We would’ve never stopped looking until we found you and brought you home again.”

Franny closed her eyes and pressed her face to their shoulders, savoring their embrace, their closeness... their love.

“How... how did I get away from that man?” she whispered, the events hazy.

Max raised his head. “You puked on him.”

“I-I did?” She remembered feeling so sick.

Max nodded. “The detective said it shocked the man and he recoiled, pulling the knife away from your throat. That’s when Clint and Cochise shot him.”

“Is he... dead?”

“I don’t know. He was still alive when they took him away. But don’t worry sweetheart, you’ll never see him again.”

She remembered the things Maddy had told her about the gangsters, and she believed her dad—she would never see him again.

“The boy...” she whispered with concern. “Is he okay?”

Her dads drew back and gestured to the cushioned chair where the boy sat huddled in a blanket... watching her. As soon as their eyes met, he dropped his head—*In shame*—and got to his feet. Pulling the blanket tighter around himself, he quietly left the room.

“He’s been here all night,” Horatio told her. “He wouldn’t leave. This is the first time he’s moved from that chair. He probably left to go to the bathroom.” He smiled small. “Now that he knows you’re all right.”

Franny hung her head, her throat knotting. “No,” she whispered. “That’s not why he left.”

. . .

“They found her.” Emmy sagged into Oliver’s arms, trembling with relief. “She’s safe.”

“Franny?” Kelly asked, holding her breath.

Emmy smiled at her, tears in her eyes. “Yes. She’s in the hospital, but she’s okay.”

“And the baby?” Nina whispered.

Emmy laughed softly. “The baby is fine. They’re both fine.”

The two young girls hugged each other, crying tears of relief and joy.

“Max and Horatio must be...” Emmy smiled and shrugged. “There’s no word for how truly relieved and happy they must be feeling right now.”

“I can’t think of one.” Oliver grinned and kissed his wife.

“We have to tell the others,” Kelly said and grabbed Nina’s hand. The two girls raced from the kitchen and up the stairs. They poked their heads into room after room, spreading the good news of Franny’s rescue. Everyone’s excitement and relief matched their own... except one.

Kelly and Nina sobered when they saw Tamara standing just outside her room, eyes narrowed as she watched them. Kelly breathed deeply and walked up to the other girl and smiled.

“Did you hear? They found Franny. She’s going to be okay. The baby, too.”

Tamara seemed about to make a snide remark, but instead, retreated inside her room with a mumbled, “Wish someone had rescued *me* from *my* dad.” And slammed the door in their faces.

The two girls looked at each other. There was nothing they could do about Tamara. She had her own issues to work through, and they couldn’t let her dampen their joy for Franny.

Later, while they were preparing lunch, Kelly told Emmy what happened with Tamara.

“She said that?” Emmy seemed surprised, so Kelly didn’t know why.

“Yeah. But she always says stuff like that.”

“About her dad?”

Kelly frowned. “Well... no. I just mean she’s always obnoxious.”

“But she mentioned her dad,” Emmy pressed. “She’s never talked about her past. None of us knows what her life was like before the traffickers got a hold of her. She refused to talk about it.”

“So...” Kelly frowned uncertainly. “This might be a good thing?”

“Even if she was being a bit obnoxious,” Emmy said, “she still opened up, if just a crack.”

“Maybe she didn’t mean to,” Kelly suggested. “Sometimes people say things without thinking.”

“True. But maybe not this time. If we continue to give her time and show her that we care, perhaps she’ll begin opening up little by little. We just have to be patient.” Emmy smiled. “Think you can do that?”

Kelly nodded. “Yeah. I mean, I understand why it’s so hard for her.” She sighed. “I wonder what her dad did to her. Do you think he... raped her?”

“I don’t know,” Emmy murmured. “Sadly, it’s a possibility. I’ll never understand a parent who can harm their child. It just doesn’t make sense to me.”

Swallowing thickly, Kelly whispered, “Me neither.”

Maybe Emmy was right. Maybe Tamara’s hard shell that held everyone out... was beginning to crack. She hoped so. She *prayed* so. As much as Tamara frustrated and even angered her at times, Kelly’s heart broke for the other girl.

Trauma had shattered Tamara’s soul until she didn’t trust anyone... or anything good.

Maybe she was beginning to see that good still existed in the world and deep down... she wanted some of it for herself.

...

Horatio couldn’t contain his rage and Max took him out of the room and to the nearest restroom. As soon as the door closed and locked behind him, Horatio lost it.

“I want him *dead*,” he cried. “I want him *fucking dead!*”

Max gave him some space and didn't crowd him. "Clint will take care of that. You know he will."

"I want *pictures*." Horatio turned on Max, fury burning through his normally soft, warm eyes. "I want to *see* what they do to him. *I want to fucking see it, Max!*" Sobs racked him and he grabbed the sink for support, gripping till the veins in his arms swelled. He stared at his reflection, his face a mask of rage and anguish. He trembled and met Max's eyes through the mirror. "I want to see it."

No, he didn't. As enraged as he was... he didn't want to see it. Not really. And neither did Max. Just *knowing* what the gangsters would do to Russell Pritchard was enough. But now wasn't the time to say so. Horatio *needed* to rage, or he would explode. Max shared his rage, and if that vile bastard was standing here in front of him, Max wouldn't hesitate to rip him limb from limb for what he did to their daughter and that poor boy.

When Horatio began to shake, breaking down harder, Max moved in closer and held him. Rather than pull away, Horatio grabbed onto him and cried against his shoulder.

"She'll be okay," Max whispered with a thick rasp, struggling to hold down his own fury. "And so will the boy. We'll make sure of it. They're strong kids. They're going to come through this. Franny refuses to be a victim any longer... and she'll help that boy rise above, as well. We all will."

Upon returning to Franny's room, they found the boy there with Devlin.

"Franny asked me to find him," Devlin explained. "And bring him back."

Franny motioned for the boy to come closer to the bed. He walked to her reluctantly, his head down, eyes on the floor.



Max's heart went out to the kid and what he must be feeling. Max understood the shame that plagued him—in his place, Max would have suffered the same. Of course, he wasn't at fault, and surely the boy knew that. But shame had a way of finding its way in, regardless.

With a tremor to her chin, Franny reached out and touched her fingertips to the boy's chin and lifted his face until their eyes met. When he tried to look away and hang his head again, she held his chin up and shook her head. "No," she choked. "Don't let him win by making you feel ashamed. Don't you do it. Don't let him make you a victim."

Though the boy couldn't hear her words, he seemed to read her heart through her eyes. Tears formed and spilled down his cheeks. Franny drew him closer and hugged him, crying with him.

"He's gone," she sobbed. "And we're home. We're *safe*." She looked at her dads through teary eyes. "Can our home... be his home, too?"

It wasn't a matter to be discussed.

A home couldn't have *too many* children.

## EPILOGUE

Russell Pritchard came awake through a thick fog of dull pain that grew sharper as his mind cleared—until the pain *screamed* through his body. Russell opened his mouth and screamed out loud, and immediately convulsed from a high voltage shock. It was then he detected the tight band around his throat, practically choking him, and the heavy *charger* attached.

What the fuck was it? Another scream... another shock... and he had his answer.

*A fucking shock collar? Strapped on him like a dog?*

Russell struggled to clear his head and figure out where the fuck he was. His eyes blurred from the intense pain coursing through his body—magnified by the electric shocks—but the room around him began to come into focus. It was made of cinderblocks and cold as fuck. Every speck of his skin prickled against the chilled air.

*I'm naked. Why the fuck am I naked?!*

Cold metal shackles clamped his biceps—not his wrists—and suspended him in mid-air. He couldn't feel the floor beneath his feet. Couldn't feel his fucking feet at all. He racked his brain to remember what happened and how he got here—wherever the fuck *here* was.

He remembered leaving the apartment with Franny and making his way to the stairwell...

*The cowboy. The cowboy showed up with the cop.*

His head hurt as he fought for the memories.

*She puked on you.*

He hadn't expected that turn of events and it threw him off his game. He let down his guard, if only for a moment, and the gangsters shot him. *In the fucking knees!* Was that why he couldn't feel his feet?

Russell looked down. His cock hung limp between his legs. No surprise there—this wasn't his kind of *fun* unless he was in charge. The core of his pain came from his legs where the fuckers had shot him, but it encompassed his entire body. Had they crippled him for life? He attempted to lift his legs a bit, to survey the damage—and brought up two cauterized *stumps*.

“What the fuck—!” he cried and received another shock.  
*Fuck!*

His legs were gone from the knees down! *Fucking GONE!*

*What's happening? Where the fuck am I?* Panic rushed through him. He started to cry out for help, then caught himself.

*The gangsters took you—this is their torture chamber!*

Franny was right. She had told him the truth about the men who were looking for her.

*You think I'm scared of them?* That's what he'd said to her.

*You better be.* Franny's reply.

Russell looked around the cold, dank room, his mutilated body suspended in chains and throbbing in agony.

*You better be.*

His watery eyes fell on his left wrist, then his right; a dotted circle had been drawn around each wrist in black marker.

*You better be.*

Russell shivered in fright. *They're gonna cut off my hands!*

The heavy metal door on the far side of the room screeched open and the two gangsters walked in. The bigger fucker, the one who kicked his way into the apartment, engaged the lock on the thick door.

*They're gangsters. And I'm part of their family now. You stole one of their own. Do you know what that means, daddy?*

He did now.

. . .

“Do you think he knows he fucked up?” Clint drawled, standing before the hanging man.

Cochise nodded. “Yep.”

“It's right there...” Clint pointed at the man's eyes. “... that *enlightenment* that just hits you all of the sudden.” He patted the man's face, hard. “Eh, *Russ*? Do you *get it* now? No one—and I mean fucking *no one*—messes with our family and walks away to tell about it.”

Russell choked on his fear. “Please... don't kill me...”

Clint exchanged a look with his Egyptian brother and the both of them chuckled. Though he doubted their *guest* derived much humor from it. He patted the man's face again, not quite so hard this time, then pinched his cheek. “No worries, *Russ*.” He nodded at Cochise and the Egyptian walked away and returned with a machete, freshly sharpened. Clint grabbed the guest's right hand and stretched his arm taut. “We don't plan to kill you any time soon.”

“No... *no! Don't*—” The collar zapped the man, convulsing his body.

“Please don't scream while my friend here cuts off your hand,” Clint murmured dryly. “We don't want him to get shocked as well.”

“*Please... don't...*” Russell whimpered.

Clint ran his thumb along the marker line. “Right on the dotted line,” he told Cochise and drew back until he was holding only the man's fingers. “Nice and clean.”

Cochise nodded and wielded the machete with a steady hand and whacked through the guest's wrist in a single clean swipe.

Russell screamed and flailed his bloody stump as the collar delivered shots of voltage through his body.

Clint looked at the severed hand, tossed it aside, and wiped droplets of blood from his face as he spoke in a deadly tone, “We know what you did to those two kids in the bathroom... what you *made* them do.” His lips twitched. “And for that... you get to *live*... even after you change your mind and *beg* us to kill you.” He leaned close and whispered in the guest's ear. “And you *will*, I guarantee it.” Clint stepped back, grabbed the man's remaining hand, and nodded at the Egyptian.

Blood splattered the cowboy's face as the machete came down, striking perfectly on the dotted line.

The gangsters waited for their guest to stop screaming and convulsing before Clint took out the black marker and eyed the man's limp dick. “Now...” He uncapped the marker. “... time for you to *rethink* your request that we *not* kill you.”

