

DreamCatcher
MOTORCYCLE CLUB

Defying

BOUNDARIES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LIBERTY PARKER

DEFYING BOUNDARIES

DREAMCATCHER MOTORCYCLE CLUB

BOOK 10

LIBERTY PARKER



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DEFYING BOUNDARIES

DREAMCATCHER MC NOVEL

BOOK TEN

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all of those who have fallen in love with the DreamCatcher Motorcycle Club throughout their journey. One more book, then we'll get into the next generation. The kids need to be heard.

Xoxo

~Lib

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many people who should be acknowledged, and I know I'm going to miss several, but here we go.

Tammy Carney and Sharon Renee, my PAs who stood beside me during the hard times and kept pushing me to keep going. Thank you. You ladies, as always, have been my rock.

My cover designer, who always makes my books come to life, Tracie Douglas with Dark Water Covers & Formatting, thank you for seeing my vision and making it beautiful.

Last but not least, the ladies of Liberty's Luscious Ladies... you all inspire me. Thank you for never giving up on me, promoting me, and encouraging me.

Love forever and always,

~Lib

AUTHORS NOTE

I know that this series is set in the eighties, but I have added a flare of present times to enhance the enjoyability of this storyline. Things will begin moving further along in years so that when I get to the next generation, they will be on our current timeline. Also, if you don't like cussing, provocative scenarios, fighting, rowdy and raunchy bikers, this book is *not* for you. But if you do... happy reading.

XOXO,

Lib

CHARACTER BIBLE

MC MEMBERS

GUNNER-PRESIDENT

KRUGER-VP

BUSTER-RD. CAPT.

COUNTRY

MALICE-ENFORCER

MASTER-SGT. AT ARMS

SHAMUS-TREASURER

BLAZE

TYSON

POLO

BULL

BEAR

ROMEO

TRACKER

TEXAS

STINGER

KONG

PROSPECT

BECKETT

OLD LADIES

CHARLEE

CAMERON

STELLA

STAR

JESSIA

ASPEN

SALEM

DOTTIE

HEMMINGWAY

KIDS

ELLA

JAGGAR

MANE

HUNTER

JUDD

OAKLEY

JUNIPER

NASH

HONOR & HAVEN

BUNNIES

KATY

SABRINA

JACKIE

ALVAREZ ORGANIZATION

JULIUS - POPS

LUCA

SHAYNE

TAMMERA (MERA)

APPEARANCES

GARRICK-RICK

GIDEON-DEON

GRAHAM-HAMMER

GAVRIEL-VRIEL

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BLURB

Life is tricky, dangerous, and heartbreaking.

Julius Alvarez knows this from firsthand knowledge. He's lived in two lethal worlds. The Alvarez organization is his birthright. He was born into power that he didn't want after it was forbidden for him to be with the love of his life. That direct order from his father had him on the run with his woman, where he founded the DreamCatcher Motorcycle Club, and built a legacy for his children. It wasn't safer than the one he'd been born into, but he made the rules, laid down bylaws, and never forced his men to choose between the club and the woman who called to their hearts. When both of his worlds collided, and his woman, his Ma, was murdered, he lost his will to love.

However, even in death, Ma refuses to let him be, to allow him to mourn, until he draws his last breath and can reunite with her in the afterlife. But she's always been feisty, even from the grave. It seems she's determined for him to open his heart and force him to let another woman into it.

Doesn't she know? No one completes him like she did and no one ever will.

Sheltered, naïve, and lackluster.

In a nutshell, those are the traits *Shayne Fitzgerald* exhibits. Things she knows must be interpreted in her demeanor to keep her safe from outside threats. The ones who are supposed to protect her are the ones who are the most dangerous to her. Shayne knows she must run, but where will she go? She has

no one outside of her best friend, Mera, but she's in the same predicament Shayne is. Neither of them has anyone outside of the convent. Who is strong enough to stand up to her brothers? Who has the clout to go to war with them, because she knows better than anyone, it'll be a bloodbath. Her siblings are determined to become more powerful, to line their pockets with cash, even if that means using her as their pawn to get there.

There's no doubt she has to leave the only place she's called home, to hide, to find sanctuary with someone who can keep her identity a secret. But this is no fairytale. There's no knight on a white horse riding in to save the day... or is there?

Can Pops learn to love again? Can Shayne forgive him for his deceit? Only time will tell.

SHORT BLURB

Life is tricky, dangerous, and heartbreaking.

Julius Alvarez knows this from firsthand knowledge. He's lived in two lethal worlds. The Alvarez organization, his birthright, and the DreamCatcher Motorcycle Club, a legacy he's built for his children. It wasn't safer than the one he'd been born into, but he made the rules, laid down bylaws, and never forced his men to choose between the club and the woman who called to their hearts. When both of his worlds collided, and his woman, his Ma, was murdered, he lost his will to love.

However, even in death, Ma refuses to let him be, to allow him to mourn until he draws his last breath, determined to open his heart, and force him to let another woman into it.

Doesn't she know? No one completes him like she did and no one ever will.

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There's no doubt she has to leave the only place she's called home, to hide, to find sanctuary with someone who can keep

her identity a secret. But this is no fairytale, and there's no knight on a white horse riding in to save the day... or is there?



PROLOGUE

JULIUS

“THE NATIVES ARE GROWING RESTLESS,” LUCA TELLS ME AS HE inhales a puff of his imported cigar.

“Would that be the men or the women?” I ask, my eyes firmly glued to the convent where our little ace in the hole is hiding.

“Seems to be a chain effect,” he informs me, sighing. “First it’s the women groaning and moaning, then like dominoes falling into place, the men join the bitch club.”

“Don’t let them hear you say bitch, in any form, when it comes to their women,” I warn, side-eyeing him.

“Wasn’t meant that way.” He harrumphs, narrowing his eyes at me.

Luca hasn’t always been the best at holding his tongue or being tactful, and he enjoys ruffling feathers, but I don’t advise him to stay on that path with these men. I should know how they’d react, which is not well. I raised most of them, and they saw how protective I was over the love of my life.

Damn, I miss that woman. She saved me, and by proxy, gave me the two best gifts I’ve ever received—Gunner and my Charlee girl. My sweet daughter with a gargantuan-sized chip on her shoulder but who would hand a stranger the shirt off her back if they need it more than she does. That’s her ma coming out in her because she doesn’t get that trait from me.

“If we don’t find a resolution to this crisis soon, there may be a revolt, and we may have to make some decisions.” A groan

of apprehension escapes me at his words. I'm not sure who I fear facing the most.

My son and his men, or the women at their backs.

Both are scary as fuck when they're at their wits' end.

Being underground for as long as they have been is the straw that broke the camel's back. I get why they're stir-crazy and climbing the walls, but their safety is more important to me than their incessant whining and complaining.

A cluster of nuns, opening the heavy wooden door to the monastery, catches my attention. "We've got movement," I announce, leaning forward and squinting my eyes.

Luca clears his throat, exhaling a plume of smoke, and asks, "Is it just me, Julius? Or is it always the same group of cross-wielding virgins going in and out of the nunnery?"

"Luca Alvarez!" I half-shout through gritted teeth. His brazen description has me fighting the temptation to make a sign of the cross across my chest. "Lightning's going to strike you down one day for your insolent tongue."

Why is it that I'm not surprised with his flagrant retort at my forewarning?

"As long as it leaves my dick and tongue out of the equation, I can handle it."

Out of my peripheral vision, I see a cunning smirk spread across his face. I'm not a man of God, per se, but I am a spiritual man. My aim is to not be in the same vicinity as my brother when a higher power decides it's his penance day and strikes him down with a bolt of lightning.

"Seems like they've got two packages with them today. Where's the photo you uncovered of the Crumley's hidden gem?"

"Right here," he tells me, pulling a manilla envelope out from the side panel of the car.

As he hands it over, the vapor of his cigar wafts in front of my face, causing me to choke on it. "Keep that shit away from me," I demand, waving my hand through the fumes.

“Secondhand smoke isn’t as harmful to you as firsthand. You enjoy some imported tobacco as much as I do, Julius.”

“With a tumbler of whiskey. Do you see a tumbler in my hand, Luca?”

“Semantics, Julius.” He tosses his hand through the air as if what I’ve said has no significance whatsoever.

As I scan the photograph, I compare it to the woman who’s surrounded by a bunch of black and white robes and habits. As hot and humid as it gets in Texas, I’m not sure how these ladies can wear that garb day in and day out without passing out from heat stroke.

“Now that we have confirmation that she’s here, we need to make a game plan about how to get her out,” Luca states.

“Call our contact down at the city and get us a set of blueprints on the monastery. As soon as we have it mapped out, we’ll make our move.”

“We’re gonna need Master and Tyson to infiltrate that place. You know that, don’t you, Julius? They’re the best at incognito infiltration and retrieval. Our men have nothing on those two, no matter how well they’ve been trained.”

“That’ll piss a few of the others off,” I mumble, not looking forward to that conversation with my son. Since I’m no longer the president of the DreamCatcher Motorcycle Club, and Gunner is, he has to approve every mission his men are sent on.

“I’ll get a bottle of scotch. That should loosen his tension,” Luca jokes.

“He gets that from me,” I tease.

Ma and I always joked that he’s as wound up and high-strung as I’ve always been. But like me, he’s always one step ahead and looking at the bigger picture. I miss those moments when the love of my life and I would sit back and argue about who our kids are most like.

Anytime they did anything bad, they were mine. But if the light was shining on them, they were hers... as should be,

because nobody's light shined brighter than my wife's.

"Get Leo to follow them from here," I command my brother, peeking in my rearview mirror where my guard sits in his car a few rows over. "We're gonna make a pit stop at the liquor store." Luca chuckles but does as I ask.

I hardly have the gear shift in drive before the back door flies open and one of my most trusted men leaps into the back seat. Marco doesn't say a word, just nods his head at me.

Guess he's going to take over for Leo and have my back.

Which may end up being a good thing for me, seeing as he and Tyson connected during a brainstorming, interrogation, and torture session. He can help Tyson rein Gunner in when I tell him I need two of his men to temporarily come out of hiding.

"Maybe we should make a pit stop at the sports store while we're at it," Luca states out of the blue.

"Why's that?" I hesitantly ask, because you never know what's going to come out of my brother's mouth.

"Need to get you a jock strap and a cup for your nuts so you come out with your balls still intact," he answers. Marco spews water all over the back of my head from the sip he just took, before falling over in laughter.

"Find that funny, do you?" I inquire of the two asshats in the car.

"Hilarious," Luca remarks.

"I give it a three out of five stars," Marco conveys.

"Just what I wanted, to spend my day with two jokesters who get a kick out of my son handing me my ass."

"Aww, Pops," Luca jeers. "It isn't going to be that bad."

"If you say so," I mumble around a huff.



Ain't gonna be that bad, my ass.

I'm lounging back on the sofa in the communal center, watching my son pace back and forth, muttering some unfavorable things aimed at me, while his arms are flinging through the air as a punctuation to his dissatisfaction.

"This is a bad idea, Pops. There's a reason we went, plus stay, underground. You pulling two of my men into civilization puts a target on their backs, on our family, as a whole, and I can't allow that to happen," Gunner berates, scolding me like I'm a juvenile who just pulled off the most obnoxious prank, and I'm now facing the principal for a reprimand.

However, the protruding veins throbbing on his forehead show me how combatant he is over this topic.

The twinkle in Kruger, my son's VP's eyes, says he's enjoying my plight a little too much, but so far, he's kept his mirth to himself. That's a good thing, since he can get my son strung tighter than a bow.

"Do you want to live down here forever, son? It's doable, but what about your children's future? How will they meet anyone and fall in love? Make families of their own?" I ask, knowing that he has a frenzy of mixed emotions over their new underground living environment.

On one hand, he's happy down here because his family is safe.

But on the other hand, there is no life down here for the children.

No school.

No socialization outside of one another.

They'll never play sports, go fishing and camping, or smell the flowers blooming and the fresh grass growing outdoors. What they're doing is surviving, not living in the traditional sense.

Master steps forward, stopping Gunner from wearing a worn path in the flooring. He holds his hand up, letting Gunner know he has something important to say. "Pops is right, Gun. We can't stay down here forever. We have to reclaim our lives. But his game plan needs some finessing. No matter how well-

trained we are, there's no way in hell we can get in and out of there unnoticed. The walls echo in places like that, and you know this girl isn't going to go without a fight."

"What do you suggest, Master?" I ask, leaning forward, curious about what he's come up with while the rest of us have gone back and forth, arguing about the merits of why this *has* to happen.

Master's eyes swivel to Tyson, who must connect the dots because his chest inflates, his brows go inward with a scowl, and his face looks thunderous.

"You know it's the only way, brother," Master explains to Tyson. His tone is considerate, not condescending in any manner. Whatever his idea is, hurts him as much as it does Tyson. "It's the most logical step in completing the plan without giving us away."

"I don't like it," Tyson declares through a clamped jaw. "Not one damn bit."

"Do you have an alternative?" Master asks him. Now, my interest is piqued.

"Wanna clue us in?" I persist. I'm backing this crusade and need to be included in their preparations.

"In latent terms, we send in Hemmi. She's the only female at our disposal who's trained in reconnaissance and undercover operations. She can get in under a guise and can get this woman out without drawing any attention to them," Master explains.

I whistle. "She's just barely recovered from her ordeal. Do we really want to send her back into a viper's nest?"

"Exactly," Tyson adds in agreement, pointing a finger at me. "Plus, I doubt she'd willingly be away from the twins for an extended period of time. She lost enough being under lock and key. We can't ask this of her."

"But we should," Tex pipes in and insists. "If she's our only rational way in, we can't *not* check in with her and see where she stands."

“And if this was your woman?” Tyson poses the question, to not just Tex but to all the men, as he visually scans the room, laying his eyes on them individually.

“We’d hate it. But what other options do we have?” Kruger confronts him, knowing we don’t have one. “She won’t be going in blind or without backup.”

“And how do we have her back? We got someone else going in with her?” Tyson asks.

This is where the universe decides to pay me back for my asshole ways. Karma viciously shoves my underwear up the cheeks of my ass and gives me a wedgie that I’ll never be able to pry loose.

This girl tests my patience like no other in my lifetime, but she is her mother’s daughter, so I’m not all that shocked by this.

“That’d be me,” Charlee states, stepping inside our meeting space without being given permission to join us.

This daughter of mine, she’s always tempting boundaries and toeing the line. One day, Country’s gonna turn her backside raw. That is, if her brother doesn’t beat him to the punch. She’s been given too much leeway with those two, but I no longer have a claim to spanking her rear end like I did before she became Country’s old lady.

Now, Country, as her man, and Gunner, as the crowned DCMC president, have the final say-so in her questionable discipline.

These are the days where her ma’s absence is felt the most. She could contain our girl, whisper thoughts into her ear, and make her believe they were hers all along. It’s how we kept her corralled and out of trouble through most of her childhood. I don’t have that gift, but damn, I wish I did.

As the men begin shouting, and Charlee starts pushing her stubbornness, I pinch the bridge of my nose and breathe in short gusts of air, trying to ease the migraine that’s pushing its way into my brain.

Looking over, I notice Luca wearing a smug smirk. He enjoys this sort of drama, whereas I want to get the hell away from it

as fast as I humanly can.

My only hope is that they run out of steam soon, so we can get down to the planning stage and end the Crumley bloodline once and for all.



CHAPTER 1

SHAYNE

TAMMERA SNICKERS NEXT TO ME, AS SISTER ANNE LECTURES us on the birds and bees in health class. Having a nun in robes and a habit, with a cross dangling from her neck, and our Lord and Savior nailed to a cross behind her as a backdrop, is... a picture unlike any other.

It's indescribable.

"We're twenty-three years old, Shaynie. Why are we being forced to take this class with prepubescent teenagers?" She whines out the question, irritation evident in her tone.

"You know why, Mera. To keep us scared from entering the land of temptation," I whisper back between clamped lips, trying to be as silent as I can so I don't disturb the class.

Mera, my closest friend in the entire world, was born Tammie Sue. Since her parents dropped her off on the nunnery doorsteps when she was three, she renamed herself Tammera, which got broken down to Mera by me.

Tammera is a mouthful when speaking, especially during those times I admonish her and try to keep her walking along the narrow path the sisters expect us to. Sister Magna doesn't care how old we are. She'll take a wooden spoon to our hands quicker than you can whistle.

We should've been released from the convent when we aged out of the system at eighteen, however, where would we go?

Mera has no family that she knows of. Even if she does and she found them, she'd have issues with being in the same home as the people who allowed her to be dropped off like yesterday's garbage and forgotten.

Me? I have a family.

Brothers to be more specific, ones who I used to adore until I realized how vicious and vile they are.

A father who's been led to believe that I died when our mother passed away during a lethal attack on their homestead that had mortal consequences, i.e., my mother, and supposedly me—which would've happened if my brothers hadn't happened to find me before I'd been suffocated.

My mother, in an attempt to save me, wrapped herself around me and laid on top of me, squishing me between her deceased body and the floor of my nursery... or so I've been told.

She did save my life in one way. But in another way, she set me up for a life of hiding.

Allistair Crumbley's got a reputation that makes my brother's morbid lifestyle look like they're a clowder—a group of virtuous kittens..

Just thinking about them has a cold chill skating its way up and down my spine. My brothers' claim placing me here is them trying to keep me safe. But word through the grapevine is that they've joined a human trafficking ring faction, and even with their blood flowing through my veins, I'm not safe from their ever-growing list of potential auctioneers. The suitors who pay millions for the chance to join the bidding war, they're just as bad, if not worse, than my biological family.

I allow myself to get lost in oblivion. Sister Anne's lecturing voice becomes static background noise, and with the black spots dancing in my vision, it's better than the alternative scenarios.

Remembering.

Fear.

Turmoil... that's all I feel emotion-wise when I consider where my life could lead me if I don't play my cards right. I don't have an ace in the hole, but I'll never stop shuffling and discarding the useless suit in my hands until I locate my trump card.

And I will. As soon as my white knight finds me and whisks me away to my castle.

Cinderella I may not be, but I'll Rapunzel my way out of this convent if it's the last thing I do.



My brothers' newfound interest in me is heart-wrenching, to say the least. The day of our health class was the first meeting I'd had with them in years, and in the last two weeks, I've had multiple gatherings with them. I can see the twinkle in their eyes, a telling sign that they're up to something. Whatever that something is will be disastrous for me.

If I ever needed someone to ride in on a white horse and save the day, it's now.

Garrick, Gideon, Graham, and Gavriel Crumbley, to our Columbian side of the family, and Crumley to our Irish side, gets confusing. They're known as both. Each one is feared and known as evil, plus vindictive. But the spelling and pronunciation of our last name varies from one country to the next.

Given the fact that I'm camouflaged between these consecrated walls, and doing everything I can do to break from that dreaded last name, I legally changed it to Fitzgerald to honor my mother's homeland.

Upon doing some extensive research on my familial ancestry, I found that my mother's mom's given last name was Fitzgerald. In an attempt to honor her in some form or fashion, I adopted that surname for myself.

Hopefully, that keeps the enemies of the Crumbleys at bay and keeps me from being tied to them, as well as the Crumleys.

As the hearse-like monstrosity of a car parks in front of the warehouse that my brothers have purchased to conceal our latest encounters, I take a second to center myself before going before the firing squad. That's what it feels like each time I've stepped foot inside of this crumbling factory that was shut down a decade ago for "allegedly" forcing illegal immigrants to work for what amounts to pennies on the dollar.

Those poor workers poured their blood, sweat, and tears into every stitch of fabric while residing like indigents in encampments. Their dwelling quarters were strewn together with assorted pieces of mismatched linen—makeshift tents on the owner's thirty-acre property.

They had *nothing* for themselves.

No freedom.

No indoor plumbing.

No electricity.

No privacy.

Their every move was scheduled by their "employer"—if you could call him that.

Garrick, also known as Rick to those who revere him, aka my eldest brother, whom I loathe more than the rest, steps out of the door, stands on the stoop and narrows his eyes at me—watching and waiting for me to... bolt, maybe?

I'm tempted to do just that. I know if I do, my driver could be put underneath the spotlight and suffer for my runaway feet. I'm not friends with the man, but he's a man of the cloth. I know that on my judgment day, I'll pay the ultimate penance for placing him in such dire and unscrupulous circumstances.

I cave and slide out of the car, meeting the devil's minion at the base of the steps. He gives me an insincere smile as he holds out his elbow for me to clutch. My hand shakes as it lifts and lands on the juncture of his bent arm. He pats it like one would a loved one, but looks can be deceiving to spectators. I

know that it's more of a condescending tap than a motion laced in adoration.

What he's playing at, I have no clue. Nobody is here to witness him acting like a devoted sibling he's portraying himself as being, but even as that thought crosses my mind, the hair on the back of my neck stands up on end.

Something, or someone sinister, is lurking nearby. I'm not sure how I instinctively know this, but I do. Which means I need to be wary of my surroundings.

Now, it's time to face the music and enter the den my brothers have weaved in sin—both from the past and in the present.



My four brothers, Garrick, Gideon, Graham, and Gavriel, ranging from eldest to youngest, sit before me, only a slab of wood separating us, each one with a smarmy look injected onto their faces.

“We need you, Shayne,” Gavriel states, his face turning stoic.

“It's time you do your part for us, for your family, since we did everything in our power to keep you safe and out of our father's clutches,” Graham inserts, adding to his Irish twin's thoughts.

“What would my part entail?” I ask, my throat suddenly dry and parched.

Clearing the frog from his throat, Garrick adds, “We've found you a match, sis. One who's suitable for you and would treat you right. Plus, he has connections that'd help us grow the family enterprise.”

I'm being sold off? That's my place in their warped minds? I'm no better, no more important to them, than a transaction? I've never been so appalled and mad in all my life. I knew they were evil. I've always known how money means more to

them than our blood ties, but honestly, this makes my stomach turn.

“I’m a barter?” I ask, fidgeting. My body trembling, my instincts tell me that this “match” won’t be as lucrative to me as it is for them. They don’t care how I’m treated as long as I’m willing to do their bidding and keep this associate happy. But will I be happy? Somehow, that is highly unlikely. Am I miserable where I am? Absolutely. Even if I can’t walk through the gardens and smell the roses without permission as well as an escort, every day, I wake up and know that I’m safe, cared for. My soul is protected from evil-deeds—or it has been until now.

At this moment, I’m aware that they don’t care. They pretend. They act like I’m a priority to them, but this... what they’re asking... no, demanding of me, is a slap in the face.

A reality check.

I’m the golden ticket to making them richer—more powerful than they already are. A craving they can’t seem to beat or overcome. My sacrifice will curb that for a short amount of time.

Then what?

Will they kill this man and move me on to the next?

Where is the line drawn?

Where does it end?

It doesn’t. It never will.

And if I have children? What happens to them? Will they be separated and gifted as a business transaction? No. I’ll never allow that.

It’s time to find my way out.

“When?” I bravely ask. “When will this... union you’ve planned for me take place?”

“You’ll wed in six months’ time. We’ll take care of everything. We’re going to set up a few meetings so the two of

you can become acquainted before the ceremony. The first one is set up for a month from now,” Gavriel answers.

Six months? That’s how long I have to make a decision—to either run, hide, and come up with a new identity, or stay and let my life crumble. As sheltered as I’ve been, the question is, where do I get those items?

“Okay,” I acquiesce for now, making them believe I’ve given in to their demand. I lower my head in submission, giving them the impression that I’m willing to be their pawn—even if every single one of my limbs shakes, my lips quiver, and my tears threaten to fall. I refuse to give them the ultimate satisfaction, so I swallow them down, shut down my emotions, and act like this is acceptable behavior, when all I want to do is kick them where the sun doesn’t shine.

But I can’t.

I won’t.

After all, being a woman, this is what’s expected from me in their opinion.

Submission... complete and utter submission.



CHAPTER 2

JULIUS

SITTING IN MY SEDAN, WATCHING MY DAUGHTER AND Hemmingway through my binoculars as they walk up the cement path, hand-in-hand, has every protective instinct inside of me ready to pounce, to drag them back to the safety and protection of the underground city I've built to safeguard my family, and to find another way to get my hands on the Crumley brothers' little secret—our ace.

The hardest part of this entire thing was when I sat back helplessly, watching the two women come to blows. They had to make it look good... legit, needing a multitude of abrasions to display when they ask for sanctuary, but it still hurts my heart to watch two of my girls rip into each other's flesh like they're street fighters. They marked the other with bruises and lacerations. By the time they lost steam, they both had the appearance of someone who survived domestic abuse... which was the idea.

Still don't like it.

Not one damn bit.

For the thousandth time, I wonder if we're doing the right thing. Is there another way we can get our hands on the woman without putting our girls in a dangerous situation?

Out of my peripheral vision, I see Tyson's hands clench and his jaw tick.

Master's looking unhinged, ready for a throw down.

Country's face is pinched, as if he's close to having a coronary.

Three growls simultaneously emit from the depths of their chests when the doors open and the girls walk through, darting out of our sights.

"Audio, now!" Master demands, gnashing his teeth, causing Country to snap out of his fog and act accordingly.

My son-in-law's fingers shake and twitch as he hits the buttons on this high-tech military equipment he somehow managed to get his hands on. The black market has a multitude of things that you wouldn't think a commoner could acquire. Some of the items in stock are downright frightening and shouldn't be available to the public. Others are damn helpful, especially during times such as this.

"On it," Country remarks, anger emitting from his pores. "Should've found a way to get video, too." His muttering has me scowling because he's right. We jumped into this too fast.

We should've laid a more structurally stable foundation. Made the girls easier for us to access, to hear, and to see what's happening behind the scenes. We'll all storm in, guns blazin' if we hear anything unscrupulous going on, but will it be in time? Charlee and Hemmi are capable of protecting themselves in most situations, but considering we don't know how far the Crumley's reach is, it makes me feel uneasy.

I'm burdened with it.

I'm angered by it.

Even those wearing sacred drapery can be swayed if the money's right.

Just because you look angelic doesn't mean you are.

"Gunner's balls are probably itching." Luca snickers like a melodramatic schoolgirl.

"Like your asshole is puckering," Country returns with snark lacing his tone, his volume low and growly.

Instead of making the conversation more awkward than it is for any bystanders—in particular me—Luca chooses to stick with one of his go-to, smartass remarks, saying, "Good one,

Country bumpkin.” When my brother reaches up to ruffle my son-in-law’s hair, Country bats his hand away, releasing a snarl. “Someone’s touchy.”

“Someone has work to do,” Country rebuts. “*Some* people know when to act like adults.”

Through all the back-and-forth bickering, my eyes stay circumspectly glued to the doors, transfixed on the abbey, as if I removed them or allowed them to stray even a quarter of an inch, I’d miss something prudent. So, I wasn’t prepared for the elbow to my ribs and acted accordingly. Before I can stop myself and think things through logically, Luca is pinned to the door, my knife edged to his throat, and a snarl lifting my upper lip.

“There are times for playing, and times to be serious. Guess which one this is, Luca?” I ask, my voice void of life. I love my brother. I’d take a bullet for him, die for him. What I won’t do is put my girls at risk for him.

A succinct snarl is aimed back my way, and I feel something hard and sharp pressed into my groin, making my dick shrivel behind my zipper. If he feels the urge, and flicks his wrist a little to the left, my manhood will suffer the consequences and be rendered useless. Not that I’ve had any lovers since my wife passed. Even if she’s gone from this world, I’d still feel like I’m cheating on her. I haven’t been with another woman since the day she crossed my path all those years ago.

“Learned long ago, big brother. But if life has taught me anything, you only get to live once, and I’m not going to lose my sense of humor. I understand how serious this situation is, and you can fuck off with your bullshit.” Luca is a jokester, but he’s also lethal, deadly, and not an adversary to take lightly. He’s a sneaky bastard. He’ll smile in your face, make a few light-hearted commentaries that render you speechless, all while removing your balls.

Just to prove I have the upper hand, I dig my blade a little deeper into his trachea, and profess, “If you’re going to threaten me, Luca, make sure you pick an organ that I don’t give a fuck if I live without.”

“You need your dick to piss, Julius,” he counters.

“I can piss through a bag, Luca. Don’t fuck with me.”

“But you can’t jack off a bag, Julius,” he spits.

“No one’s touched my dick since Ma,” I argue. “Not even me.”

At my declaration, all movement in the vehicle stops, going eerily silent.

“Pops.” Country whistles my name. “You haven’t been touched since Ma died?”

“Nobody’s touch, including your own, means a fucking thing without the love of your life.” I gulp back the emotions that’ve wrapped themselves around me, drowning me in a sea of abyss—hiding the loneliness from onlookers, and the guilt that nearly suffocated me from feeling that emotion.

There’s more to life than getting your dick wet.

Like keeping my family safe.

“Get back to work.”



Minutes creep by.

Our audio is fuzzy.

The hallowed, uninsulated walls of the convent have each syllable being spoken, bouncing around from one wall to the other, echoing—making decoding their sentences harder to decipher.

Frustration is mounting in the car.

The musk of terror and discontent permeating the air makes it hard to catch your breath, causing you to choke on your own saliva.

Everyone is jumpy, ready to swoop in and disassemble any unseen variable if either girl mutters a sound of distress or

trouble.

We're all a ball of energized nerve endings, a little frayed, and scarily wound up. We could run ten laps around this facility, and still have enough fuel leftover in our bodies to take on combative attackers.

"Make... help."

"Anyone hear what Charlee said? All I got out of that were two words. Everything else in between was broken up and clouded with static," Country asks, leaning into the device as if that will clear things up.

"Hide... safe," Hemmingway spouts, and Tyson's eyebrows crinkle.

"Fuck, this is jacked up," Tyson hisses. "I think our equipment is broken."

"It's not broken," Master argues. "Nothing will come across clearly with this type of medieval structure. There's no insulation. It's drafty, and every sound will reverberate. All we can do is listen for signs of trouble."

"This operation gets better and better, doesn't it? Did we just send our girls into the lion's den without any weapons to defend themselves with? Someone better come up with some good news for me, because if things deteriorate from here, I'm going in," Tyson announces. I have zero doubts he'll do just that. Hemmi, Honor, and Haven are his entire existence. He was spiraling into darkness until they gave him light and woke him up. We were close to losing him... too damn close.

"I promise you this, Tyson. If anything sounds off, or if the girls get spooked for any reason whatsoever, I'll be the first one leading the charge in there to bring them out," I vow.

A snort comes from my side. "You'll only be seeing dust, Julius. As soon as a whimper leaves Hemmi's mouth, Tyson's gone. He'll be nothing but a breeze in the wind, and we'll all be playing catch up."

I have no arguments with that because, for once, I agree with what my brother's saying.



CHAPTER 3

SHAYNE

MERA PACES THE ROOM, HER FEET EATING UP THE FLOORING AS she walks, stops, twirls, and picks up the same pattern. She's chewing on her thumb's cuticle. I'm worried she's going to gnaw it to the point it bleeds.

"Tell me again," she insists, swiveling to face me.

Sighing, I repeat the demands of my brothers. Even knowing that Mera is my closest ally, I volleyed with telling her what my siblings decreed. She's like an alley cat, ready to let her claws out and defend what's hers... and no doubt about it, she considers me hers. I worried that if I told her, she'd have us packed, snuck out, and we'd both be on the run. But even knowing she'd place herself in danger, refusing to leave my side, I decided to confide in her, even if I refuse to let her be on the chopping block with me.

"Six months," she utters, going back to her tenacious routine of pacing. "We need a plan. A solid one."

"We?" I ask, my brows drawn. "There's no *we* in this scenario, Mera. This is dangerous."

"Kiss my behind, Shaynie. You're not doing this alone. You're my friend, my only friend, my family... I won't leave you out there vulnerable and alone. You need me at your back. I'm not scared, Shayne. I don't fear death. I only fear losing you. My sister."

My eyes well with tears as she speaks, and my head drops. I can't, no, I won't let her catch my brothers' attention. She

needs to stay off their radar. I'm not placing a big red target on her back for them to use as shooting practice. Right now, they have no clue that she exists or that she's important to me. I aim to keep it that way.

Because if not—

She'll become one of their many victims.

A tool.

Another woman to exploit.

I'd never be able to live with myself if she became another piece they play on their chessboard. If she's caught along with me, they'll use her as a puppet against me, threaten her well-being in order to get me to be a willing participant in their dishonorable ploy.

I'd give in, let them use and abuse me if it were to protect her from suffering a fatal fate. No. My mind's made up. I refuse to let her come with me. She wants to protect me, I get it, but I want to protect her too. I'll wait until she's asleep and sneak out.

Without her.

I'll be sad without her, maybe a little lost and scared, but I can't let her endanger herself for me. In my mind, that makes me just as despicable as Garrick, Gideon, Graham, and Gavriel. And that's a slippery slope that I'll never slide down. I may have the same blood as they do running through me, but I'll never be devious or reprehensible. My personal oath to myself, and the world-at-large, is to be a gracious and respectable person, not a vile and shameful one.

I'll never fall into my father's entrenched rabbit hole the same ways as my brothers have. It takes more guts to stand up for what's right, than to give up, and let evil invade my body, heart, and soul. I'm stronger than that and I'll remind myself of that fact with each step I take away from my safe haven, my friend, and the only home I remember.

Flopping back on my bed, I chew over the escape plan. Mera is a light sleeper, so that will be the first challenge I face on this endeavor. If I pass this trial, I'll have the confidence that I

can jump over each new hurdle I come across. When I have myself convinced of this, I watch as Mera mumbles, plots, and moves from one end of the room to the other.

A knock on our door has both of our heads turning that way. Sister Agnes pops her head in, announcing, “Lockdown. We have a few guests that were... unexpected. We’ll let you know when it’s deemed safe to come out again.”

“What do you think that’s about?” Mera asks.

“No clue. But I hope it holds for the next six months,” I grumble.

“That would be helpful.” She snorts. “Then again—”

“Yeah, then again...” neither of us was comfortable completing that particular thought. The prospect of what “*could be*” wasn’t inherently soothing. It was unnerving.

Deep down, we both know that if we’re under lockdown for that long, we’ll never escape... I’ll never escape. Which means the next time I step through the convent doors, it’ll be on my wedding day. No thanks, I’ll take door number two’s option, thank you very much.

A life on the run sounds better than being a sex toy for a man to do with as he pleases. That’s not my life’s goal, not that I have one outside of existing. It’s not like opportunities are knocking on my door all willy-nilly, but I’d rather work menial jobs for the rest of my life than push out babies for a man I already despise. I may not know this stranger personally, but my brothers have brokered a deal with him, using me as the prize. I already loathe him for agreeing to such a thing. He can sit and spin on a glass bottle. They all can. I hope every serrated shard digs into their buttocks.

Immature, maybe? But in my estimation, this warrants it. I’m struggling with the hatred and self-loathing pushing its way through my system. I’m not a hateful person. I’ve never pitied myself. But as of now, I’m allowing myself to reflect on how much I abhor my life and feel all of those array of thunderous emotions to pour down on me.

Mental exhaustion drags me under, and I surrender to it, collapsing into a restless sleep with nightmares of what my life will be if I'm captured and forced into a marriage of servitude.



A light knock on our bedroom door rouses me, my eyes sting as if they've been rubbed raw with sandpaper as I rapidly blink them, trying to clear them from the cobwebs trying to keep my eyelids stuck together.

As predicted, my dreams were plagued with a nightmarish setting. I was miserable, used, forsaken, locked in a life of utter misery.

I haven't told any of the nuns what my meeting with my brothers was about, even though a couple cornered me when I returned, looks of concern marring their faces. My shields are up, I'm not sure who I can trust and who I can't when it comes to those running this monastery. After all, I was sent here by my brothers for "*safe keeping*" so who knows if they're also on the Crumley organization's payroll.

"Come in," Mera raspily calls out. It appears that I wasn't the only one who fell asleep after our exhaustive pacing and planning.

"Sorry to interrupt again," Sister Agnes says as she pushes into the room. "These ladies need shelter for an undetermined amount of time. You ladies are the only ones with open beds. So, in the meantime, they'll be using their sanctuary request to room with you two. I'd appreciate it if you ladies helped them settle in and show them where to find essentials."

"Of course," I answer, my stomach dropping. This gives me two extra people that I'll have to evade when I make my escape.

"Welcome," Mera says to our new roommates as they shuffle into the room. Both of them have their heads hung in defeat. If anyone gets that, it'd be me.

“Linens are kept in the laundry facility. Tammera and Shayne will show you where that is so you can grab everything you’ll need to make yourselves more comfortable for your stay.” She exits and leaves the ladies standing there, looking uneasy.

Rubbing my swollen eyes with my fists, I stand and make my way to them to introduce myself. “Hi, I’m Shayne, and this is Tammera, but I call her Mera. Welcome. Did you bring any clothing or bathroom necessities with you when you came?” I ask, because I don’t see any bags.

“No,” the blond bombshell says, lifting her face. I wince when I see an array of bruises trailing along her cheek and down her neck. “I’m Charlee, and this is Hemmingway, but I call her Hemmi.”

“Nice to meet you, Hemmingway. Or do you prefer everyone to refer to you as Hemmi?” I question, lacing my tone with sincerity so I don’t freak her out. Booming voices and fast movement can be triggers for those who’ve suffered domestic violence. These two aren’t the first to seek sanctuary here from abusive partners.

“Hemmi’s fine,” she answers.

I get an inkling that there’s something different about these two. Call it intuition or whatever, but there’s still life shining brightly in their eyes, and that’s not something I’ve witnessed from survivors. I question if they have alternative reasons for being here. I’ll keep my eye on them and watch to make sure I’m not imagining things. But, I don’t think I am.

“Follow us and we’ll take you to get your bedding first, then we’ll hit the commissary for clothing and bathroom supplies. Afterward, we’ll come back and help you make your beds and put things away,” I suggest.

“Thank you,” Charlee says, holding her hand out to indicate they’ll follow me. I turn to Mera and both of us share a look. Neither of us believe they’re as helpless and as docile as they’re trying to come across as.



Rounds are made, and by the time we make it back to our dorm, all four of our hands are loaded down with supplies to the point where we're nearly toppling over. When my feet tangle with a sheet, I nearly face-plant, and am pleasantly surprised when Hemmi breaks my fall by anchoring me with a stronghold on my elbow.

"Careful," she says, sounding worried.

"Fast reflexes," I mumble, side-eyeing her with curiosity and noting how in shape she is.

"Years of practice," she conveys, sending me a halfhearted smile.

When we hit the room and drop their load on their beds, Mera's had enough and snaps, "Cut the crap. Who are you two, because you're not who you're trying to appear as being? Do you work for her brothers?" she asks, pointing in my direction.

"No." Hemmi sighs, but Charlee, she has an amused smirk on her face.

Charlee nearly drops me to my knees with her next admittance. "But we are here because of your brothers, just not in the way you're presuming."

"Explain," Mera hisses, her fists digging into the divots of her hips.

"You want the truth?" Charlee inquires.

"Nothing but," I gasp out.

"The whole truth," Mera adds to my request.

"Is it safe to explain? Here, I mean. No ears can hear what we have to say?" Hemmi probes.

"This is a safe haven," I explain. "Our privacy isn't invaded here."

“We hope,” Mera expands, blowing out a heated breath.

“That’s not good enough. Follow me,” Charlee directs, leading us into the bathroom and turning on the sink faucet where it spits and sputters before a steady stream begins flowing. She reaches over and turns the dials on the shower, causing it to rain down with water. “Sorry, Pops,” she says, confusing me more.

Is that a metaphorical apology?

Who the hell is Pops?

I’ve studied deities of all kinds, and that’s one I’ve never heard before.

That confusion quickly dissipates when she starts explaining.



CHAPTER 4

JULIUS

EVEN WITH THE AUDIO BREAKING UP HERE AND THERE, WITH A little fine-tuned tweaking, Country has managed to get it to the point where we're catching more of the conversation than what we were. A word here and there cuts out, but we've gotten the gist of things. So far, there is no danger toward our girls.

We listen to them be introduced to our gem, hit the laundry facility for bedding, gathering clothing and bathroom necessities. Finally, they're hitting the bedroom where hopefully, they keep up with their cover story and gain the trust of the woman we need on our side.

Things were going well until boundaries get crossed and the girls go off script.

I nearly choke on my spit when I hear my daughter state through the hidden mic buried into her bra, "*But we are here because of your brothers, just not in the way you're presuming.*" What are you doing, Charlee girl?

"What the fuck is she doing?" Country growls, seconding the same question that just went through my head.

"What needs to be done," Master calmly states with a steady hum.

"This is not what we discussed," Luca sputters, pulling out a cigar.

“Not in such a confined space, Luca. We’ll be smoked out,” I admonish.

“I could use a smoke too,” Tyson murmurs.

“Step out,” I demand. “I need a clear working space.”

“Just keep the door open so you can still hear what’s going on. We’re hidden here. Nobody will see us,” Master adds, soothing feathers before they get ruffled. We’re near the convent but hidden in a back field that was abandoned long ago by its owner.

The perfect concealment spot as far as hideouts go.

“I thought you quit,” I say to Tyson, raising my brow in his direction.

“I have. I did. But this shit is stressing me the fuck out,” he answers, waving his hand toward our audio equipment’s sound system with a leer on his face. Note to self, don’t leave him alone with the shit. He’s liable to go apeshit and destroy it in a fit of rage.

He and Luca step out but lean toward the car as they light up so that they can stay in tune with the conversation.

He’s not taking his woman being behind those lime and brick walls, and out of his eyesight, well. Not that I blame him. If that were Ma, I’d have already ripped the place apart, stone-by-stone to get to her.

“Listen,” Country snaps, drawing our attention back to the conversation taking place.

Gotta give credit to my son-in-law. He’s grown some balls throughout the years and has taken his place within the folds of club life as if he were born to help Gunner and Kruger lead it.

“Your brothers are sociopaths,” Charlee informs the girl.

A snort comes through the open airwaves, before a sweet, melodic voice says, *“Tell me something I didn’t know.”*

“Your brothers have tried to kill my family,” Hemmi simply states as if she’s stating the sky is blue.

“Tried? They have. Curley, Ma—” Charlee chokes on that. Her Ma’s death cut her deep. *“They were tied to a group of narcissistic assholes who murdered my ma. It was on their orders that things went to hell and an innocent woman got caught in the crosshairs and lost her life because she put herself on the line to save other innocents.”*

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” our ace says. What catches my attention is the sorrow that thickens her voice. Mourning a woman that she never met, it seems as if this woman feels things passionately.

“I lost my mother at a young age because of the evil acts of my family. I don’t remember her, which is both a blessing and a curse. I can’t imagine how you must feel. I’m just happy for you that you knew the love of a mother, even if she was taken from you in an act of violence and before her time.”

“She was the best mother a girl could ask for. I’m just sorry you didn’t get to experience that love and devotion for yourself,” Charlee states, reminiscing. The weepy emotions clogging her speech make my heart beat rapidly in my chest.

Losing our matriarch, the love of my life, still affects us profoundly. She’ll forever be missed. The void of not having her with me can never be filled. I’m taking it one day at a time until she and I can be reunited. Whereas I can’t wait for that day to come, I know that my children will be left parentless, and that’s what keeps me kicking life in the ass. I will not abandon them unless I have no other choice.

Interrupting the two girls who are connecting and consoling each other over the loss of their mothers, Hemmi clears her throat and says, *“I’m sorry to interrupt, and I know this loss hurts you both as it should, but we need to stay on topic.”*

“That’s my girl,” Tyson hoots, a proud smile crossing his face.

“And what’s that?” I hear Tammera ask.

“That we need your help,” Hemmi remarks. *“Your brothers are the catapults for us going underground and faking our deaths. Our family is living underground... literally. Our children haven’t seen sunlight in an astronomical amount of*

time. No social interactions, no activities outside of the park built below the streets. They're suffering, and we need to get them back to the land of the living. Kids shouldn't have to survive. They're confused, angsty, and missing their friends and extra-curricular activities. Can you help us, Shayne?"

"How can I help, Hemmi? I've been sheltered here my entire life. I have no knowledge of the ins-and-outs of my family's businesses."

"Maybe not," Charlee interjects. "But by having you come up missing, it'll send them scrambling, which means they'll make a mistake. That's the opening we need to return to our lives."

"Help us reclaim what we've lost, Shayne. Please," Hemmi begs.

"It may be a better alternative than us running, Shayne," her friend proposes. "Will your family offer guards to keep her safe from her brothers? Because at the end of the day, that's all that matters."

"There you go with the us thing again, Mera." Shayne sighs. "It's not safe for you to come with us. I don't want my brothers getting a hold of you and using you against me."

"You are not leaving me here, Shayne! I've had your back since we were kids, and that's not going to stop now. Here's something you haven't thought of. What if your brothers are in cahoots with the nuns and priests here? Huh? They already know that we're always together and that we're the best of friends. What makes you think I'm safer here than with you?"

"Damn." Luca whistles, exhaling a puff from his cigar. "She's good at the guilt-trip thing."

"Sounds like it," I agree.

"I kinda like this chick," Luca adds.

"You would," Master grumbles.

"What? I like them feisty." Luca chuckles, adjusting his crotch.

The things that arouse my brother are troubling. My parents should've gotten him therapy after shackling Luca to my

intended bride all of those years ago.

“Stop the idle chitchat. We need to know if Shayne’s going to agree to sneak out with Charlee and Hemmi,” I demand, tuning back into the conversation that matters.

“Why do you need protection from your brothers, Shayne? Other than the obvious fact that they’re sociopaths?” Charlee probes.

“Good girl,” I mutter.

Knowing all the facts ahead of time will help us be better prepared for what’s to come.

“Because they’ve used me as a pawn in their schemes,” Shayne answers.

“How?” Hemmi asks.

“They’ve basically sold her as arm candy, a breeder to another foul man,” Mera replies.

“They’ve found me a marriage match that suits their motives. I’m to be married to a man I’ve never met in six months,” Shayne mentions.

“That’s barbaric and a bit outdated, don’t you think?” Charlee groans.

“It’s old school, yes,” Shayne concurs, sounding snippy and unhappy about that fact. *“But that’s the way it is in our family, apparently.”*

“Your brothers are making a power play,” Hemmi states. *“But even a marriage contract between families is a travesty, and honestly, a bit disgusting.”*

“In their world, me being a woman, means I do as I’m told without any lip. I’m to be seen and not heard. I have no choices. They’ve captured my dreams and have utterly wrecked them. Our blood bonds mean nothing to them other than a way to control me and defy boundaries.”

Shayne’s sad voice makes me want to pull her into my arms and shelter her from the bad things that happen in life. She’s a treasure, one her brothers will happily cash in instead of

putting her in a trove and holding her in high regard as any woman such as herself should be.

“So, not to be an interloper or anything, but as you can see, this situation is serious and nobody answered my initial question after we got sidetracked. Can your family keep her safe? Her brothers aren’t to be taken lightly. Do you have the means, security, and the backing necessary?” Tammera digs.

“We can keep her safe,” Charlee insists.

“And yes, we have the clout, financing, as well as the backing of soldiers to make sure it stays that way,” Hemmi includes.

“The fact that you have your own soldiers is a bit troubling,” Shayne confesses. *“Now I have to decide if the devil I know is safer than the devil that I don’t.”*

“Honey, our soldiers, our family, won’t sell you off to the highest bidder. We’ll protect you and keep you safe. Does it suck that you’re stuck in the middle of a war that isn’t yours? Yes. But at least with us, you have a chance for a life of your own once this is over,” Hemmi says, her tone soothing.

“What assurances do you have of that outside of your word?” Tammera presses. *“No offense, but we don’t know you, which means just because you say so, doesn’t alleviate any of our concerns.”*

“What would make you feel better?” Charlee asks.

“Leverage,” Tammera states.

“What kind of leverage?” Hemmi inquires.

“You have us, we want one of yours with us at all times,” Tammera answers. *“And we want a weapon to ensure this person doesn’t try to escape.”*

“I volunteer as tribute.” Luca offers himself up, raising his left hand in the air and bouncing on his feet, which is a bizarre look considering he still has a lit cigar dangling in his other hand. The excitement dancing in his eyes has me gaping at him. My brother is an oddball even by our organization’s standards.

“Are you kidding me right now? Never mind, don’t answer that,” I grumble.

“*Done,*” Charlee snaps.


“Done? She can’t make crucial decisions like that without clearing it through us first,” I hiss.

“So, we give her a gun with blank caps,” Master states. “They’ll look like real bullets. She’ll never know the difference and it’ll give them the illusion that they’re in control without one of us paying the price for a trigger finger.”

“Jesus fucking Christ!” I moan. I suppose it will give them a sense of peace that we can’t offer them until they get to know us and let their guard down.

“Bring on the weaponry and kitten claws,” Luca says, rubbing his hands together in glee. “Looks like our lives are fixing to get interesting and I, for one, can’t wait.”

“Someone save me from stupid people,” I rumble into the universe.



CHAPTER 5

SHAYNE

EVEN THOUGH I SHOULD BE LEERY WHEN IT COMES TO Charlee, and her friend, Hemmi, seeing as they're complete strangers, I don't get the sense of foreboding that they're a danger to me and Mera.

However, I do get the feeling they're not women to be trifled with and are women of their word. And those are the type of people I need on my side.

For the past half hour, I've been telling them about my latest meeting with my brothers. They asked me to give them a play-by-play and recall as many of the details I could. Even if they didn't come across as important to me at the time, they could be crucial.

Mentally and emotionally wiped, I crawled onto my bed and am lying here, drowning in my terror of what my future holds.

"Tell me about your family," I implore, needing something to distract myself with.

"My family is a beautiful disaster," Charlee starts off saying.

My lips lift upward in a small smile. If anyone understands that sentiment, it's me. The disaster part anyway. There's nothing beautiful about my family.

"Pops, my dad, he's amazing, my hero. But he had issues with his family. They didn't want him to marry my ma because she wasn't part of their world. So, he ran and took her with him. They stayed off the grid for years. They'd changed their names

and started the DreamCatcher Motorcycle Club that my brother's now the president of. They'd been undetected until I was fifteen. When they were discovered by their family's team, which was organized by my uncle Luca, they ran again, and left me in the care of my brother, Gunner. That's where Country came in."

"Country? That's an interesting name," Mera comments. "How did his parents come up with that?"

If it weren't for her playful tone, we'd all think she was being judgmental. She's not. My best friend is curious by nature and that can come across as being snarky and outlandish at times—but it's all done in fun. She actually loves unique names and always wants the story behind them. According to her, parents name their children after someone they either admire, or have a fascination with. She's always seeking further information. I call it her geeky side.

"It's his road name," Charlee remarks, as if that would cure Mera's curiosity.

Newsflash, it won't. If anything, she'll have more questions.

"Does everyone get a road name?" Mera asks, her infatuation for knowing everything has started and she won't stop digging until her curiosity has been satisfied.

"It's a common thing in the motorcycle world. Not everyone uses them, or their name is perfect and complements who they are," Hemmi resolves.

"I'd love to be someone else for a short period," Mera states.

"You *have* become someone else," I remind her.

She did legally change her name to give herself her own identity and erased the one the people who abandoned her gave her.

Continuing, I summate, "And I love who you are. Don't go changing who you are again, because my life would be crippling without you and who you've grown to become."

"Stop being sweet," Mera playfully admonishes me, before tacking on, "You'll give me a toothache." A rosy-pink blush

paints her cheeks as she bashfully angles her face down, her fingers playing with a frayed string that's come loose on the hem of her T-shirt.

She doesn't do well with compliments.

"Keep it up, and I'll add some sprinkles to that sundae," I singsong, using one of our terms when the other doesn't take praise and own it.

"Don't forget the hot fudge too. That's the best part of the sugary dessert." Mera shyly giggles, letting me know she's uncomfortable.

"Keep going and we'll top it off with a cherry and some whipped cream," Charlee says, not wanting to be left out of the banter, easily picking up where we left off.

"As long as you keep the stem on," Mera sasses, her eyes lighting up with another person getting in on the ribbing. Four sets of eyes roam to the other, and after a few beats of silence, we all crack up in belly-aching snickers.

Charlee and Hemmi finish telling us all about their family, those in the motorcycle club, as well as those who are not. They sound like an interesting bunch of characters, and I'm not as scared as I initially was to trust them to keep me safe.

Eventually, time catches up to us and we end up going down to the communal dining room to eat dinner with the nuns and other residents of the school.



For the past two days, we've been packing and hiding our things close to the back fence line, so that the men who dropped them off—who are around acting as their security detail—could grab them and keep them safe until we find a way to escape undetected.

The girls finally confessed that they were "wired up" which I'd never considered seeing as its new advanced technology

that hasn't made the local news. The only television program, outside of biblical documentaries, we're allowed to watch.

All that technological mumbo-jumbo goes above my head.

I've led a simple life, and the nuns don't teach us about militaristic equipment. Not only because that goes beyond their scope of expertise, but because they abhor violence, which includes our armed forces. In my opinion, that's absurd. They're there to protect us against foreign threats, and at times, ourselves.

Hemmi was appalled when she heard this. I knew she was a tough woman, but when I learned that she'd been one of our country's soldiers, I was flabbergasted on her behalf.

The four of us have spent many nights talking about our pasts. The things these ladies have survived is heartbreaking. I can't say that I'd be as strong as Hemmi if I'd gone through what she has.

She conveyed that she still talks to a therapist to deal with the trauma, and in her words, she still has a few hurdles to jump over. But the fact that she's here, helping another woman that she never met, simply amazes me.

And her man, Tyson, his actions and support are breathtaking. It takes a strong man to raise another's children as his own. Not to mention, the way he loves her, the way he's devoted to her, is inspirational.

It makes me believe that out there, somewhere, is a man who can be that for me.

It'd have to be someone with steel in their marrow to stand up for me, for us, and go up against my brothers. Not for the first time, I wonder if that's a true possibility.

Six Days Later

Outside of our knickknacks, photos hung on our walls, and toothbrushes, toothpaste, hairbrushes, and so on, everything has been delivered to the patch of land for retrieval. I wasn't a believer that our stuff would be recovered unseen, however, they have been.

It's actually been a fun, covert, and clandestine game. I've never had the nerve to play espionage, nor to be sneaky, but Charlee and Hemmi seem to bring out the braver part of me. I have a feeling that through time, they're going to become an integral part of our lives, plus great friends to both Mera and me.

"Are you sure they're waiting for us?" Mera asks. "You can only give them information but can't receive any back. What if something's happened and they can't make it? I don't trust that her siblings don't have someone watching to make sure she doesn't attempt to escape."

"That makes me nervous," I grumble, biting on my thumb cuticle. "I wouldn't put it past them. Is there a way we can find out if your people are out there waiting on us before we tempt fate?"

"Country." Charlee says his name into the small device tucked into her bra. "Can you set off some sort of alarm if y'all are here and ready to break us out?"

For five minutes there's no sound, and I begin walking from one end of our room to the other.

Was this too good to be true?

Did I get my hopes up for nothing?

Will I be stuck marrying a man who could hurt me in ways that there'll be no coming back from?

All of these questions bounce around incessantly in my brain. The longer it takes to hear something, indicating everything is good to go, the more skittish I become.

Like a siren singing my song, car alarms begin going off up and down the street.

"There's our answer. Once the lights go out, we'll give it two hours for everyone to settle, then get the hell outta here. This place gives me the hives," Charlee says, followed by a full-body shiver.

"That's a pretty impressive answer," I muse, a slight bit of humor lacing my tone.

“They aren’t known for subtlety.” Hemmi laughs.

The halls fill with murmurs as students and faculty come out from their dorms to see what all the commotion is about.

“It’d be suspicious if we don’t fall into line like the rest of them to see what the noise is about,” Mera implies, knowing good and well that we’re usually the first two among the masses that are nosy.

“Lead the way,” I tell her, a smile spread from one cheek to the other. For the first time in our lives, Mera and I have the inside scoop. We’re aware of things nobody else, outside of the four of us, is. It’s exhilarating, I’m enthusiastic knowing that it’s the proof needed to show how my life is fixing to irrevocably change.

Whether it’s for better or worse still remains unknown. But if it gets me away from my brothers’ clutches, it means that it can’t be that bad.

At least, that’s the hope.



“Hustle, ladies. We’re not out for a midnight stroll in order to smell the roses,” Hemmi gripes, waving her hands haphazardly in front of her for us to get a move on.

“Man, I’m out of shape,” Mera complains, having a hard time, like I am, keeping up with these two ladies’ fast-paced jogging. “Are their legs longer than ours or something? Because it’s as if they have giraffe legs and we have walrus stubs.”

“I don’t run. It makes my boobs hurt,” I whine.

These size Ds are a hindrance in many ways, but when I attempt to run or jog, they feel like gallon jugs weighing me down.

Here’s two facts about being a big-breasted woman that not many share—not only *wasn’t* I joking when I said it’s painful

on your back and neck, and *not only* do they jiggle when it's inconvenient, but finding clothes that are flattering, without being tacky and showing things that nobody has a right to see other than the mirror when I'm changing, is an impossible feat. Which is why I stick mainly to T-shirts and jeans, or a flowy dress that isn't restricting the upper part of my body.

Unstylish? Maybe. But I'd rather be comfortable than sleazy.

Not to mention, luxury isn't a thing that's an offer for me. We can't wear skirts. Shorts worn here are permitted to go above the knee. No cleavage is allowed to be shown, not unless you want the wrath of the nuns. Those horrors you hear about nuns and rulers are true. They love to smack you with them as a way of punishment and to keep you in line. Being on the other end of that wooden stick is not fun.

Hemmi grabs my hand, and Charlee grabs Mera's, dragging us behind them, quicker than my short, stacked legs have ever moved before.

If I never do cardio again, I'm okay with that. This is the extent of that form of workout I ever want to do. You won't see me raising my hand for a turn on the treadmill.

No siree.

I'll covet my curves, and pridefully so.



CHAPTER 6

JULIUS

TWO WEEKS LATER

“WHAT’S TAKING THEM SO LONG?” TYSON PROBES, GRIPPING the chain-link fence and shaking it with abandon.

“That won’t make them move any faster,” I warn him, cautioning him about making any noises that can draw unwanted attention our way.

They may not monitor their property the way they should, considering they have a lot of people under their care, but the brazen way he’s flailing it around could wake the damn dead.

“Look. Here they come,” Master asserts, gaining our focus.

“All I see are four shadows,” Luca grouses. He’s been hankering and sulking to get a look at Shayne’s friend ever since she showed us her domineering side. Something about her calls to the hard-nosed man inside of him.

No woman, sight unseen, has ever enraptured him the way she has. I hope she gives him a run for his money. I haven’t admitted this to anyone, but Shayne also has me bouncing on my toes, wanting to put a face to the voice I’ve been hearing for nearly two weeks now. There’s something about her mellowness and innocence that makes me want to protect her.

The only problem that I see is who’s going to keep me safe from her?

Women like her are my weakness. My natural instinct is to shelter them from the evils of the world. Usually, I find them a

safehouse with somebody I trust to watch over them, but with her, I want to be her protector instead of pushing her off on someone to do that job for me.

That's has me fucked up.

Is my feeling a betrayal to Ma?

Am I defying the boundaries of my matrimony, being reckless by bringing her into our home?

How would my kids, or my grandkids, feel if they knew I was considering being her salvation? Her knight. The one who obliterates her demons and buries them deep down into a pit of dirt.

Charlee, deep down, has such a soft heart that I think she'd be open to my thoughts.

Gunner, on the other hand, worshipped his mother. Would he see this act as being disrespectful to her memory?

It's a damn good thing that this is more curiosity than me moving on, because I don't see how I could do that. I don't think that I could ever be in love again. I don't have the mental, emotional, or physical capacity of sharing myself with another woman when I'm still in love with my deceased wife.

But then Ma's words whisper back through my mind.

Let me go, my love. I'm your past. Your future awaits you.

Was this what she was referring to? Is Shayne the future she mentioned?

More of her words come back to haunt me.

You'll always have me, but open yourself up, and let another in. You can do this. I'll still be here when you need me, but my physical body will never experience your touch, and yours will never feel mine. Your second chance is around the corner. Save her. Protect her. Love her. Just like you did with me. I'm sending her to you, dear. I trust you to help her bloom and show her what family means.

"What family means," I mumble aloud.

Remember, I'm here if you need me. Call out if you do and I'll come. But I'm going to leave you now so that you can go on without wondering if I'm hearing and watching you find a reason to live with another by your side. Take care of yourself, love. Forgive me and yourself, husband. My purpose in life was fulfilled, and it was my time to join our lost loved ones.

“Damn you, woman. Always meddling, even from the other side of the veil,” I moan under my breath, running my hand down my scruffy beard. Both fear and frustration course through me.

Fear because the aspect of moving on with another woman frightens the ever-loving shit out of me. Frustration because Ma took the choice of if I want to move on or not out of my hands. What this woman deems as right isn't always what others do. She's never steered me wrong before, but I'm still standoffish about allowing another woman into my life when she could potentially be ripped away from me.

Shayne doesn't only come with a suitcase of baggage... that I could handle. No, she comes with a trunk full of problems and risks. Danger that's already stolen people I loved and could snatch a few more before this war with the Crumleys is over.

The rumbling of steel as it's rearranged and pulled to the side in order to make the opening we cut bigger captures my attention. First through is Charlee. Country grabs her up in his arms and crushes her to his rumbling chest.

“Swear that man is part bear,” I muse, making Charlee chuckle.

Next through is one of the women. This one is a platinum blonde whose curls bounce around the frame of her face. “This is Tamera, but she prefers to be called Mera.” Charlee introduces our ragtag group to her as she bends down, pushing Luca to the side so she can help the other woman, Shayne, through the expanse opening.

When Shayne lifts her head, our eyes are immediately drawn to the other's. Her crystal blue eyes hypnotize my hazel ones. She's caught me in a trance that I can't seem to break free of. I'm not sure if I want to.

“Hi,” she shyly says, giving us a half-wave.

“This is Shayne,” Charlee states, reaching out and helping the woman from her crouched position. “Shayne, this is my husband, Country. My brothers, Master, Tyson, my Uncle Luca, and my dad, Pops.”

“Nice to meet you,” she softly replies as she stands up, and moves away, so that Hemmi can finish crawling her way through the opening. Tyson bends down and lifts Hemmi from her knees and carts her away to the car without another word spoken.

“He’s not a man of many words,” I tease, since Shayne and Mera’s eyes are comically wide as he whisks her away.

“Rude would be my wording for it.” Luca tsks, shaking his head.

“Give him a break,” Master inserts. “He’s protective of my sister. This has been hard on him. They’ve never spent this much time away from each other or the twins.”

“This is nice and all,” Mera says, waving her hands wildly through the air. “But can we get out of here? Last thing we need to do is stand here lollygagging in case her crazy brothers are having us watched.”

“She makes a good point,” I admit, reaching out to take Shayne’s hand to walk her to the getaway car. She tentatively reaches out. Apprehension has her hands trembling while doing so. “You’re safe with us. I guarantee it.”

“He’s never broken a promise when he’s given his word about something, Shayne, and this is him doing that now,” Charlee kindheartedly tells her with utmost honesty.

“O-okay,” she says, stumbling over the word. “Thank you.”

As a response, I squeeze her fingers with mine, giving her the courage to put one foot in front of the other and follow me. I want to assure her that I intend to do her no harm.

“I’ll do everything within my power to keep your brothers from locating you. We have the same agenda here,” I implore.

“I think they may be slightly different,” she objects, a slight blush staining her cheeks and neck.

“But our end goal is the same,” I argue.

“To destroy those scumbags?” Mera asks, narrowing her eyes at me.

“Basically, yes,” I answer.

“Works for me,” she says, shrugging her shoulders and inching away from us before pointing at my sedan. “This one?”

“Yes,” I remark, hiding my grin at her brazen and deadpan tone.

“Damn, I think I just found the woman I’m gonna marry one day,” Luca states, mischief dancing in his eyes.

“You wish, bucko,” Mera drones, stabbing herself in the chest. “This woman’s not on the market. I’m not a slab of meat on display.”

“If you were, I’d pick you every day of the week,” Luca flirts, shooting her a wink. “You are succulent.”

“And you, sir, are a pig,” she articulates.

“Oink, oink, baby girl.” Luca snorts.

“Oh, yeah. He’s charming,” she rebuffs, stomping her feet as she marches to the car. “I’m not your baby girl. I’m not your anything. Please refrain from acting as if you have some sort of intimate connection to me. My name is Mera. Use it.” Luca’s face brightens as she lays down that challenge.

“I like the way the word intimate rolls off your tongue,” Luca continues, pressing his luck. “What else can it do?”

“You have some audacity, mister.” Mera huffs.

“And lots of stamina to go with it,” Luca adds with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

Drawing Shayne’s attention from the train wreck that’s fixing to derail, I clear my throat until she swivels her head my way. “This is Luca’s, my brother, form of foreplay,” I tell Shayne, watching her eyes light up.

“It’s an interesting way to flirt,” she says as she crawls into the car. “He won’t get any brownie points using that odious verbiage. It’s insulting and a bit nauseating.”

“He’s an interesting guy.” I bark out a laugh at Shayne’s description of my brother because that’s putting things mildly.

“He’s detestable and depraved. He keeps going like that, he’ll push her away. She has a dream guy in her mind, and trust me, he’s nothing like your brother.”

“Nobody’s like my brother.”

“I can see that, Pops.”

“Julius,” I remark.

“Excuse me?”

“My name. It’s Julius.”

“Nice to meet you, Julius.”

“The pleasure’s all mine, Shayne.”

Once everyone has been loaded into the two vehicles, we gently pull away without the headlights illuminating our pitch-black path. Shayne’s fingers dig into my forearm as we crawl through the darkness. Marco drives the car with me, Luca, Mera, and Shayne, while Leo drives the one with the rest of my family onboard.

“How far is our drive?” Shayne inquires, never wavering from watching the car navigate through the terrain. “Can he see? I’m not sure a car crash is a great getaway plan.”

“We won’t crash. He’s spent hours mapping out this drive. He knows it better than the back of his hand,” I tell her.

“If you say so,” she begrudgingly groans. She still doesn’t look convinced and I have to bite my bottom lip to keep from cracking up at her spunkiness. From the last week and a half of conversations I’ve overheard between the girls, I’ve never heard her use this sort of cockiness. It’ll be nice to watch her grow and expand her horizons.



Forty minutes into the drive, both Shayne and Mera succumb to sleep. Whatever she's dreaming about must be nice, because she has a calm and serene look on her face.

"Do you think her fucktard brothers were having her watched as they suspect? Not once did we see anyone casing the convent," Luca apprises, his sight stuck on Mera.

"I doubt it. They had no reason to suspect that she was planning a getaway. They're so damn egotistical, they believe she's under their thumb and would never disobey an order," I counter.

"They're going to flip their shit when they realize she's gone." He snickers. "Wish I was a fly on the wall when they discover that."

"Yeah. They won't be happy when they notice she's disappeared without a trace," I say, agreeing with him. "It'll be awhile before they figure out she's untraceable, and they'll know she had outside help. It'll buy us some time before we end up letting them know exactly where she is."

"The nuns will sound the alarms and call them as soon as we don't show up to seven a.m. check-in," Shayne incoherently mumbles. "And you're right, Julius. They only see me as the dutiful, naïve little sister who always tucks her head and does whatever is asked of her. They never considered the fact that I'd rebel and fight a way to avoid their marriage proposal."

She blinks her beautiful crystal blue eyes up at me, her raven hair tumbling over her shoulders, and her puffy pink lips shining with gloss as she nervously licks them, making me want to bend her over and claim them for myself.

"That gives us plenty of time to get y'all settled, lock down the compound to the point that even the Pope couldn't get in, and erase our tracks. They won't suspect it's us until after they've gone down the lengthy list of their enemies. As far as they're

concerned, the entire club was eliminated when the clubhouse burned to the ground,” I state, trying to console her.

“Or they may look at us first since we have the strongest motivation for revenge,” Luca concludes. “Either way, we have plenty of space for you ladies to roam undetected. They can assume all they want to, but if we go on with business as usual, and they never visually put eyes on you, that’s all it’ll be.”

“Our staff is loyal to us, and they know the repercussions if they’re not,” I add.

“Your staff? How big is your place exactly?” Shayne queries, turning her body sideways to face me. “The girls mentioned something about an underground town. Will we be able to see it?”

“We have a secret entrance from our house. You’ll be able to go anytime you wish,” I tell her. “It’ll be good for you to interact with other people and there’s nobody better for you to make friends with than our family.”

“If they’re anything like Charlee and Hemmi, I can’t wait to meet them,” she says, excitement strumming through her body as she dances in her seat. “There’s so much I want to do now that I don’t have my every move watched by the nuns.”

“Like what?” I ask, not only because I’m curious, but because I want to make sure she explores everything that’s been forbidden to her. That she gets to live, find herself, and not by living vicariously through others.

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SHAYNE

“I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHERE TO BEGIN. I HAVE A HUGE bucket list,” I admit, chewing on my bottom lip as I try to put them in a list by priority.

“What’s the first thing that comes to mind?” Julius asks me.

“Ice cream!” I all but shout, causing Mera to stir.

“Candy,” she tacks on. “Lots of candy. I want to try every variety.”

“We could put sprinkles on our ice cream,” I announce, dreaming of having a sugar rush.

“It’s late for ice cream tonight, but tomorrow afternoon, be prepared to be dazzled. We’ll set up an ice cream bar,” Luca states, pulling out a pocket-sized notebook and his pen. He jots down notes.

“What’s an ice cream bar?” Mera urges, voicing the question that I was about to ask myself. I hope we don’t sound bratty, but we want to be knowledgeable about everything, big or small, that’s been forbidden to us.

“Have you ever been to an all-you-can-eat buffet?” Julius asks with bemusement on his face.

“No, but I know what that is,” I confess.

“It’s like that, but with ice cream and all the add-ons instead of food,” Julius explains. I’m not sure what he means by *add-ons* but I can’t wait to find out.

“Bring on tomorrow,” Mera teases, rubbing her hands together as a dreamy look comes over her face. “I want to watch a movie and read racy books.”

“Mera!” I gasp. “Why would you want to read those sorts of books? It’s... they’re indecent and... they’re lewd.”

“There’s nothing wrong with her wanting to read risqué novels, Shayne,” Luca lightly scolds her. “You said you want to live a little, give it a chance. The world won’t shatter because you two want to be a little naughty. I dare you to give it a shot. The erotica lifestyle isn’t necessarily one you would choose for yourself, but going outside of your comfort zone is the only way you’ll be able to explore your interest and find out what makes you purr.”

“Purr?” I choke. He makes it sound lovable instead of salacious. “The nuns would fumble all over themselves and make a sign of the cross across their chests if they were to overhear this conversation. They’d believe we’d been touched by diabolism, needing an extensive lesson in what’s proper and pure. In our sex education class, it was drilled into us that the marital bed is for reproduction intentions, not for lustful activities. After all, lust is a sin.”

“Ah, one of my favorite sins to explore,” Luca saucily includes. “I see they weren’t shy about expanding y’all’s vocabulary either. Diabolism isn’t a word used in everyday conversation.”

“It is when you’re raised in a convent,” I ascertain.

“We’re well-versed in biblical definitions,” Mera supplies.

“Was it part of your spelling bee too?” Luca asks, his eyebrows shooting up into his forehead. “I didn’t know what that word meant until my junior year of Catholic Sunday school.”

“You went to Sunday school?” I probe, because he doesn’t seem the type.

“Our mother was Irish Catholic. She was brought up in a strict, religious household, even if they were living a secret life outside of that theology,” Julius informs me.

“What do you mean by that?” I wonder aloud.

“Our mom was from the Irish Mafia, and our dad was from the Columbian mob. Their marriage was one of convenience, a way to unite two forces and make them a powerhouse to be reckoned with,” Julius answers. “It was rare but wasn’t the first of its kind.”

“Wow!” Mera whistles. “That’s one syndicate I wouldn’t want to cross.”

“To the Crumleys, we became a challenge,” Luca confesses.

“It started with the Crumbleys,” I correct him.

“Yeah, how did that whole name swap thing happen anyway? We’ve referred to them as both in the past because we weren’t sure which was the right pronunciation.” Luca has a valid question, and all I can do is give them the answer my brothers gave me when I asked.

“Crumbley comes from our Colombian roots, and Crumley is used by our Irish side, which gets confusing at times. But the spelling and pronunciation of our last name varies from one country to the next. It’s the same family. They work side-by-side, only spread out in different regions,” I enlighten them.

“It’s a way for them to control two different geographical territories,” Julius clarifies.

“It’s not happenstance either that they’re from the same countries our forefathers came from, or where they established our familial domain,” Luca defines.

“They want to take away what our family built from the ground up,” Julius confirms.

“Without putting in the work,” I maintain. “It’s easier for them to steal than to put their blood, sweat, and tears into it.”

“They’re dirty, but don’t want to get the dirt underneath their fingernails by being that way. It’s abhorrent,” Mera snaps, her mouth turning downward into a frown. “Your brothers are worse than I believed.”

“I told you my family is evil,” I remind her.

“Yeah, but there’s evil, and then there’s *evil!*” she comes back.

“True. I can’t believe that their blood runs through my veins.” I sigh.

“Blood ties don’t make you evil, Shayne. Your life is what you make it,” Julius conveys, sincerity blanketing his features. “You’re a good person with a good heart. Use that to make yourself who you want to be.”

“I will,” I determine. “I refuse to be like them.”



A slight nudge to my shoulder awakens me. I must’ve fallen asleep mid-conversation because I don’t remember shutting my eyes.

“We’re here. We’ll go through the garage entrance so nobody sees you,” Julius tells me.

“Wouldn’t someone have spotted me through the car windows if they were looking?” I ponder.

“They have a blackout coating to them. Meaning, we can see out, but nobody can see in,” he answers.

“That’s spectacular,” I praise. “I didn’t know that was a thing. Is it legal?”

“It is for us.” He chuckles. I’m not fixing to ask him to expand on that. It says enough. Apparently, these men have that clout I had originally been worried about. But there’s a difference between these men and my brothers. They may be just as lethal and scary, but their eyes aren’t dead.

Spying out the window, my jaw drops in awe. This isn’t a house—it’s a monstrosity. A castle. And it’s very well-guarded and protected if the high brick wall and solid steel gate is any indication.

“Wow,” I say as we pull up. I watch in fascination as men surround the vehicle. Some have mirrors on long poles and

others lift the hood and check inside the engine. “What are they doing?”

“Checking to see if our vehicles are clean,” Luca answers in amusement.

“Clean of what?” Mera inquires, her face pressed against the opposite window from mine, watching the men’s every move with marvel.

“Bombs, bugs, drugs, or other paraphernalia that could be used against us as entrapment,” Luca nonchalantly remarks.

“People do that to others?” I grimace. How could others be so bold and cold as to put someone behind bars for life just to be vengeful?

“You’d be surprised to know what some would do to get ahead,” Julius laments.

“It’s uncouth and disparaging,” I say with an added huff. “Parents should be ashamed of themselves for not giving their children morals and values.”

“Everyone’s morals and values differ,” Luca excuses. “Depends on what lifestyle you’re born into.”

“It takes more energy to be bad than it does to be good,” I defend.

“That it does,” Julius agrees.

Once the car is cleared, we slowly inch through the gates and the property. Even though it’s nighttime, I can see it is gloriously landscaped. The grass is a plush green. The bloomed flowers are a myriad of assorted colors, and the bushes as well as the trees are neatly trimmed.

“Your home is beautiful,” I tell the brothers.

“Thank you. Our father and mother designed the entire place. We’ve expanded it some, added in some extra protective details, but it still feels like home,” Julius quips. “The underground bunker, or city, as my son and crew call it, was started forty years ago. We’ve put our twist on it. It’s livable instead of being used only for a temporary hideout.”

“Is that where they’re going?” I watch as the second car drives into some sort of cargo elevator, designed only for cars to go up or down on. It’s marvelous, something I’d never thought was more than a fantasy.

“Yes. They’ll go down twenty feet and be dropped in the subsurface lot. After you girls get your bearings, we’ll take you down there and introduce you to the rest of our family,” Julius says as the car shuts off. “Ready to start the rest of your life?”

“More than you’ll ever know.”



CHAPTER 8

JULIUS

SINCE WE DIDN'T KNOW THE WOMEN'S SIZES OR PREFERENCES as far as clothing and essentials go, we had Stella, Star, and whoever else they recruited, do some catalog shopping for some generic things. They compiled a list, and I sent a few of my men and their wives to the stores.

From what trivial things we grabbed and had sent here ahead of us, their belongings are meager and lackluster, no colors or patterns. Everything is muted in shades of gray, black, and brown. I understand that they didn't have many choices, but I wanted to let the ladies know that now, they do.

They won't be able to personally shop at stores for themselves due to the danger following them, but the world is their oyster now, and I have people willing to do the footwork.

"We'll do a thorough tour tomorrow. Breakfast will be brought to you as soon as you've woken," I announce as we walk into the mudroom, which leads into the house directly off the garage.

"This room is as big as our dorm was back at the abbey," Shayne states as she twirls around, taking everything in. She acts like our utility room is a five-star resort, reminding me how sheltered she's been. "Even our laundry and commissary combined wasn't this big."

"So, we didn't get a chance to talk, but Charlee made certain promises to us that we took her word on, and nobody's discussed it," Mera pipes in.

“Luca’s taking care of that for you,” I promise. “As soon as we get to the family suite, he’ll work those details out with you, Tammera.”

“Mera. My friends call me Mera.”

“Are we friends?” Luca purrs, leaning into her.

“Has anyone ever taught you about personal space, Luc?” Mera snidely asks. “This is my bubble.” She frantically waves her hands around her, stretching her arms out, wiggling her fingers through the air. “Stay out of it.”

“I’m gonna pop that personal bubble, Mera,” Luca vows, a smirk lining his face. “What’s your space, will become mine, roomie.”

Mera sputters, “Ex-excuse me?”

“We’re going to become *very* good friends,” he exaggeratedly implies.

“Is he serious?” Shayne asks as we climb the back staircase.

“Deadly,” I remark before quickly adding, “Don’t worry, it’s not as nefarious as he’s making it out to be.”

“*Suuure* it isn’t,” she taunts, drawing out the word with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “And what did you mean by family suite, Julius?”

“Since you ladies had certain... requirements for staying with us, we thought it’d be easier and more lucrative for all involved to have y’all close by, instead of having a hostage type of environment,” I reply. “No reason to start things off with tension between the four of us. We’re going to be a team in this endeavor. Yes, I get that trust between us won’t be instantaneous, but we need to at least try to have some sort of an even balance.”

“I couldn’t agree more. But having us in such close quarters may be... intense,” she settles on using.

“It may in the beginning,” I acquiesce. “But once we get to know one another better, that should all level out. We need to be a team, Shayne.”

“Even with those two butting heads at every turn?” she asks.

“Believe it or not, I think those two secretly like each other,” I confess, leaning into her so they don’t overhear us.

“You think?” she probes.

“Yeah, Shayne. I really do.”



“What the—” Shayne falters, her jaw dropping to where it nearly hits the ground, leaving her statement incomplete. “This is as big as our entire floor was.” I chuckle at her starry eyes.

“It’s meant to be a mini apartment of sorts,” I admit. “A place for our family to gather and relax without the housing staff or our men interrupting.”

“I’m going to need a map to navigate this monstrosity, aren’t I, Julius?”

“You’ll get used to it,” I say, opening my arms to usher her down the hallway that leads to my half of the suite. “You and I will be at this end, and Mera will stay on Luca’s, so she can have her wish.”

“Her wish?” she asks, quirking her brow.

“For a hostage. And a weapon. We’ll let those two work out their differences without it interfering with our tranquility.”

“Julius, are you saying that I’ll have my own room?”

“Yes?” I phrase it more as a question than an answer because I’m stumped. It’s elusive to me as to why this would be an issue for her, or if it even is.

It’s been a long time since I’ve had to read a woman’s words, emotions, and movements. I’m feeling inadequate, and that’s not something that I’m used to feeling. I knew Ma better than I knew myself, so I never had to solve any puzzles when it came to her. It seems like I’m going to have to learn Shayne’s little quirks and ticks so that I’m not confused when it comes to her.

“I’ve never had my own room before.” The raw sound releasing from her windpipe has me wanting to grab her up and comfort her, but we’re not at that stage in our friendship yet, so I hold myself back.

“Well, now you do,” I quip, smiling down at her. “Follow me. If there’s anything you need that you don’t see, or any changes you’d like to make, we’ll get that done for you.”

“I’m not going to change up your home, Julius. This is a temporary solution to a problem that is hopefully resolved soon.”

“Shayne, for now, act like this is your place. Whatever you need to make you feel more comfortable and welcome, do it. The room I’m giving you, nobody uses it. It’s been a while since it’s been updated. You actually would be doing me a favor. One day, my family will be able to come out of hiding and I’d like to have a room ready for them when that time comes.”

“A favor, hmm?” she protest, not believing me. That’s understandable considering this house was updated before Ma passed away.

However, all she did was slap some paint on the walls and freshen things up a bit. The furniture is the original ones my parents outfitted the house with. Ma was never comfortable getting rid of what she called “family history.” That was a load of crock if you were to ask me. What I always felt is that this house never felt like home to her, and she hoped we’d get to go back and live in the same town as our children and the DreamCatchers did.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t enough time for me to figure out how to make that happen for her. One more thing I’ve always felt guilty about.

It was a one-way six-hour plane trip if there were layovers, which let’s face it, when you fly, even if it’s within the same state, there usually is. And if we traveled by car, it’s a sixteen-hour drive to get from our place to theirs. It was always brutal on her having that much distance between us and them, but we

managed. Especially seeing as we didn't have to fly commercial.

"Honestly, it would. I don't want to think about what Charlee would do if I were to set her free. There'd probably be band posters hung on the walls, or she'd paint everything in shades of black."

"Can black be considered a color?" she jokes.

"To my daughter, it is," I claim.

"I don't see her hanging up posters on the walls, either, Julius," she deadpans. "Maybe some motorcycle motif, and art, and probably some black wrought iron furniture. Okay, maybe you're right. Let me look and see if anything comes to mind. But I'm warning you, I'm not an interior decorator, nor have I ever outfitted a room before. I won't be comfortable making big changes unless they're run by you first."

"Deal," I tell her, holding out my hand to cement the trade she just made with me.

"I guess we're in business then, partner," she counters, reaching out her slim fingers and cupping my hand with her palm.

The lithe shake has electricity zapping through me. My dick stirs behind my slacks, tightening them around my pelvic area. It's time for me to make my excuses and escape before she notices what her touch did to me.

"I have a few calls to make before I climb into bed," I lie. "Your room is the one directly across from mine. If you need me, just knock." I point to the door on my left before directing her toward mine. "Make yourself at home, Shayne. If you need anything, press the red button on your landline and my staff will take care of you."

"Okay. Thank you, Julius. For... everything."

"You're welcome, Shayne. 'Night."

"'Night, Julius."



Jacking off in the shower didn't diminish this insatiable need I have to feel Shayne's pussy wrapped around my throbbing cock. The damn thing hasn't even twitched since the night before I lost the woman I believed I'd be spending the rest of my human life with.

Previously, I had thought that my appendage was as dead, buried, and as cold as my heart has become... the only exception to that cold heartedness being if you are my family. Fuck, I'm more confused now than ever. Did it come to life because the only women I've been around are ones who are like my own kids to me? Or is it because it's her, and there's something about her that makes me wish I could travel down that road again?

But the day my wife was placed six feet under, I vowed that I'd never touch another woman again. And I haven't. I haven't even felt the need for it. That is until now. I'm a motherfucking hypocrite because I'd never allow my boys to live the life I've been living. Half of my younger and older adult years were spent loving that woman. It's hard to turn that shit off.

She's all I ever wanted.

I fought for us, for our freedom, for our right to love each other unabashedly.

How do I just say fuck it to all of that work and call it a day?

I never expected a hiccup to thwart that oath, but this slip of a woman is slithering her way in and destroying all of my stances. The urge to let all my defenses go and find out if there's something worth keeping between us rides me hard.

Fuck, my balls are aching. The only way I know how to deal with this is to numb myself with as much alcohol as I can get my hands on. Walking over to the bar in my room, I pour myself a tumbler of scotch, hoping that it does the trick.

After swallowing two glasses filled to the brim, I came to a conclusion.

It doesn't.



CHAPTER 9

SHAYNE

SPINNING AROUND, I NOTICE THAT THIS ROOM IS DECORATED IN a Renaissance motif, a monument stuck in a different time era that should've been disposed of generations ago. To me, it appears to have been outfitted to capture the same medieval look as the Capital of Gold in Vicenza, Italy.

Not even a museum would accept these antiquities. They've become brassy with age and aren't easy on the eyes. They're ostentatious and excessively flamboyant to say the least.

To be frank, it's old, and decorated with gaudy goldplate trimming. Everywhere you turn, you're hit in the face with it.

Chandeliers, mirrors, candle holders, and tapestries. There's no surface that's not gleaming from the golden glow. At least there's not a speck of dust anywhere. That's a plus.

"Yuck," I sputter. "Now I know what he was talking about. It doesn't need updating. It needs to be demolished by a wrecking crew. Bulldozers and all. I need a clean slate to work with."

Shaking my head at the amount of work I have ahead of me, I decide that's a problem to tackle another day.

Tonight, all I want to do is get a good night's sleep.

Scanning for my belongings, I notice that my bags are tucked away in the far right-hand corner, situated near a lounge chair and end table. I rush over to grab them and toss them onto the

chaise lounge. Recognizing the frayed maroon bag that carries my clothes, I unzip it and pull out my nightgown.

The material is threadbare and discolored from its many uses, but it's my favorite and is well-loved. It's a comfort item for me. Something that grounds me and makes me feel like things in my life aren't so unbalanced. It's a contrast to my surroundings, reminding me that I don't fit in here. I may come from money, but I've never had any of my own. I've never lived like this and it's... humbling.

Shaking my head at where my thoughts have traveled, I grab the smaller bags containing my hygienic essentials and bring them with me into the attached bathroom. As soon as I step foot inside, my jaw drops.

"You've got to be kidding me." I huff as I take in the way it's been furnished.

The only thing about this decor worth keeping is the giant clawfoot tub that takes up the majority of the room. Holy moly, I could fit five... or ten of me inside of that blasted thing. But no matter how monstrous the tub itself is, and no matter how much space I could make use of if I installed a new one, I've already made up my mind... it's staying. I'll work around it and update the rest of the area to where it's not so flashy.

"First to go is that wallpaper," I mumble. "That's an eyesore." The backdrop is blood red with huge, exorbitant gold flowers that are geometrical. They're all the same exact size, no dichotomy whatsoever. "Why not gold? It seems to be the theme of this entire suite." The snort that escapes me has me clapping my palm to my mouth. It's rude of me to be so judgmental, but seriously? It's a bit too much in the grand scheme of things.

Even the sink and toilet are speckled in gold. It's... nauseating.

Used to more neutral, and dull colors surrounding me that I ignored them for years, I can do the same here. Shrugging my shoulders, I pull everything from my bag and begin shelving my toiletries, lining the shower with my shampoo, conditioner,

and body soap. My moisturizer, toothpaste, and toothbrush get placed neatly along the sink. I don't have any cosmetics. They were forbidden at the abbey.

It's an offense to paint your face as far as the nuns were concerned. That belonged to the ladies of the night, meant to entice men, and lure them into committing a sin... a lustful one that's seen as one of the worst sin next to greed.

With my things unpacked, I feel more settled and less twitchy. Searching through cabinets, I locate the body towels, washrags, and hand towels. There are fancy, decorative ones already pulled and situated on top of the sink, but the thought of using them makes me edgy. Instead, I choose to use the plain, less ornamental ones.

Once my face has been washed and my teeth have been scrubbed, I turn off the light and step back into the bedroom. A shadow jumps out at me, causing me to squeal.

When the light shines on my intruder's face, I gulp. Not from fear anymore, but from intrigue. "Holy, Mother Mary, Julius. You scared the life out of me."

"I'd say I'm sorry, Shayne, but that'd be a lie, because I'm not."

He prowls toward me like a predator who's found its prey to capture and devour.

As soon as we're nose to nose, he asks, "Have you ever been kissed, Shayne? Because I really want to know what your lips taste like."

"N-no," I stutter, shuffling my feet, but my vision stays locked firmly on his face.

For an older man, he's stunningly handsome.

His white button-down shirt is undone at the top and unbuttoned midway down his stomach, and his tie is hanging loosely around his neck. It's unknotted, resting lifelessly down his sternum. His hair hangs long. I hadn't noticed before that it wasn't cut short because he had it pulled back from his face. Now that it's loose, I'm struggling with the instinct to run my fingers through it to see if it's silky like it looks, or if the

strands are coarse. He has specks of gray highlighting his age, but to me, it makes him more refined.

Irresistible.

My interest has always been drawn to more mature men, but I never allowed myself to wonder why that is.

“Would you like to? Can I kiss you, Shayne?”

My brain goes haywire, because, yes, I’d very much like for him to kiss me. But my upbringing has made me standoffish and demurer than the typical woman in this decade. I’m modest and have been told that all carnal activities are only to happen in the confines of the marital bed. Kissing leads to more lecherous actions, and I’m certain I’m not ready for that.

Would I be considered a jezebel if I gave in and allowed myself to succumb to such a sinful transgression? My teachings say yes, but my soul screams no.

For once, I want to forget about everything that’s been forbidden to me and give in to my womanly wilds.

“Yes.”

“Thank you for this gift, Shayne,” he huskily says. When his head cants to one side, mine automatically mirrors the tilt. A sly smile erupts as he leans forward. He lightly grazes my lips with his, and a flicker of electricity dances throughout my entire body from the short contact.

“More,” I whisper.

“Always,” he proclaims as he slams his mouth down onto mine. This isn’t an experiment to see if we’re compatible, or if the attraction is mutual.

It’s a claiming.

A branding.

A declaration.

If he keeps kissing me like this, he’ll own me, heart, body, and soul.

His tongue swipes my bottom lip, begging to be allowed entrance. My libido sparks like a live wire inside of me, awakening the wanton woman within that I never knew existed. He's ignited something inside of me, becoming my forbidden fruit.

My lips tingle, manifesting foreign feelings that I'm eager to explore. I open my mouth and allow him to dip his tongue inside, triggering my taboo desires. A moan reverberates from my throat, enticing him to go deeper, which he does. One of his arms wraps around my waist as the other grabs a hold of my hair in a tight grip, holding on to me like I'm his lifeline.

My arms lift of their own accord, anchoring me to him, hoping he'll keep me from sinking and drowning. Earlier, my mind hadn't wrapped around what he said in regard to tasting me, but now, I understand the meaning behind it. He's like sunshine and whiskey wrapped in one glorious package that I want to unwrap one piece at a time.

Following his lead, I let my tongue battle his. Our breathing syncs, and our air becomes one shared atom. We blend into each other, becoming one person instead of two separate entities. Julius growls into my mouth, his grasp tightening, yanking me further into him.

When our breathing becomes erratic, he pulls back. His pupils are blown, the carnal hunger he has for me seducing me into a territory I'm unfamiliar with but want to embrace.

As if he reads my mind, he simply says, "Later, siren."

"Yeah, later, Julius."

"See you tomorrow, Shayne."

"Tomorrow's good," I reply, clamping my lips when I realize how foolish I sound.

"Night, temptress."

Temptress? Me?

"Night... uh, Julius."



Sleep eludes me as I toss and turn, my legs becoming slick with passion, arousal, and wishful longing. My inexperience doesn't answer the many questions of my whys and hows.

Why do I feel this way?

If it's frowned upon, why and how does it feel right?

Are my beliefs jaded due to the severity of lectures we received?

How could something that's looked upon as a misdeed and malfeasance ignite my entire being the way it did when his lips were attached to mine?

None of it makes any sense.

Determining I'm not going to figure anything out on my own, I proceed to shut my mind off, count sheep after sheep, until, finally, my eyelids grow heavy and I give in to my droopy eyes and sudden drowsiness.



CHAPTER 10

JULIUS

WHEN I WAKE THE NEXT MORNING FROM MY BLARING ALARM, my alcohol-clouded brain recalls the stupidity of my actions last evening. How could I have been so stupid and allowed myself to give in to my wants the way I did?

She's never been kissed for fuck's sake and I took advantage of her. She's in a new environment. Her world's been flipped, and I go charging in there like a caveman and take something from her that wasn't mine to take.

"Dammit. How can she trust me if I lose her respect the same evening I asked for her reliance on a man she'd just met for the first time?" I berate myself, hating the fact that even if it was the wrong thing for me to do, I want to say fuck it and do it again, and again.

Every. Damn. Day.

I wasn't wrong last night when I called her a temptress because she's a temptation I can't seem to forget. This dying need to be her first everything is intense and overpowers my previous mantra of celibacy.

"Fuck," I throatily snarl, feeling guilty as if I've betrayed Ma in the most carnal of ways. She may have left me long ago, but I've never left her or denounced my marital vows. I said 'til death do us part, but I never expected that she'd go before I did.

My scruples of what's right and what's wrong are all over the damn place, warring with my body, at least a certain region of

it anyhow. If this emotion soaring through me was lust fueled only, I could deal with that. The fact that since hearing her voice over the broadcast transmitter all I wanted was to hold her in my arms... that's a problem.

Those thoughts loom inside of my mind, playing on repeat as I lie here in bed, moping, contemplating my chaotic life. Shit won't get done if I sit here and wallow, so I get my ass up, take care of my morning bladder, then begin my daily grooming routine.



When I hit our suite's living space, the breakfast cart has already been delivered, and the room smells like eggs, toast, bacon, fruit, and waffles. Luca and the ladies have their plates made and are sitting in front of the television, watching the morning news while eating.

The call of coffee is too much for me to resist, especially after the type of evening I had. After pouring myself a cup, and doctoring it to my liking, I sit near Shayne, breathing in her freshly showered aroma. Her dark locks hang artfully over her shoulder, still damp, dripping droplets of water over her top.

"Morning, everyone," I greet after my first sip.

Mera returns the gesture with an aloof nod of her head as she consumes her cup of java, and Luca salutes me, engrossed in whatever the newscast is showcasing.

"Morning, Julius," Shayne rasps, her cheeks a bright shade of pink.

"How did you sleep last night, temptress?" I whisper, leaning closer to her, drawn in by her purity and naïveté. Nobody's ever reacted to me so bashfully—I find myself beguiled and enchanted by her timid responses to being near me.

"Good," she squeaks, ducking her face.

Mera's shifting on the couch catches my attention. As my eyes swivel her way, she pushes the pistol gifted to her by my brother further from underneath her thigh and into plain sight, her eyes narrowing suspiciously on me. Her unspoken threat is loud and clear. Instead of being afraid as she's expecting, my lip tilts upward in an amused smirk.

Secretly, I'm actually thrilled that she's as protective of Shayne as she is. Fuck knows that's a trait I can admire in a person. It's hard to find trustworthy loyalists these days. Everyone is out for themselves and their pound of flesh. She's a good friend. I raise my eyebrow at her, showing no outward signs of fear, causing her to shift, and promptly cover it back up. Good girl.

"Mera," Shayne scolds, not missing the action. "Would you stop? Julius is no threat to me."

"Are you sure about that?" Mera counters. They begin a stare off, neither willing to look away first. I volley between the two, patiently waiting to see who will give in.

Mera rolls her eyes, and Shayne does a winning shimmy in her seat, celebrating. I get the feeling she's usually the one who yields.

"There it is," Luca states. "This is what we've been waiting for."

My head shifts in the direction of the television set. The portrait on the television displays the convent in the background as the reporter speaks into a microphone. The depiction scrolling across the bottom of the screen states that two women have disappeared without a trace from the abbey in the dead of the night. They're hypothesizing that they've been kidnapped and are considered as being endangered. In big, captioned letters on top is the word *reward*. They're expecting a ransom call to come in that'll never come from us.

"That'll have all the looney's coming out and asking for money, testifying that they've been spotted in one city or another, giving the po-po false leads to follow. They'll be scattered around the state and the ones surrounding us," I

speculate aloud. The fiasco of that offering will keep LEO off our trail.

Not that I expect them to suspect us in any capacity, but technology has improved, making things riskier than they have been in the past. As Ma used to say, “Don’t count your chickens until they’ve hatched.” That euphemism works in this case.

“It’s fixing to be chaos,” Luca predicts. His premonition about how this debacle will play out is the same as mine.

“Let the fun begin,” I announce.



“The tunnel that leads underground starts here,” I tell the girls, opening the secret hatch. You have to know where it is to find it.

The men we hired to dig the cavern went missing shortly after the job was completed.

They’re fish food.

They took their boat out on a fishing trip, heralding their new riches because we pay well. The official report that was filed states that something caught fire under the deck, and when it made contact with the gas tank, the vessel exploded.

May they rest in peace.

I’ll do whatever it takes to protect my family—no matter the costs to my bank account or my soul. I made a deal with the devil long ago, and I don’t regret it for a moment.

As I flip on the switch plate that’s settled just inside of the trap door’s opening upward, the bulbs progressively flicker on one at a time. They brighten the path before us in a row from start to end, light flooding the expansive pathway, and replacing the eerie darkness.

“You go first, Mera,” Shayne pesters, jumping behind her like a shield.

“Why me?” Mera asks, her brows tense and drawn downward.

“Everyone knows that you stand behind the blonde, not in front of her,” Shayne responds.

“For someone who’s never watched horror movies, I’m surprised you know that fact,” Luca teases, his facial features alight with mirth.

“The girls who go home on the weekends have more freedom than we do. I’ve overheard their conversations after coming back and talking about them. I listen and pay attention, especially when it comes to anything pertaining to my future safety,” Shayne responds.

“And what about my safety?” Mera probes.

“Out of the two of us, you have a fighting chance, I don’t,” Shayne counters. “Plus, you have the gun.”

“Because you refused yours,” Mera reminds her.

“That’s because I’m uncoordinated and would shoot my eye out, or yours,” Shayne cheekily responds. The banter between these two is entertaining.

“Yeah, I’m rather fond of my baby blues.” Mera bats her lashes, enjoying her moment of attention. These ladies are soaking it up like a sponge.

“Nothing and nobody will get to you ladies here,” I promise them. “These tunnels are tightly monitored on both sides.”

“I dare anyone to try,” Luca snips, anger coursing through him from the bogus danger.

I’m not the only one who takes the security of our family seriously. He is the comedian out of the two of us, but he’s as deadly as a rattlesnake’s bite when faced with a threat to his homestead and the people inside of it. He’s venomous, bloodthirsty, and his strike is deadly.

“Come on, ladies. I’ll lead. Hope you put on your walking shoes,” Luca jokes.

“What?” Shayne asks, looking down at her flats. “Nobody told us that.”

“He’s teasing you,” I tell her as we begin our trek. “We have a ride down.”

“You have an elevator down here?” Mera questions.

“No. We have mining carts that are on a track,” I answer. “It’s only a couple of blocks walk. We’ll be there in no time.”

“You have a mine cart inside of a tunnel. That’s not ominous or anything.” Shayne cackles, sounding like she’s near breaking.

“That’s the strangest thing you’ve heard, Shayne?” Mera stops, turning to face her friend. “Out of everything, that’s what has you nearing hysterics?”

“It’s creepy, Mera,” Shayne hisses.

“It’s not the most frightening thing they’ve said though, Shaynie. They’re going to war with your family, and this is what spooks you?”

“Um, yeah?” Shayne’s voice is full of confusion and censoring. “Dark tunnels, mine carts, secret underground lairs, it’s... fantastical, Mera, and not the kind that gives me the warm fuzzies.”

“It’s a better option than fleeing on your own with no safety net,” I point out. “It may be fantastical as you claim, but that’s what we counted on when we had it built. Nobody with a lick of sense would suspect this.”

“That lack of sense comment is what has me bewildered. How did you come up with the concept, Julius?” Shayne’s right to question us because it isn’t the norm.

But that doesn’t stop the spiteful words from slipping free. I’m angered by her fear and distrust. I don’t give a rat’s ass that we just met. We’ve put ourselves on the line for them. We may reap the benefits from them being here with us, but in the end, so does she.

Her suspicion and hostility toward us is uncalled for. We’ve bent over backward for them. My brother is all but Mera’s hostage. We supplied her friend with a weapon, giving them liberties other families wouldn’t, yet she’s pessimistic, and

suspects us of being diabolical without a foundation for that belief.

Uncalled. For.

“This thought started by my father and his men. It’s saved my son, daughter, children, their spouses, and our club. So yes, it may be surreal, but it’s saved our family’s bacon, and for that, I’ll never apologize to you, or anyone. Your brothers started this vendetta, but I intend to end it and keep my family alive while doing so. It may scare you, but in the end, it’ll save you. So stop with the judgment and enjoy your freedom. We’re putting ourselves on the line, and you’ll reap the rewards.”

What started off as a good morning has gone downhill quickly. I’m ready to get her to the girls and be able to take a step away to cool off. My steps accelerate as I walk around the three and head toward the stockroom that holds the trolleys. Luca can steer the women down. I need to be alone with my thoughts so that I don’t say anything I’ll regret.



CHAPTER 11

SHAYNE

JULIUS'S LEGS EAT UP THE SPACE IN FRONT OF US, AND MY shorter limbs have a hard time keeping up. His words were harsh but needed. I was wrong and have no room to be unkind. He's been nothing but compassionate and giving, and Mera and I have happily taken.

What's wrong with me?

Why am I acting this way?

This isn't me.

In his haste to get away from me, I don't get the chance to admit how wrong I was before he's sat himself inside of a cart and is off without another word.

"So, yeah. He's a little sensitive at times," Luca rambles. "Give him a little while and he'll be over it. We have a two and a three-seater, seeing as it has to be steered and navigated by a hand wheel. Since you ladies don't know the train rails, we'll take the one big enough for all three of us.

"I didn't mean for it to come across like it did," I whisper. "I've never been good with my words and communication," I divulge.

"She's not lying," Mera tells him. "I'm usually her spokesperson. She doesn't have a mean bone in her body like I do. I don't shy away from confrontation like she does."

"I can see that. Like I said, give him some time and he'll come around. Your doubts and animosity have him conflicted," Luca

confides.

“How so?” I ask.

Luca clears his throat, then answers, “You’ve sparked something inside of him that we thought died when his wife did. He’s not sure how to feel about it nor how to respond. Give him a chance to weed things out, and when he’s ready, he’ll talk to you about it.”

“Just be patient. He’s a man who doesn’t know how to express himself without doing so in an uproar,” Mera surmises, patting my hand in sympathy. “These two are more beast than man.”

“True facts,” Luca agrees, nodding his head, not looking shameful or slighted. “After you.” It’s only then I snap out of it and that I notice he’s dragged the three-seater cart out from storage. Luca lifts his hand to keep us from losing our balance. “Your chariot awaits.”

I’m both terrified and giddy to get inside and see what awaits us as we travel. This is the most exciting thing I’ve ever done. It’s as close to a roller coaster as I’ve ever gotten. The thrill of the unknown should terrify me, yet it doesn’t. If anything, the daredevil within wakes up, pushing me to climb inside and be adventurous.

We start off slowly, our speed slightly picking up, but it’s nothing that gets my adrenaline pumping, and it’s not the thrill I was looking for. Seems my initial excitement was for nothing—the ride is more of us coasting down the rails, nearly boring. Instead of being disappointed, I sit back and let myself unwind. I contemplate the different ways to apologize to Julius for acting so paranoid and downright rude. Sometimes my mouth gets away from me, but never to the extent that it did earlier.

I’m not sure what happened or why I felt comfortable enough to lash out with the attitude I did. He, Luca, and the girls have been nothing but kind and welcoming. But this world they live in, it’s one I’ve desperately tried to escape—futilely wanted to put in the back of my mind and pretend wasn’t my birthright.

I don't want to be hardened by life. I don't want frown lines to mar my face. I want laugh lines... marks of a happy life.

Some people enjoy the power and fear they inflict on others, but not me. I'd love to live a life of peace and solitude instead of one where I'm in the limelight, ducking behind cars, while there's a shootout surrounding me and placing me in danger. Nor do I want to be stuck in the middle of men's power plays. I want to be an average, everyday woman. I don't like being the center of attention, never have. I don't want to be a pretty trinket someone can dangle on their arm. I want the white picket fence, go to my nine-to-five job, come home, and cook dinner for my husband and children.

Selfish much, Shayne, I internally chide myself. Those were a lot of I's happening in that innate commentary.

"Here we are," Luca says, breaking me out of my inner scolding.

"That was quick," I comment as he stands and steps out.

"It's a good thing we didn't have to walk that far," Mera states, snickering. "My blisters would have blisters. We never had the chance to exercise much outside of strolls through the garden. Shaynie and I would've needed to stop for breaks."

"Y'all didn't have PE?" Luca inquires.

"Not in the traditional sense," I remark. "We did calisthenics once a week, but that was the extent of our physical exertion."

"That sucks." Luca whistles. "In school, we had an hour a day. It's how we learned to play sports, had drills, did a shit load of running, played dodgeball. The workouts were tiring as hell, but it's damn good for the body."

"Some of the girls did Jazzercise on the weekends. I was always envious. But dancing, in any form, was forbidden."

"Seems as if a lot was forbidden from you ladies," Luca complains. "There's a difference between a sheltered life and an isolated one. If there's anything you'd like to try, let us know. We'll do whatever we can to make sure you get a chance to explore it."

“Thank you, Luca.”

“You’re welcome, Shayne.”

We walk a couple of minutes before hitting a dead end. Before I get the opportunity to quiz him about it, he leans down, pulls a lever, and the wall shifts sideways.

“Mother, Mary, and Joseph,” Mera gasps. “It’s a whole new world down here.”

“Welcome to the Alvarez sanctuary for wayward souls needing a place to hide,” a man’s gruff, gravelly voice announces.

Looking to the side, we see a mouthwatering man leaned against the side of the wall, smoking a cigarette, wearing a blinding white smile on his face.

“Shamus!” Luca greets. “How’s it hanging?”

“A little to the left.” Another man chuckles. “How are you this fine day, Luca? Is the sun shining on the other side?”

“Texas, you may wanna see a doctor about that sideways problem you have. It could be a sign that your dick’s rotting,” Luca harasses him.

“Nah, it’s just well-used,” Texas volleys.

My body heats, my embarrassment coating my skin, burning me from the inside out.

“What are you, Hugh Hefner or something? Bringing two centerfold beauties down to visit us so we feel like royalty or some shit,” another man asks, smirking.

“Nah, Kruger. I left my robe and cigar home today,” Luca banter.

Leaning into Mera, I quiz her for information that has me confused and feeling like an outsider. “Who’s Hugh Hefner, and what’s a centerfold? And why would it be hanging to the left? Do you think he needs medical intervention?”

“I’m not sure,” she hums before pointing to her midsection.

“But my question is, can... you know, it rot?”

“I don’t know. The nuns never covered that in health class,” I respond. The men must’ve been listening to our private conversation because raucous laughter echoes around us.

“Oh, they are a treat, aren’t they?” the one named Texas asks. “The boys are going to have fun with this.”

“Be nice,” Luca scolds the lot of them. “This is all new to them. Treat them with respect. They don’t understand mongrel speech.”

“What’s mongrel? We know a few different linguistics, but that’s one language we never learned about,” I state, mentally going back through language classes.

“It’s mutt talk, darlin’. It means you don’t speak dog like us strays,” Kruger tells us with a glint of bemusement dancing behind his irises.

“I’m getting a headache,” Mera announces, rubbing circles around her temples.

“Bullet, you motherfucker!” Texas bellows.

My eyes widen in shock as a dog shuffles his feet next to Texas, kicking grass onto his shins. Did that really happen? Did that dog pee on him?

“What’d I say about marking me, you shithead?” I swear the dog, Bullet, has a smile across his muzzle as he happily saunters away instead of scampering like I’d do if he’d used that tone on me.

This must be a common act for poor Bullet. I’m not sure how much longer he’ll survive if he keeps accosting Texas that way. The man looks fit to be tied, and it’s like he’s ready to filet him of his pelt.

Wheezing beside me has me shifting my attention to Mera. She’s clutching her stomach, laughing to the extent that tears are descending both cheeks. “Breathe, Mera,” I command because she’s turning blue. “Don’t make me perform CPR on you.”

My threat has the opposite effect than what I was anticipating. Instead of the men rushing over to help me, Texas rubs his

hands together before saying, “Girl-on-girl action, now, that’s something I can get behind. Someone go grab a tub of popcorn.”

“Get it yourself. I’ll just plop myself on this patch of grass.” Kruger cackles.

“It’s been a hot minute since I’ve seen a live show,” Shamus gleefully says. “Whoever’s going for popcorn, grab the lube.”

The men must not have seen the group of women coming up behind them, because the next thing I know, this little bit of a thing blurs past Kruger and tackles Texas to the ground with an “oof” coming out of the burly man. Another woman comes up behind Shamus and starts slapping the back of his head, claiming she needs to “knock the sense back into him.” And poor Kruger, he’s being chased in circles by a mini tornado who is intent on causing bodily harm.

“Welcome to the family, Shayne,” Charlee says from beside me, her voice full of giggles.

“What an introduction this is,” Hemmi snickers. “Welcome to the carnival that is my life. Once you’ve bought your ticket to enter the funhouse, there’s no escaping.”

“Is she alright?” Charlee asks, pointing at Mera. “She’s changing colors. Is that normal?”

“I’m not sure,” I confess. “I’ve never seen her react like this.” I’m getting more concerned the longer this charade continues. She may stop breathing altogether if they don’t give her the chance to stop panting.

It’s like one big comedy skit that I’ve heard the girls whispering about in the hallways. Their entertaining show never slows, and she’s not given a chance to recover before something else laughable happens.

I have so many questions about things I’ve seen since stepping down here.

One... how do they grow grass down here without sunlight?

Two... why does Bullet think Texas is a fire hydrant?

Three... what did Texas mean by a live show?

Four... are all of them crazy? Do they need psychiatric help?

The list is ever-growing and I don't have a pad of paper nor a pen to write them all down so I can ask later.



CHAPTER 12

JULIUS

STANDING IN THE BACKGROUND, MY VISION STAYS SOLELY focused on Shayne. Her emotions are all over the map. She goes from concerned to curious to amused, and back to concerned. The frown between her brows makes me want to walk over to her and run the tip of my finger down it to soothe her worries away.

It didn't take me long to figure out that I wasn't pissed. I was more embarrassed and disappointed that she'd think so little of me and my family. Why I have the innate need to impress her is beyond my comprehension. I've never given a single goddamn before about how others perceive me... us.

Usually, I'm of the mindset that they can like me, or they can fuck right the hell off. No one gets away with putting my boys and girls down without a fist being fed down their throats. But the thought of laying a finger on her makes me violently ill.

In my world, a woman is just as capable as a man. I don't see gender when I'm doling out punishment. Any threat is a threat regardless of their station or designation.

Leo and Marco are my head enforcers. They more often than not are the ones with blood under their fingernails, but there are times I become bloodthirsty and need to enact my own brand of revenge.

"Y'all are a bunch of jackasses. Enough is enough!" I holler, letting my temper fly.

This is not the first impression I wanted these ladies to have of us. They need to see us as their protectors—the men who are going to bring Shayne’s brothers to their knees and end the imminent danger they pose to my family.

“Ah, Pops, we were just having some fun and letting off a little steam,” Kruger defends.

“We didn’t mean nothing by it,” Texas excuses.

“They’re boys living inside of men’s bodies. Don’t pay any attention to them,” Star states, walking up to Shayne and Mera, presenting herself to them.

The women stop mutilating their men and converge on them, carting them away so I can deal with these overgrown Neanderthals.

“Seriously, guys. They’ve been raised in a convent and this is how you want to conduct yourselves?” I say, scolding them. “How are they ever going to learn to trust us if you imbeciles represent yourselves as overgrown apes?”

“I don’t have enough body hair to be seen as an ape, Pop,” Texas alleges, being a smartass as per his usual response when he’s done something that irritates his brothers or me. “Don’t be upset. I promise they’ll love us. Everyone does.”

“Not everyone,” I murmur.

“Okay, then they’ll grow to love us,” Texas counters.

“You’re a fungus, Texas,” Luca chides, shaking his head but clearly amused by the man. Luca finds him charming. I find him infuriating. If I had to spend longer than a day with him, I’d throttle him and that’d upset Jessa and Malice, and those two I adore. I’d never do anything to hurt either one of them, so I bite my tongue and look the other way as much as I possibly can. But there are times that he needs a reminder of how he should be acting, and today is one of those times.

“Keeps growing but never goes away without antibiotics,” Malice states, standing in the background shaking his head.

“Pops,” Gunner calls out my name, rushing over to our group.

“What’s up, son?” I ask, swiveling around on my feet to face him.

“We’ve got an issue,” Gunner says, looking panicked and a little pale. Cameron’s hand is gripped in his, and my granddaughter, Mane, is straddled on his opposite hip, eating an obliterated banana that’s all smooshy. She’s rubbing the soggy fruit on his shirt as she pats his chest, trying to calm her daddy’s distress. The fact that he doesn’t even notice is worrisome and has my spine stiffening.

“Chill, Gunner,” Cam ridicules him. “It’s not the end of the world.”

Gunner’s eyes widen at her declaration, his face tightening. “Not the end of the world? Cameron, you’re pregnant and we don’t have a doctor down here. You haven’t stopped puking in days. You have a hard time crawling out of bed, and wiping Mane’s ass makes you gag. I’d say that’s pretty damn close to the world ending, wouldn’t you?”

“Stop being such a girl, Gunner.” Kruger snorts. “Get your shit together and stop squealing like a bitch in heat.”

“We lost babies not too long ago, remember? How could I not stress about this?” Gunner counters, his tone full of remorse and anxiety. “I can’t watch another one of our women mourn and cry like that. Not again.”

“That wasn’t y’all’s doing, though, son. *You* did nothing wrong. Why would you suspect that the water source and shipped supplies were poisoned? Nobody knew that someone would be so damn malicious to put toxins in your shit that’d force miscarriages. I’ll work on getting you a doctor to see to Cam’s needs,” I promise.

“Good, because I’m not the only one in need of obstetric services,” Cam states, licking her lips, stunning us all utterly speechless.

“Who?” Shamus asks, stepping forward. “Who else?”

“I can’t say who. It’s not my place. When they’re ready, they’ll tell you themselves,” Cam whispers.

“Getting the Crumley brothers’ issue wrapped up is more pertinent now than it ever was before,” I announce. “We have babies to welcome, and a life to rebuild.”

“A-motherfucking-men to that, Pops!” Texas shouts.

“Damn, brother. We need a remote to control your volume,” Kruger comments, a sour look on his face. “That shit hurt my eardrums.”

“That’s because you’re a pussy,” Texas parries. “Or old. Both work in your case.”

“Take that shit back, you punk ass bitch,” Kruger snarls.

“Truth hurt, brother?” Texas taunts, never knowing when enough is enough.

“I’ve got some truths for you, shithead.” Without any warning, Kruger strikes. He charges Texas and the two tumble to the ground and begin wrestling. Punches are thrown, but neither of them grunt, both lost in the fight for dominance.

“I wish they’d just pull out a ruler and measure their dicks already. This shit is getting old,” Cam complains, rolling her eyes. “Come on, Pops. Let’s go get you a drink while us ladies get to know our new friends.”

“Perfect. I could use a whiskey on the rocks,” I state, following the two to the community center where the bar is set up.



Hours later, I’m nice and buzzed, watching the women float around the room, full of laughter. Mera and Shayne seem to be fitting in with the men’s old ladies. I’m hoping they’ll be the key to helping the girls find their place and answer any questions they may have about life in general as well as other things that weren’t taught to them at the abbey.

“We saw the local news report about the girls missing from the convent,” Gunner says, lounging back in his chair. “Any word

on the streets about how her brothers are handling her disappearance?”

“Nothing as of this morning, but we left shortly after breakfast. There wasn’t much time to check in with our contacts. I’ll check in with them when I get upside,” I tell him. “I want to see how the cards play out before we make our move. Plus, we have some things to sort out before we’re ready for war.”

“They’ve gone lax with y’all’s untimely death. They’re still trying to scope out who was responsible for the clubhouse’s bombing. They’re busy trying to find out if they have another enemy they didn’t consider on the horizon that they need to be watching out for,” Luca says, giving them the lowdown.

“We believe that’s the reason they’re trying to get this union between them and the Ruiz family sorted.” I inform them of my assumption. “Their eldest son, Paulo, is who they’ve made the marriage contract with, in regard to Shayne. They’re an up-and-coming organization. They’ve started making a name for themselves in the organization.”

“They trade in skin,” Luca briefs them. “They’re climbing the ranks, taking out those above them, and taking their stock.”

“For fuck’s sake, Luca. They’re people, not cattle to be branded. That shit’s fucking sick,” Gunner admonishes his uncle. “What the hell is wrong with these people?”

“They were weaned from the tit too early,” Kruger says, putting his two cents in.

“The Fitzgerald’s reached out to us not long ago, looking for an ally.” I sigh. “I couldn’t give them an immediate response, knowing that we were fixing to infiltrate the convent and kidnap their granddaughter.”

“Can’t have them in your house with their deceased granddaughter. That could cause a problem. You can’t leave and go to them, not without having preparations in place,” Master adds, rubbing his chin.

“How’s their relationship with their grandsons?” Tyson asks. “If it’s not good, we could use the fact that they hid the fact

that she's alive against them and gain their trust."

"If we let them know that she's alive now, they could demand to have her and take her home. Then we wouldn't have any leverage," I state, telling them the issue that's been plaguing me. There's no true way to get around this. They can't know she's alive—not yet anyway.

"If they gain custody of her, we'd lose our upper hand," Gunner surmises.

"Exactly," I agree with him. "But if we don't, and we end up joining them in their battle against the Ruizs, and they find out down the line that we kept this from them, then they would come at us which puts us in the same situation we are in now with their grandsons."

"So to recap. The Ruizs have brought their operations to the Fitzgerald's territory. They want us to help assist but could become an enemy if we keep the secret that Shayne's alive. This is a conundrum." Master sighs.

"What if you tell them and I refuse to go home with them?" Shayne asks, her voice timid as she comes up and sits in the empty chair beside me.

"Why would you do that? They're your family," Shamus questions.

"I may have the same blood as they do, but they're not my family. I don't know them. What I do know for a fact is that they forced my mother to marry a monster and didn't step in while she was being abused by his hands. I have no respect for people like that," she confesses. "I've managed to escape one betrothment orchestrated by my siblings with your help. Who's to say I'd be lucky enough to evade that scheme twice?"

"She has a point. But what if they refuse to leave without you?" Gunner urges her.

"I'll be as honest with them as I can. I'll tell them that I'll go with them eventually, once the threat of my brothers is taken care of. But I'll also stress that I refuse to go anywhere with them unless I have their word, in writing, stating that they

won't force a marriage on me, and that I'm free to leave at any time. From what I've heard about them, they believe in upholding their agreements to the letter."

"How have you heard anything about them? You've been kept from them since you were a toddler, right?"

"Pretty much. But my brothers talk, and I may have done some research on them myself," she admits.

"Again, how?" I push for an answer that makes sense to me.

"The library," she answers with an impish and wicked smile. "Mera and I earned a day pass. We went through their newsreels and checked out all the published issues where their names were mentioned. We went under the guise of researching information for a paper that was due in cultural religions."

"That was smart of you. You're correct. They are a family who binds themselves to their verbal and written promises. However, that doesn't mean they'll agree to anything. They're also known for their hardheadedness and spontaneity. When they urgently want something, they go after it, no matter what the consequences might be. I have no doubt that *you* are something they'd fight tooth and nail for, Shayne."

"I get that, Julius. I really do. I know that there's no guarantee that my plan will work. But if my brothers are what's standing in their way, they'll be more willing to comply. They owe me that at the very least." She huffs.

I can see the rage burning behind her eyes. She has some difficulties and conflict with her family—on both sides of the spectrum. Not that I can blame her, but I'm wondering if she's acting with her heartfelt emotions instead of with her brain.

"We're not in a rush at this point. Let's talk it over and watch them. I'll start bargaining with them and see where they stand," I compromise.

"Yeah. Let's do that," she says, nodding her head, consenting to my plan of action. "I just want to help however I can."

"And you will, Shayne. As soon as we figure out how that is," I swear.

“Thank you, Julius. I feel like I’m saying that a lot to you, but I’d be married to a man in a few months’ time that would most likely treat me like the dirt on the bottom of his shoe. I refuse to be wiped away from anyone’s soles like dust on a mat.”

“That won’t happen, Shayne. I won’t let it.” That’s something I won’t ever let become of her life, even if I have to give my own to prevent it from happening. She deserves better, and I’ll make sure she gets it.



CHAPTER 13

SHAYNE

I WANT TO GIVE THE FITZGERALDS THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT, but Julius brought up some good and valid points during his argument toward my plans. He's correct. We need to be better prepared. A simple demand of their assistance in our plight is ludicrous.

Just when I thought I had a handle on how to deal with this, it blew up in my face.

The rest of the day passes by with a haze of endless activity. My mind continuously shuffles through different scenarios, and how we can best deal with our issue with the least deadly outcome.

Even though it's been less than twenty-four hours, these men and women have become important to me. I'd sacrifice myself before letting them lose another thing.

They've lost their homes, loved ones, and businesses—all thanks to Garrick, Gideon, Graham, and Gavriel. These four are my monsters to deal with. I just wish I were strong enough to do it on my own.

"Let's head back. It's been a long day and I have some calls to make," Julius whispers in my ear.

"Sounds good. I'm tired," I disclose around a yawn. "I like your family, Julius."

"They like you too, Shayne. Come on, up with you." He laughs, holding his hand out for me. Yesterday, I was timid to

accept his offer. Today, I'm thrilled to feel his hand in mine. With no hesitation, I reach out and allow him to lift me from my seat. "We'll come back soon."

"Looking forward to it," I concede. And I really am. I've never known anyone like them. They're interesting, genuine, and honest. Qualities I admire in others. "I'm sorry about earlier, Julius. I let my fears overrun my mouth. I think you're all amazing people and I'm looking forward to getting to know you all better."

"Thank you, Shayne. I'm sorry that I overreacted. You have a right to ask anything you'd like. I should've answered and calmly relayed my insecurities about your feelings in an adult manner. I'll do better in the future."

"We both will," I say around a smile, letting him know that I'm good with where we stand. "This is all new for me, but I promise to be more open-minded."

"Same, temptress." A shiver races up and down my spine with the way his voice turns robust. My body's reaction to him should be troubling, but the more I watched him with the kids and the others, all of my reservations have been put at ease when it comes to him. I'm ready to put my complete trust in him.

Is it too soon for that? Maybe. But my impulses scream that this is the right thing to do. I'm going to go with my gut and alleviate my day-to-day hesitations by laying them to rest and living in the moment.



Last night, I was so tired that I don't remember crawling into my bed and falling asleep. But it was a good day, and I'm hoping that it's an omen to how this day's going to go.

I quickly shower, and dress—excited to join the others for breakfast and see what Mera and I can explore and discover. Everything is new and fascinating. Mera wants to find books

to read, and I want to study some interior decorating magazines. Hopefully, Julius and Luca have access to those items so we can both get started.

“Morning,” I greet, entering the room.

In return, I get a round of, “Mornings.”

“What’s everyone doing today?” I ask, going over to the breakfast bar and making myself a plate of fruit, eggs, and bacon. I fill a glass with orange juice and head over to the dining room table and begin eating while waiting for answers.

“I need to connect with a few associates,” Julius says.

“I was going to take Mera to the gun range for some target practice,” Luca states. “Is there something else we need to do instead?”

“No,” I comment. “I was hoping you had a library here on the premises or had someone who could go out and get me a few magazines.”

“We have a library,” Julius informs me. “But I’m not sure what type of magazines we have stocked. What were you looking for?”

“Some home decor ones,” I answer. “Wanted to get started on the project you asked me to do. Is it too soon?”

“Absolutely not. I’ll have Marco run out and grab what he can find. I’ll also have him set you up with an account at a few retail places so you can call in some orders and establish the delivery times.”

“Are there certain dates and times that work best?” I question, not wanting to be a burden, seeing as they already have so much on their shoulders.

“Not necessarily. I’ll also have him grab you a calendar so you can mark them down and give me the schedule,” Julius replies.

“What are you decorating, Shaynie?” Mera asks, her attention turned to me.

“The room I’m staying in needs updating,” I tell her. “Julius asked me to take care of it for him.”

“I’d like for the house to have some personal touches. A decorator would argue with me on things and placements. I trust Shayne to compromise and not overdo things,” Julius states, causing me to preen at his unyielding faith in me. “That was a guest room that was a mix of my mother’s and wife’s touch. They clash and it’s an eyesore.”

“It really is. Remind me to take you in there before I get started. I’ve never seen anything like it, Mera.”

“I thought mine was bad. I have seashell wallpaper in my bathroom, and huge daisies painted along the upper trimming. It doesn’t mesh... at all, and makes me a little dizzy,” she complains.

“Mine’s like walking into the city of gold.” I snort. “It’s almost blinding.”

“Hey now, don’t bash the decor, ladies. My mama did that,” Luca says, clutching his chest as if he’s in pain. He accompanies that action with wide, dramatic eyes.

“Yeah. Don’t break the mama boy’s heart.” Julius cackles.

“You’re just jealous because I was her favorite,” Luca rebuts.

“In your wet dreams, Luca. I’m the first born, which means I’m the favorite.”

A smile broaches my face as I watch the two verbally spar. They’re trying to get a rise out of the other one, and for the most part, it’s working. I sit back and enjoy the moment as the two go head-to-head and Mera conspicuously talks to me, begging me to help her secretly redecorate her room behind Luca’s back.

This moment feels good.

It feels like family.

Like *home*.

That may be an issue considering this is a pit stop—a temporary one.



When Mera went to her room to change, Luca came up to me and asked me to redo the room she's staying in. He wants it to be a surprise, so he doesn't want me to tell her he's put me in charge of fixing it up to her liking. As an excuse, he said we could be here for a long time, and he wanted her to be comfortable in her surroundings.

It's hogwash and the biggest line of boloney I've ever heard. I'm not dumb. I know what's running through his mind, even if he doesn't want anyone else to know what he's plotting. That man wants to keep my friend here forever, and he's willing to do whatever it takes to woo her into staying.

The two of them clash, but I think they'd be good for each other, together. They're both strong willed and mouthy, but I think they'd keep each other in line. If I'm being honest with myself, they're both lonely and need someone good to share their lives with.

I'm a fan of the two of them together—I would love to somehow tug on their heartstrings and get them both to open their eyes and admit their feelings to the other. The only issue is, Mera is loyal to me, and she'll want to be wherever I am. If I end up going to Italy with the Fitzgerald side of my family, she'll tag along and won't buy any excuses I give to make her stay.

“That's a problem for another day.” I seem to be saying this a lot to myself lately. At least no one's around to witness by blubbering. But that seems to be the ongoing motto of my life.

Currently, I'm sitting in the library, going through an abundance of interior decoration magazines. When Julius said he'd have Marco grab me a few, I was expecting around ten copies, but no, he brought me over fifty. I have them broken down into three separate stacks. Then I have a fourth one consisting of supplier catalogs with item numbers that correlate with the magazines so I can align the items that I like

with codes and place an order with the vendor to schedule deliveries. It's a bigger task than I thought it would be, but I'm having fun with it.

Pushing up the sleeves of my top, I grab my highlighter, sticky notes, and start marking paint colors, bedding, and furniture that I believe will complement both rooms. Hopefully, Julius will help me keep this from both Luca and Mera. Even though they've both pleaded with me to do this, neither wants the other to know. This means, I'll be having two confidential meetings with them where they'll assume the other doesn't know that I'm doing this.

The things you do for your friends! I pray that they both agree to what I find, and I don't have to talk the other into something the other one likes.

Just thinking about it is giving me a headache.



CHAPTER 14

JULIUS

SIX WEEKS LATER

FOR WEEKS, MY MEN HAVE BEEN POUNDING THE STREETS, looking for intel on both the Crumley brothers' whereabouts and the Fitzgerald's stand on what their grandsons are getting up to—business-wise.

Shayne's mother's side of the family still isn't aware about the supposed "upcoming wedding", or who it's to. This makes me wonder if Shayne's suggestion may be the way we should go.

Looks like the two factions may be butting heads, which makes things strenuous for their communal allies. Personally, I find this shit funny as hell. I may not have to lift a hand to help put the two at odds. It seems as if that's happening without me needing to lift a single finger—my digits are safe from cramping. And since the brothers are doing all the mundane and hard work for me, I can sit back in my easy chair and enjoy the show.

For now, I'll keep my ace in the hole, my temptress in my pocket. I won't show my card until it becomes a necessity. In the meantime, I'll help keep Shayne's mind busy with her project, and give her more once she finishes on the two rooms taking up all of her available time. She hasn't brought her idea up to me again, which means we haven't butted heads. That's fine with me.

Luca and Mera still go at it, but their attraction is growing by the day.

Shayne makes my dick ache and stiffen. It takes all the will power within me to hold myself back and not ravish her on the spot. I've visited Ma's gravesite more these past few weeks than I have been.

I've pleaded for her forgiveness when it comes to my carnal thoughts toward another woman, and then asked for guidance on how to handle them the right way.

Every time I turn a corner, I run into Shayne. I'm not sure if this is a sign or not of my love, or if it's all coincidental.

"You're going to need to give me something more, woman, if you want me to act on these feelings." I sigh, speaking to the heavens where I'm sure my wife is. "It's going to have to be something big and substantial if you want me to give in and act on this."

The very second I proclaim this, Shayne's bedroom door cracks open on its own, and the woman herself is standing there, as naked as the day she was born. She has her right leg propped up on the bed, as she puts lotion on it. Her pussy is bared wide open to me, in my direct line of sight, and what a delicious view it is.

"I'd say that's pretty substantial," I moan, nodding my head. "Touché, *mi amore*. Touché. I read you loud and clear, Ma."

Not allowing myself to wallow, my hand pushes the door the rest of the way open, and I saunter into the room unabashedly, shutting the door closed with the back of my heel.

"Shayne," I gurgle out her name. "You are so very beautiful, my temptress."

"Julius! What are you doing? I'm naked!" she exclaims, ripping the duvet off her bed and wrapping it around herself. "W-why are you looking at me that way?"

"How am I looking at you, temptress?"

"Like I'm your last meal," she squeals. I see the way her eyes are hooded and the way her pulse is beating.

Prowling to her, I skim my finger over the swell of her breasts. Her breathing becomes deeper and more erratic with every

inch of her flesh I touch.

“Julius. What’s happening here?”

“The beginning,” I huskily answer.

“The beginning of what?” she whispers.

“Us, Shayne. This is the start of us.”

“Oh,” she gasps as I rip the sheet from her hands and toss it to the floor. As soon as the material brushes the floor, her arms lift to cover up her delicious breasts, and she crosses her legs in an attempt to hide her luscious pink lips from me.

That.

Just.

Won’t.

Do.

“Do you want me, Shayne?”

“W-want you?” She stumbles over her question, then sucks on her delectable bottom lip. Jealousy streaks through me, wanting to be the one who drags it into my mouth as I pummel her mouth—sucking on that sweet treat.

“Yeah, Shayne. Do. You. Want. Me?” I ask, spreading out each individual syllable to accentuate the seriousness of my question.

“Want you how, Julius?”

“As yours, Shayne. Because I gotta tell you, I want you... desperately. I want to worship your body with my hands, tongue, and dick. I want to explore every damn inch of your body. I want you writhing underneath me in pleasure. But most of all, I want you to be mine.”

“Yours?” she gulps. “For now?”

“No, temptress. Not for now... for always.”

“Always?” she squeaks.

“Yeah. But do you?”

“Do I what?” she breathlessly asks, her eyes trailing my mouth.

“Want to be mine in return? But be careful how you answer, Shayne. Because once I take you... once I’ve had my hands on you, felt you sheath my dick, there’s no escape for you. You’ll be mine. Forever.”

“Forever sounds good,” she purrs.

“Is that a yes, temptress?”

“Yes,” she answers, clearing her throat. “That’s a yes, Julius.”

“Good girl,” I growl, leaning down and nuzzling her neck. I don’t know what this masculine need to scent her and mark her is, but it’s primal. I’m not going to take the time to analyze why this is, considering I have her willing to let me devour her.

“Oh. Oh, my,” she whispers, wilting in my arms, giving me her body weight.

I lift her in my arms, and she gasps from the sudden and unexpected movement. Her legs dangle over one of my forearms, and the other forearm is clutching her back, keeping her securely nestled into my chest as I maneuver us over the mattress. She’s trembling but the lust in her eyes says it’s not from fear—at least not in the traditional sense of the meaning. No, it’s from need, want, and desire.

“It’s been so hard denying the pull I have to you. You’re a magnet drawing me in and holding me captive. I wanted to do right by you. Make sure you had the chance to meet new people and find yourself an honorable and good man. But this unfaltering yearning I have for you refuses to allow that. This need isn’t going away. If anything, it’s growing stronger each and every damn day.”

“You are a good and honorable man. Maybe not to a more civilized society, but who wants that boring life?” she asks, trying to lighten the mood. “On a more serious note, Julius. Honor to me represents all factions of the definition. You’re loyal to your family, and you love them with every piece of your heart. You keep everyone you consider yours safe from

outside threats. You took a woman, no, you took two women who you didn't know and saved them from a lifetime of misery. If that isn't what a good man is, then there isn't one out there waiting for me to find him. To me, you're everything good in this world. I don't want a perfect life, Julius. But I do want my happily ever after... that begins, and ends, with you."

She slays me with that proclamation. She may have to live a life with a protective detail surrounding her, she may be encased by a structure of fortified walls, but she's going to be loved so well that that'll be a dismal nuance.

My woman's never going to want for anything—I will give her heart its every whim and desire. She's gone on long enough, fighting for every scrap, but I'll lay all of my life's earnings at her feet to keep her happy and ensure that she never has to beg, fight, or cry for a goddamn thing.

I'd willingly burn down the universe to see a smile on her face and make sure she's never *not* blissfully content.

"I know this is moving fast, Shayne." I internally snort because it's at a warp-speed pace. However, I'm done denying the inevitable. She's mine, sent to me by my very own cupid. "But I swear to you, that once the threat your brothers pose to you and our family has been eliminated, I'm going to put the biggest diamond ring on your finger and marry the fuck out of you."

Relief flashes across her face, making me feel like an utter jackass.

"Temptress," I murmur, needing her to understand that I'm not a man on a mission of wetting his dick, and that this between us is *not* simply a fling. I'm *not* a man taking advantage of her virtue—this is an animalistic claiming. A man making a promise. A man who's willing to fall at his feet and worship her like the goddess she is. "Will you make an honest man outta me once the threat has been neutralized?"

"Julius. Are you proposing to me?"

"If I were to say yes, what would you say to that, Shayne? What would your answer be?"

“Like you said, Julius, this is moving fast. To some, it may be too fast. I may not have a lot of experience, but this feels right. I know what I want, and that’s you. So, if you *were* proposing, and my answer would be yes.”

“That’s all I need to hear,” I say as I slam my lips onto hers.

Her taste awakens my buds, so I dive in deeper, my tongue dominating and possessing her mouth. I groan when she lifts her hips, swiveling them while pressing her hot core into my hardened cock.

“Jesus, fuck,” I hiss, my eyes crossing from the onslaught of warmth emanating from her core. “You’re gonna burn me so good, temptress.”



CHAPTER 15

SHAYNE

MY BODY IS LIKE AN OVEN. THE FIRE INSIDE OF ME IS HOT AND consuming.

“Please, Julius,” I beg, although I don’t know what it is I’m needing to quell this fiery inferno that’s been ignited in my gut. “Please, I’m aching.”

“What are you aching for, my siren?” I love the way he shifts from using my name to one of the pet names he uses for me.

“I don’t know,” I abashedly confess.

“Let me see if I can help you figure it out,” he says, his voice blustering and robust.

Enticing.

Intense.

Almost violent in want—my entire being whines in response, to the point where I almost grovel for him to ease the ache between my legs.

His fingertips travel down my stomach, slowly, meticulously, and eventually they graze across my drenched slit. My hips catapult upward, the sensations pulsating through me causing me to whimper.

“You’re soaked, beautiful. The smell of your arousal is intoxicating. Makes my mouth water. The urge to taste you on my tongue is irresistible.”

“I’m not stopping you,” I grumble, needing something—anything, to quench this carnal desire.

“Is your cunt needy, Shayne? Would you like me to relieve your suffering?”

I hate the “C” word. It’s lewd and vulgar—almost scandalous, but for some reason, right now, it’s sexy, erotic, and hot.

“Yes,” I hiss, tired of waiting. I’ve waited a lifetime for this, for him, even if I didn’t know it at the time. “Please, Julius.”

“Ah, temptress, you beg so well.” His teasing amps up my ambition. He growls as I boldly grab his crotch, showing him how *needy* I am for him.

He started this, now, it’s time for him to finish it.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck. I don’t know where this ballsy woman came from, but I’m so damn happy to meet her.” He digs his middle deeper into my hold, and my natural response is to squeeze him, lure him into giving me what I want most—him, all of him.

He grasps my wrist in the clutch of his hand, forcefully moving me away from my prize. He soothes the assertive way he removed my hand with a wink. All rational thoughts fly from my mind once he starts nibbling at my skin. The calming the pinch of pain from his blunt teeth with the flat of his tongue afterward has my entire being soaring.

Pleasure with a nip of pain arouses me, making me a sopping wet mass of flesh and bones—flooding the sheets beneath my rear end.

“Patience, love. The anticipation will make the win so much sweeter,” he suggests. I’m not sure how much of that I believe. All it’s doing is making me a quivering mess.

“No, Julius. Now,” I cry out as soon as he swipes his tongue over the bundle of nerves protruding from my center, clamoring for attention. “I need you. I need you right now. I feel empty. It hurts.” A provocative, bestial growl escapes his lips, sending a shooting vibration of insatiable hunger to strum throughout my entire being.

Lust is overriding my common sense. Every teaching, every vow of celibacy to keep my chastity intact means nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Without marital vows tying us together, I should be stopping this, not encouraging it.

A small, naughty voice, a succulent side that has made a sudden and surprise appearance, reminds me, *He made you a promise. You will be his, and he will be yours.*

I'm salacious with need, unadulterated need.

He travels down my body, mapping it with his tongue as he slides down, eventually pushing my legs out, splaying me wide open to make room for his broad shoulders, settling between them. He sniffs my center, his chest rumbling, which feels right and wrong at the same time. Risqué, indecent, mischievous—and I love every second of it.

A zing of goosebumps run up and down my spine when he pulls my clit into his mouth, sucking on it like it's a lollipop. "Oh, oh, oh," I chant as my hips propel upward, pushing my core deeper into his mouth.

Julius hums. The vibration from his mouth has my eyes crossing, and my libido exploding like a live wire left unattended, electrocuting my every nerve ending as he laps at me, eating me like a man consuming his last meal.

When he pushes one of his fingers inside of me, then two, he scissers them, curls them, bumping along a spot inside of me that has me tossing my head back with a moan. I become a blistering disaster. No part of me is calm. I've gone wild with insatiable need. I begin to move, looking for a tether to keep me grounded because if not, I fear my body will levitate from the bed.

I don't want anything to take me away from encountering every moment of this wanton feeling that's awakened inside of me. "More, stop, please," I implore, confused about what I want from him. More of this, or something else entirely.

"Shh, I'll take care of you, baby girl," he coos, trekking up my body, using my abdomen as a napkin to wipe my release off

his chin as he crawls back up and over me. “Kiss me, Shayne.”

It should be disgusting, agreeing to have his lips on mine after he'd made me feel so good, but it's more seductive in a way. I groan as his lips crash onto mine. I wrap my arms and legs around him, dragging him down where our torsos are aligned and we're chest to chest.

I know that it's going to hurt, burn, and be uncomfortable when he slides deep inside of me, but I yearn for it, long for it, want to enjoy every stretch and invasion of it. I'm almost greedy for it. My body, heart, and soul don't care that there's going to be a pinch of pain before experiencing the unadulterated pleasure he'll give me afterward.

“Give it to me, big papa,” I internally muse.

“Don't worry, gorgeous. I'm gonna give it to you,” he answers, his pupils blown with lust, making them look nearly inhuman.

If I wasn't so elated and sated, I'd be embarrassed that I stated that out loud. His right-hand glides to the top of the bed, and he yanks a pillow down.

“Gonna make this as painless as possible, baby.” His left hand lifts my hips as he slides the pillow he just grabbed underneath them. Julius sits back on his calves, my legs lifted and spread. He's staring down at me, every part of me, like I'm the most beautiful piece of art he's ever seen.

“Please, Julius,” I plead, my being singing for more, feeling deprived and unfulfilled. I may not logically know what my body is looking for, I've never been in this predicament before now, but it's instinctual. Natural. Savage. A woman mating with her man. I need him, want him to brand me in a way nobody else ever has or ever will.

He climbs his way back off of the bed and undresses f in a lightening rate of speed. As he stands before me in all of his naked glory, my core begins to clench, and my legs begin to scissor, looking for that friction that'll ease the ache growing inside of me.

He. Is. Magnificent.

His physique is well-defined. You can clearly see that he takes care of himself by working out.

Julius spreads my labia, pressing his thumb against my clit with one hand while he glides his dick through my folds with his other. Not able to resist, I look down. Seeing him coated in my silky release is erotic. I begin to internally purr, an enchantress singing her song of allurement so that she can lure her prey to her and use him for her every womanly wile until she's satiated.

When the head of his dick notches, then breaches my entrance, I pant. His eyes rise from where we meet and latch on to mine. They steadily gaze into mine as he eases his shaft into my sheath one inch at a time, feeding his length inside of me with caution and care—being mindful that I've never been with a man, in any way, before him.

A tear slides down my cheek when he shreds my hymen, and a hiss of discomfort from me follows. Julius is large, wide, all man, every part of him. I'm stretched, full. Even with the anguish that came with him tearing into my womanhood, I don't want him to stop. I want this connection with him, no, I *need* this connection with him.

“Want” and “need”, those seem to be the two words that I use the most when it comes to this man.

My man.

My savior.

My forever.

My seductor.

Julius crashes down on top of me, sighing. His body trembles from the effort. Sweat from holding himself back from pounding into me coats his chest, making his skin slippery and hard to hold on to. But I don't let that stop me as I dig my nails into his pecs, the crescent moon shapes marking him as mine.

It's lascivious.

“Move, Julius. Take me, own me, claim me.”

A growl reverberates through his chest, pulsating into mine. "Mine."

"Yours," I agree. "Now prove it."

"It'd be my pleasure," he murmurs, slightly pulling back then sliding back in. It becomes a dance between lovers. His withdrawal and depth interchange. Sometimes, it's barely a kiss of movement, and other times, it's drastic.

He swivels his hips randomly, hitting that special place inside that has me detonating. I become active, my pelvis shimmies, raises, meeting his thrust for thrust. We don't waltz around each other. We draw each other in, needing skin-to-skin contact. We aren't bashful about proving how much we desire the other.

He pumps steadily inside of me, reaching out and plucking my extended nipples. The combination from the stretching of my inner walls so good as I accept his girth, while he simultaneously pulls at my protruding buds, has me crying out his name with exuberance. As soon as my belly begins to tingle, he jerks out of me, and lightly smacks me on my inner thigh to get my attention.

"I'm going to turn you onto your belly, love. I want you to raise your knees and plaster your chest to the bed."

When I get into the position he indicated, a thundering moan greets my ears. Another groan meets my ears as he conveys, "You are utter perfection. I've never seen something so beautiful in my goddamn life." He spreads my cheeks and leans over my back, nudging his way back inside of me. His breath tickles my neck as he glides in and out of me. His hands come around to my front, gripping my breasts in his hands. He pounds into me, and a sound unlike any I've ever made before escapes me.

"J-J-Julius," I stutter, seeking redemption and searching for completion. I don't understand how something that feels so perfect is considered to be so deplorable.

I pant and wail out his name as I explode around his girth. My walls tighten, trying to hold him as my hostage, making each

lunge and lurch of his grinding dick feel ten times more potent. He follows shortly afterward, mewling my name in response to the immense emotion of his orgasms.

He made my first time consummating our relationship perfect.

He was the missing part of my soul. We are now forever linked as one.



CHAPTER 16

JULIUS

YESTERDAY, THE PAINT WAS DELIVERED. I'VE HUNG UP MY suit and am in sweats and a tank top as we roll the color she's chosen onto the walls.

We are working with two different tones. The darker one, the one we'll use as an accent wall, is a mixture of purple and pink, coming out as a dark lavender pigment. This is the same shade that will be used in the bathroom with silver hardware, replacing the gold. The surrounding walls will be white, brightening the room and making it appear bigger, warmer, and more inviting.

I approved everything she brought to me. I didn't always see her plan of combining everything together. It all seems mixed and matched to me, but even if I didn't one hundred percent like any of it, I would've jumped onboard and approved it. She's become passionate about this project, and it's that smile on her face that makes me happy, settled, and elated.

"What do you think?" she asks as we finish with the first coat.

"I think it's nice. But it's a blank canvas. I won't truly get a feel for it until it all comes together," I answer, wanting to be honest, but in a nurturing way so that she doesn't think I'm being a bastard. "Design isn't in my repertoire, but I'm here to be your muscle."

"I can't wait!" she exclaims, bouncing on her feet and clapping her hands. Thankfully, she put her roller down first so that paint isn't splattered over our hard work.

“It’s going to be exciting seeing your vision come to life,” I tell her. “Seeing it on your vision board doesn’t do it justice. Already it looks different from everything you pasted on the rough draft, and we haven’t even brought in the furnishings or accessories yet.”

“I just hope all the duvets and chairs match like I’m thinking they will,” she confesses, nibbling on her bottom lip. Damn, it’s fucking cute as hell when she does that. I forgot how much these small gestures from a woman I’m in love with mesmerizes me. I’m not sure how she made that impossible feat happen, but yes, I’ve admitted to myself that no matter how short our time together has been, I’m utterly enraptured and in love with this woman. I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life worshipping her.

“Come on, baby. Let’s go to my room and clean up,” I state, holding my hand out to her. “We have to let this dry before we can apply the second coat. We’ll hit that tomorrow.”

“Okay,” she agrees, reaching out and placing her hand in mine. “Can I wash you?”

“Yes. Every damn day if you’d like, Shayne.”

“I’d like. Very much,” she sassily says.

“Can I return the favor, temptress?”

“Absolutely.” She chuckles, and my eyes home in on the way her tits bounce with her exuberance. Damn, I’m obsessed with this woman. I want to touch her everywhere as often as I can, no matter how.

My lips pressed to hers.

My hand held in hers.

Her body meshed with mine.

Writhing together in bed, on the couch, on top of a counter, under the showerhead, inside of a bathtub. Doesn’t matter where or how, every time we come together, it’s electrifying and all-consuming.

“Love you, temptress.” This is the first time he’s shared these words which has my heart fluttering.

Swallowing past the emotion lump that's gathered in my throat, I return his feelings by saying, "Love you too, handsome."



Watching and waiting since we played our first card by rescuing Shayne and Mera has me growing more antsy with each day that passes by. The Fitzgeralds and Crumleys are dancing around each other. Threats are being made, but there's been no follow through on them outside of small skirmishes.

"We need to make shit happen, Jules," Luca snaps. "They're lollygagging, parading around each other like boxers in a ring and yet no one's putting their fists up by acting on their forewarnings. They're taunting each other and it's incredibly exhausting. This needs to move along so that we can get ahead of this crap, make our power play, and neutralize the petty bullshit."

"It'll happen, Luca," I say, attempting to pacify him. "We can't make a move until one of them makes one first. It needs to be a big one. we don't want to become a target of theirs. We need them enraged to the point that they'll be at each other's throats. We want them focused on the other side of their family and not ours. We need to stay out of the limelight so that when we do come at them, it'll be a shock and unexpected. We don't want them prepared for our attack. We want them caught off guard. As far as the Crumley brothers are concerned, we're still in mourning and aren't in a position to come at them."

"I'd love to be a spectator in their brain when they come to realize that our boys aren't dead and that threat hasn't been neutralized." Luca snickers. "That'll be a shocker."

"Yes, it will," I agree, chuckling. "They've gone lax when it comes to our family. None of their scouts have been spotted circling our properties in months. I think their takeover of us has been postponed until they figure out where their sister's

gone. We need to give them more rope to hang themselves before we strike.”

“So the plan is to be the hangman, give them a few letters to shuffle around and let them try to solve the puzzle before we release the hatch and let them drop with the noose hung around their necks,” Luca reiterates, looking almost giddy with the prospect of being the litigator—for all intents and purposes.

“Exactly,” I confirm. “We’ve led them to the water, now we need to convince them to take a sip.”

“I agree. We need to dangle a carrot in front of their faces. The only question is, what would be a big enough display to get them to take that bite?” Luca probes.

“I think it’s time to pull the boys in and get their input,” I suggest.

Luca nods his head before saying, “I agree. The girls are painting Mera’s quarters so we should be able to slip away long enough to meet with the guys without Mera and Shayne wanting to tag along. We’ll leave Marco and Leo as their guards to keep an eye on them and be there in case they need anything.”

“Go get them and let them know they’re officially on babysitting duty. I have some goods the ladies asked for that need to be delivered to them down below anyhow. We’ll hit two birds with one stone. That should keep the old ladies busy putting things away and out of our hair while we’re there,” I order.

“Be back in ten, Julius, then we can let the girls know we’re heading out and gather the supplies to take down with us.”

“I’ll make another phone call and see if I can whisper in a few ears and get things rolling quicker,” I tell him, lifting the receiver. He waves at me over his shoulder and heads out to gather Marco and Leo.



Luca and I each took a separate cart so that we only had one trip to make. We each have fifteen boxes among us to stock their stores up for a bit.

I may or may not have added a few extra items for the grandkids. I bought them a trampoline and had a netting custom made to go around it so the kids don't bounce right on out. Someone needs to suggest this to the manufacturers so that it comes with each kit. There've been too damn many broken bones with the use of the contraption for it not to have been constructed already and offered to the consumer for purchase.

It's a travesty. Accidents could've been avoided if people just thought about precautions. Like any other time we've come down, men are stationed at the entrance, just in case it's not someone friendly coming through the sliding wall. Not that we'd ever let that happen, or that the entrance is easily found. I made sure of that.

"Kruger. How are things going?" I ask him as he helps me unload my cart while Country helps Luca empty his.

"Outside of moody women and bored kids, things are keeping on keeping on," Kruger answers. "How's it going on your side of things?"

"Slow paced," I answer him, before admitting, "But I've whispered in a few ears today, so hopefully, that moves things along faster."

"I'm ready to knock some skulls together and reclaim my life, Pops. I miss riding my bike, shaking things up, and causing some havoc," Kruger whimsically responds.

"That's a load of bullshit and you know it, VP. You cause havoc down here every day and then some," Country banters. "Just yesterday, he put food dye in Texas's toothpaste. He's walking around with blue teeth."

“I need to get y’all locks for your doors.” I sigh. “What’s up with the childish pranks, Kruger?”

“I’m bored,” he confesses.

“I’ll get you some damn crossword books to solve if that’s the cause. You need to stop antagonizing your brothers,” I admonish.

“Bet you miss those days, hmm?” Country asks. “I bet you told Charlee girl that a lot, didn’t you?”

“You have no idea. Even with their age gap, she still pestered him day in and day out. It was her favorite pastime,” I acknowledge. Remembering their childhood antics brings up happier times. “Damn, I never thought I’d look back on those days with any kind of fondness. That girl tested my patience like no other ever has. She saran wrapped his toilet one time when she heard Gunner’s motorcycle revving down the street. I thought Ma was going to skin her afterward. Gunner always hit the toilet when he came around. As she suspected, he rushed straight to the commode to take a leak. He cursed her with some pretty colorful phrases that, I have to admit, impressed the hell outta me. He had piss strewn everywhere, and the house stunk of urine. It took us days to air out the bathroom.”

“Those two are fucking nuts when they’re together,” Country states, but he doesn’t sound appalled by what she did in the least. “Damn, I love my girl, something fierce. Her ingenuity and imagination are off the charts. I hope Hunter’s nothing like her though.”

“She’s fucking psycho, but we wouldn’t have her any other way,” Kruger admits. A fond smile crosses his face because he’s been the victim of her antics on several occasions.

He and Gunner have ganged up on her several times, but my Charlee, she took it like a champ. They paid the price for it later on down the road, because my girl, she has a memory like a steel vault. She may not hit you back today, or even tomorrow, but you can count on her issuing some payback at some point.

“Let’s get this shit to the women. Luca and I need to talk to you guys about some shit,” I command. “It’s time to do some shuffling and start some chaos.”

“About fucking time.” Kruger whistles. “I’ll grab the trolleys from the janitor’s closet to make moving things easier and quicker.”



CHAPTER 17

SHAYNE

“I LOVE THIS COLOR ON THE WALLS,” MERA SAYS, ADMIRING our work.

“It’s gonna be feminine, but not overly so,” I add, putting the lid on the paint bucket and hammering it down so there are no air pockets.

“Things between you and Julius seem to be getting serious,” she casually says as we put our materials away.

“I’m gonna marry that man,” I confide. “He asked, and I said yes.”

“What? Shaynie, that’s ridiculous. We’ve only known them for a couple of months. Don’t you think that’s a little, I don’t know... too fast? Shouldn’t you two get to know each other better before you make those sorts of commitments?”

“It may seem fast to others, but I’m in love with him, Mera. He makes me happy. My life has been stagnant for so long, and I’ve been optionless when it comes to making my own decisions. But this time, I have that opportunity. It’s my choice, and I choose him. He’s been my every first and I willingly allowed that. Doesn’t that say something?”

“Whoa. Your first? You mean?” she asks, swiveling her hips, her eyes wide.

Embarrassed, I don’t verbally answer, but I shyly nod my head.

“Seriously? Wow... just, wow! How was it? Did it hurt? I bet it hurt. Did he at least propose first? He better have. Did it feel wrong? Abominational? Like you sinned, as the sisters predicted that we’d suffer consequently after bedding a man that’s not our wedded spouse?” She grills me, shooting question after question out of her mouth without pausing to give me a chance to answer.

It sounds like a tongue-twister of garbled words, and her sentences are so jumbled that they don’t wholly make sense. But I get the gist of what all she wants to know, so I simply go with it.

“It was phenomenal, life changing. It didn’t hurt per se, but it was uncomfortable. Just a pinch of pain then it went away. He proposed before we had intercourse. It was romantic because he put my beliefs to rest before seeking out his pleasure. It didn’t feel wrong, it felt right... perfect. No, it didn’t feel like what we did was an abomination or like I’d be smitted for following my heart. And no, it didn’t feel sinful. Yes, there was lust, but there was also affection. I felt his love in my soul.”

“Wow,” she whispers.

“You already said that.” I giggle. “What about you and Luca? You two seem to be getting cozy.”

“He drives me mad. Insane, really. I want to throttle him more than I want to kiss him.” She harrumphs. “But he does stir something inside of me, something I don’t understand, and I refuse to act on that until I get what that is exactly.”

“Don’t second-guess yourself, Mera. If you feel something deep and confounding, don’t let it slip away because of all the biblical beliefs the nuns stuffed into our heads.”

“Are you saying it’s nonsense?” Mera asks.

“No. But I am saying that God is forgiving. It’s even expected for us to make mistakes here and there. Mistakes are how we learn and grow. If you suspect, even a smidgeon, that Luca is your forever, your happiness, don’t hold back,” I sincerely convey. It’s not fair that we’re taught to be perfect little

breeders and pretty little housewives who are to be seen, but not heard, doing the Lord's work without any fault of our own.

Paper dolls that can be dressed up and micromanaged, that's what the nuns say we should be. Forget that. I've enjoyed my time with Julius, and I'd never trade that for some "godly" man who thinks he knows what's best for us.

They taught us to be fearful of His wrath, but that's an unrealistic expectation. We're human beings with hearts.

"You might be on to something, Shaynie. But he makes me so dang—"

"Excited? Alive? Scared?" I finish for her.

"Yes," she hisses, tossing her brush into the sink. "Those and more."

"And what do you make him feel, Mera? Has he said anything to you, anything at all that makes you believe he feels things for you too?"

"I don't know," she confesses.

A throat clearing in the doorway catches us off guard, making me drop the items I had clutched in my palm. "If I may? I'd like to offer some advice from a man who knows Luca well," Marco asks.

I nod my head as Mera says, "Yes, please."

"Luca's not your ordinary man. Has he told you anything about his past?" Marco probes.

"Yeah. I know that Julius was nearly forced into an arranged marriage before he met his late wife, and that in order to keep the peace between the two families, Luca married the wench that the head of the Alvarez family had contracted for Julius, before he'd met Ma, wedding in his stead so that his brother could have a life with the woman he loved," Mera answers.

"Listen. Luca will be pissed at me for telling you this, but I don't want you getting lost in your head and not giving him a chance, so I'm going to break some confidences and hope that you ladies don't tattle on me. Yes, what you stated, that's true, all of it. It wasn't a happy marriage. She was a vile woman

who was controlling and upset that she didn't get the brother that she wanted. Julius, as the first-born son, was in line to take over the family. She hated Luca because he was second in line. She didn't give him any heirs, claiming it was medical, but I think it was out of maliciousness. She was a hateful woman and made Luca pay daily for his second placement in the hierarchy. I've always given Luca props for not laying a hand on her in retaliation for her abuse. He was in a domestically violent relationship. He ate every spoonful of bullshit that woman fed him. Her family wasn't any better. In fact, he was expected to be at their house for Sunday dinners, but he wasn't allowed to sit at the table with them. He was too low on the totem pole to be accepted by them."

"That's horrible," I gasp. "Who does that?"

"People who needed to be knocked down a peg or two," Mera seethes, crossing her arms across her chest to keep her feelings locked down inside her. She only does that when she's upset and distressed. It's her way of holding herself back from lashing out. She's a good woman, but she has the temper of an Irish man. "If she wasn't dead, I'd give her a tongue lashing."

"Karma came for her in the end. She died a slow and painful death," Marco confirms.

"Good," Mera sasses. "But what's your suggestion on his feelings toward me? How do I fit into this?"

"Since you've been around, his mask has slipped. He no longer laughs mirthlessly. His smiles aren't forced like they've been for twenty-plus years. Yeah, he still jokes like he always has, but it's been his coping mechanism since he was a kid. Get past those defenses, Mera. Only then will you see the man he really is, and only then will he express himself freely."

"How do I do that?" Mera asks Marco.

"Just keep being yourself," Marco advises.

"How can I do that when I don't know who I am?" Mera whispers, looking dejected.

"You know who you are, Mera. You're fun, you laugh at his stupid jokes, you banter with him. You're strong, independent,

and fiercely loyal. That may only be the tip of the iceberg, but it's not far from shattering. Let yourself look past all the fears the nuns drilled into you and enjoy yourself. You may not know who you are, Mera, but us, your friends and family, we do." Marco's friendly words have my eyes clouding with mist. Dammit, what is it with strong men sharing their feelings with me that has me ready to cry at the drop of a pin?

"I'm your friend? You consider me family?" she asks in awe.

"Absolutely," he replies. "Now, it's time for you to consider us as those things too. Don't you think so?"

"Yeah. I think I do, Marco. Thank you."

"Anytime, Mera. Are you ladies wrapped up for the day?" e questions.

"Yes," I reply. "We were just cleaning up."

"Good. Let me help you with that and then I'll take you to the media room. We got a few videos in that I think you ladies will enjoy."



Tears stroll down my cheeks as the credits roll. "That was so sad," I cry. "Senseless death."

"Those poor boys." Mera snuffles. "Finding that boy dead like that. Parents who don't realize their kids left, walking railroad tracks, and those leeches! Can you imagine?"

"No," I say, shivering. "I'd pass out if I came out of the lake with those slugs attached to my skin. Dang bloodsuckers. Note to self, we don't wash or swim in foreign bodies of water."

Marco and Leo are laughing hysterically at our dramatic responses to the movie. "It's not funny, guys! Those boys will have mental scars from that for the rest of their lives. Well, the ones who lived long lives that is." Mera harrumphs.

"I wish they hadn't shared that narrative," I admit. "It made things sadder, knowing that their futures weren't happy and

fulfilled after experiencing such a sorrowful adventure.”

“From now on, you ladies can only watch comedies,” Marco expresses, clutching his midsection. “I didn’t realize it would affect you ladies so much.”

“Pizza’s here,” Leo announces as a light flashes on the wall. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Thank you, Leo, I’m starved,” I say, rubbing my rumbling stomach.

With as much popcorn and candy as we’ve consumed, you’d think there’s no way I could fit any more food inside of my stomach, junk or otherwise. It’s already stretched to its limit. I’ve put on at least ten pounds since we’ve come to live with Julius and Luca. We not only eat three square meals per day, but we have free rein of the kitchen and sometimes, a girl needs some chocolate.

“When are Luca and Julius supposed to be home? Should we set some dinner aside for them?” Mera asks Marco.

“We ordered them each a pie of their own. We’ll put them in the fridge for them and they can reheat it when they get in if they’re hungry,” Marco tells her.

“A pie? We ordered pizza. Why didn’t you say we could get pie, Marco?”

“Pardon me, I should’ve used a different phrase. I’m from New York, and up there, we call pizza’s pies.”

“Oh,” Mera responds. “We still have so much to learn.”

“Don’t worry. It won’t happen overnight, but soon enough, you’ll understand our euphemisms and whatnot,” Leo pacifies. “Different regions of the country use different terminologies. It can still be confusing for me, so don’t sweat the small stuff. Just ask, and we’ll answer.”

“I think I should start carrying around a notepad so I can jot these things down,” I state.

“Same,” Mera agrees.

“I’ll get you two one if you’re serious,” Marco offers.

“We’re pretty serious, Marco. There’s still so much out there that we still need to learn and discover,” I answer. “What we have at our fingertips is too much, but not enough at the same time.”

“Exactly my thoughts,” Mera adds.

Food is delivered, passed out, and the cheesy goodness as well as the spicy aroma has me nearly ravenous. As I eat my slice of pizza, a sinking sensation hits my stomach. I’m not sick. This isn’t food poisoning. No, it’s something else entirely. I just hope it’s not an omen of something bad coming our way.

“*Watch over us,*” I whisper to the universe. Goosebumps run up and down my body and it has me near shivering.



CHAPTER 18

JULIUS

“So, THEY’RE TIPTOEING AROUND EACH OTHER, HUH?”
Gunner asks, stroking his chin.

“Yeah. And if we don’t do something soon, something drastic to get their attention to get this ball rolling into our court, they could keep dancing around each other. Then we’ll remain stuck in this loop of nothingness,” Luca adds.

“Maybe it’s time for us to sporadically come up top and be seen,” Malice speculates.

“Sightings of us could stir things up and get the Crumleys to react,” Master encourages.

“Or it could blow up in our faces, one of us could end up captured, or worse, dead.” Gunner emphasizes the reminder with a flick of his wrist as he ashes his cigarette.

“We could sit back on our asses and do absolutely nothing. Keep living this life of solitude and let our families die out too.” Kruger harrumphs. “There are always risks, Gun. But we need to weigh which one is best for us.”

“We can’t live like this much longer,” Country admits. “The kids are bored more often than not, the women are getting squirrely, and if we don’t do something soon, they’ll revolt. Charlee asked the other day where she could get a bazooka so she could go and wipe them out.”

“So, we play a game of chess. We show our faces and wait for them to make a move,” I confirm. “I’ll have men in the

background as an added precaution in case you boys find trouble.”

“We go up in groups of two. We arm ourselves, and act as if we’re trying to blend in with the shadows,” Gunner says, giving in. “It’s a risky move, I don’t like it, but I agree, it’s time to put an end to this shitshow.”

“I’ll order some tactical gear so that y’all are better protected. Give me a week and we’ll start cycling you all above ground,” I tell them.

“As the president, I’ll go first. Master will come with me,” Gunner states.

From there, groups are diplomatically chosen, and by that, I mean, that the men ended up arm wrestling for who goes when and who goes with.

I’m getting too old for this shit.



“Fuck,” I grunt as my eyes cross. Shayne’s riding me like a champion. My dick has had more action in the last week than it has in years.

“Feels so good,” she says, her nails scored into my pecs, nearly drawing blood.

I lift my hands and wrap them around her bouncing globes, plucking her nipples between my fingers as they swing haphazardly in my face—a temptation that’s too alluring to resist. Not wanting to shoot my load too soon, I flip us over and begin pounding into her.

“You undo me, baby,” I confess, our eyes locked onto each other’s.

“Yes,” she purrs, tilting her head back and pressing it into her pillow. “Don’t stop. I’m so close.”

The beast inside of me roars and I let him take over. Pounding relentlessly into her, my balls draw up and my spine tickles

with my impending release. “Now, Shayne. Come now.”

“Julius!” she screams as her walls tighten around my dick, choking it, and I let loose, pumping into her, pursuing our mutual release.

We come together in a roar of elation as ropes of cum shoot into her womb and fireworks rocket in the back of my mind. I flop over onto my side, still intimately connected to her, panting for breath. “You’re the best thing that’s come into my life, Shayne. I love you, baby.”

“I love you too, Julius. Now, tell me what’s going on, because you came back last night stressed.”

“We’re going to try something unorthodox. Something I’m not wholly comfortable with but is necessary.”

“What’s that?” she inquires.

“The boys are going to come back from the dead,” I say, scrubbing my face. “They’ll go up in groups of two. Gunner and Master will be the test dummies and see how it goes.”

“You’re trying to catch my brothers’ attention?”

“We need them out of their minds, Shayne. If seeing the boys’ ghosts is how we do that, then it’s the play we have to make. I’m not excited about it, but it’s necessary.”

“It’s a gamble, but I think you made the right decision,” she encourages. “Will they have protection?”

“I’ll have my men lurking in the background, unseen, but there. I’ll protect them to the best of my capabilities,” I state.

“Which means you’ll burn down the town if even a single hair on their heads is messed up.” She giggles, stroking her fingers up and down my abs.

“Damn straight, Shayne. Nobody hurts what’s mine without paying a penalty for it.”

“Which is why I feel safest when I’m with you,” she discloses, snuggling deeper into my chest. “Sending Charlee and Hemmi to the convent with the mission to convince me to trust them

and leave with them was the best thing that's ever happened in my life."

"Mine too," I tell her. "I hate that you're a pawn in so many scenarios."

"It's been that way for me since the day I was born and my mom died," she conveys. "I know that originally you only came for me to use me against my brothers, but they say everything happens for a reason, Julius. For you it's me, and for me it's you, no matter how that came to be."

"I wish we'd met in a more conventional way, temptress, but I'm grateful you understood why we needed your help, and fucking relieved that you didn't hold it against me."

"In a way, I was using you too, Julius. I needed to get out of there before I was forced into a marriage with a man I didn't know. If he's in cahoots with Garrick and them, if he has the same business practices and the same morals and beliefs as they do, he can't be a good, honorable man. I knew I was living on borrowed time." She shivers and I tighten my arms around her.

It gives her some comfort and reassurance that when she's wrapped up in them, nobody will ever touch her. A silent promise that I'd put myself in the line of fire before anyone got a shot off in her direction.

Bullets may kill, but me, as her shield, will always give her a fighting chance.

After a few beats of my heart underneath her ear, she continues, "Your family and you... all of you gave me the out I needed. I grabbed onto it with both hands and jumped. In my heart and mind, it was a leap of faith. I believed with my entire being that a higher power intervened and set me on a path that was better than the one I was being led down."

"Shayne, you do realize they aren't my family, they're *our* family, right?"

"Honestly? I hadn't really thought of it that way, Julius. Not because they aren't, or that they won't be my family too, but because my thoughts hadn't strayed past you... us. How is

Charlee and Gunner going to feel about me becoming your wife? I'm the same age as your daughter is, and your son is fifteen years older than I am. Is that going to make them uncomfortable?"

"My kids don't zone in on age, temptress. All they'll care about is that you make me happy. We were incredibly young, too young honestly, when we had Gunner. I was hardly old enough to vote and not old enough to legally buy liquor. Ma was already pregnant when we took off. When my father told me to keep her on the side as my mistress, I was horrified. I knew in my gut that she was my forever, and I wasn't about to turn her into the other woman. She would never be my side piece. She was carrying my kid, and she deserved so much better than that. If Luca hadn't stepped up and married the bitch my parents contracted for me, my life would've been one of complete misery. I had years of unadulterated love that I wouldn't have had otherwise."

"Why were your parents against you finding and sanctifying your true love, Julius? That's not how it should've been. A parent's love is *supposed* to be unparalleled. It isn't perpendicular. Love shouldn't fit inside of a box that is nice and tight. Love is messy, beautiful, and meaningful. It's uninhibited, comforting, affectionate, and most of all, unconditional. They should've encouraged you, and supported you, not pushed you out the door."

"I couldn't agree more, gorgeous. But my parents, they were old school, traditional, and they firmly believed in marriages that'd not only boost our lineage but give us more money than what we'd know what to do with. They had tunnel vision, thought they knew what was best for us regardless of if we agreed with them or not. They saw everything in black and white. There were no shades of gray in between."

"They lost so many years with you, your wife, and your children. It's a shame that empowerment got to their heads the way it did. I'm glad you're changing the way the Alvarez family conducts things," she compliments. "I applaud the fact that you let people love who they want to regardless of their station."

“I learned a lot when I started over. My new identity gave me the opportunity to live life outside of these four walls. Ma and I opened doors for our children, ones any other I might have had with someone else impossible. All I’ve ever wanted was for them to have what she and I did. I would’ve been disappointed and heartbroken if they’d had to settle for who was better for them on paper.”

“And yet, you think you aren’t a good man, Julius.”

“I’m not, baby. But I’m glad you think I am.”

A decorative graphic for Chapter 19. The word "CHAPTER" is written in a large, bold, serif font at the top. Below it, the number "19" is written in a similar font. The text is centered within a stylized, symmetrical emblem that resembles a pair of wings or a shield with intricate patterns and a central circular element.

CHAPTER 19

SHAYNE

BREAKFAST TURNS MY STOMACH. I'M A BALL OF NERVES that've seemed to settle in my belly. The guys have been going above ground periodically for the last eight weeks, and the stress of the unknown has had me nauseous for what feels like ages now.

I think my response to it is worse today because Julius has had enough of no interaction with my brothers and has decided to join a few of them as they go out and about. I wish it was because they've given up on their vendetta against the MC and Alvarez family, but I'm not stupid. They just aren't having a knee-jerk reaction to their sudden reappearance. They're biding time, waiting for the right time to strike.

If anyone knows how lethal their venom is, it's me.

"They're waiting on me," I say to the toilet as I rest my head on it, praying that my stomach stops recoiling. "If anyone has me with them, is brazen enough to go against the Crumleys, Garrick knows it'd be them. Dang it."

"Then we need to convince them to let us go out with them next time," Mera states, startling me. I was alone last time I checked.

"When did you get here?" I ask her, wiping my mouth with the rag I pulled from the cabinet earlier.

"About your second toilet flush," she answers. "What's going on with you, Shaynie?"

“Nothing. Everything. Take your pick, Mera.”

“That’s a lot of in-between to read through the lines, Shaynie. Listen, I know that this is crazy. I get that Julius joining them on the town puts a huge target on his back, but he’s well protected. You know that right?”

“You’re right.” I sigh. “I do know that, but it’s not comforting. No matter if he had the secret service at his back, he’s not invincible, and anything can get past his soldiers.”

“I don’t know your brothers outside of what you’ve shared with me, but I do know these men. Not well, but I’ve seen them training underground and shooting at the firing range. Let me tell you, they hit the bullseye every single time they press the trigger. They’re lethal, skilled, a little pompous, but good at what they do. They won’t take chances for which they aren’t prepared. We have to trust them to do the right thing and put an end to this. It’s the only way we can live without looking over our shoulders. We have, for all intent and purposes, traded one prison for another, and that’s not acceptable. We deserve the chance to walk freely without worrying about someone snatching us off the streets and selling us to the highest bidder.”

“I agree with you, Mera. I do trust them, but that doesn’t mean I’m not afraid *for* them. I don’t think my brothers will act irrationally. Every move they make is intentional, well-thought out, calculated, and plotted. They’re waiting, Mera.”

“What are they waiting for, Shayne?” Luca asks as he joins us.

“What is it with you two sneaking up on me?” I berate, not happy that the spills of my intestines are within their eyesight. It’s embarrassing.

“Me, Luca,” I answer before stressing my viewpoint. “They’re waiting for me to show my face and you know it. We all know it.”

“Julius will never deliberately place you in danger, Shayne. It’s not in his DNA to intentionally place a female in a precarious situation where she could be hurt. He’s a protector, always has been, and always will be,” Luca contends.

“Unfortunately, I agree that they’re waiting on something, and that may be you.”

“What do we do about it?” Mera asks.

“We talk to my brother. It’s the only thing we can do, Curly Sue.” A giggle escapes me at his nickname for Mera. She hates her tight ringlets, but I’ve always envied them.

Mera stomps her foot and gives Luca a death glare. “Stop!” She hisses, then argues, “I hate that pet name. Find something else.”

“Can you two do this, whatever this is, somewhere else while I clean up and brush my teeth?” I basically beg them, needing a moment and some space to myself. An escape from their brand of foreplay. It’s debilitating, grueling, and depressing. They need to stop fighting their attraction to one another and do something about it already.

They shuffle out of the room and I let out a sigh of relief.



“No. Absolutely not,” Julius deadpans, shaking his head unequivocally. “No way in hell is my woman going to expose herself to those cretins.”

“It’s the only way, and you know it, Julius,” I debate. “You’ll keep me safe. Just a quick in and out.”

Secretly, I have a reason, a mission for going to the pharmacy. One I can’t tell him about yet. I’ll just need to get Mera in on the reason why without it being discovered by others. She’ll have to sneak her way to the counter undetected, grab the test, and pay for it without being seen by anybody, including Luca. It’s doable. At least, I hope it is.

“I can’t, baby. I’m sorry. You may be right about this, but I won’t put you in danger. I just won’t,” he says, fighting the truth of the matter, unwilling to give in.

“Julius, you need to consider this. It may be the only option we have. We’ve given them the opportunity to lash out, but they’ve stayed away and haven’t given in to the temptation. Honestly, brother.” Luca sighs. “We’ve already put ourselves out there, made ourselves vulnerable. You can’t convince me that you believe that they aren’t already watching us, surveying our house, planning a way to get behind these walls to check and see if we have their sister locked away in our home. It’s better if we do this our way. We’ll have better control over it if we’ve pre-planned this and have precautions in place.”

“There has to be another way.” Julius sighs, combing his fingers through his hair. “I’m not comfortable dangling you in front of them.”

“Julius. We’re a team, right?”

“Yeah, temptress, we are. Where are you going with this?” His eyes breach his forehead, ready to come back with an argument that has me fumbling for a viable response. But I know how he operates. I’m ready to fight for us, for our future, even if that makes him uneasy. I want a future that’s not laced with dread, but full of fortitude and vitality.

“I trust you. Do you trust me?” I continue, imploring with my eyes for him to listen to my argument with open ears and mind.

“I trust you. That’s not the issue here, and you’re well aware of that fact,” he contends.

“Then trust yourself to keep me safe. We need this. I need this. Were you serious about marrying me, Julius?”

He rocks his head from side-to-side before answering me. “You know I am, gorgeous.”

“I don’t want to be your secret, Julius. I want to be on your arm. I want to show the world that I’m yours. That I belong to you and you belong to me. That’ll never happen if I’m trapped here until the score is settled.”

“You’re not a score!” he thunders. “You’re the damn prize, woman.”

“Then don’t make me be the dirty secret!” I yell. “Put yourself out on a limb here, Julius. Otherwise, we’ll always be stationary, walking on eggshells. We’ll never be truly happy. I can’t live like that again. I just can’t!”

“And that’s our cue to leave,” Luca states, standing up and pulling Mera with him. “Let us know what you decide, Jules. We’ll always have your back and I’d proudly take a bullet for your woman so that you get your happily ever after, brother.”

“What?” Mera gasps. “Don’t say that, Luca. Never, ever say that.”

They continue to bicker as they shut the door behind them. They’re squabbling loud enough that we can hear them behind the walls.

“That’s going to be an explosive relationship when they finally give in to their desire and go for it.” Julius snickers. “Baby, come here.”

With a steadfast resolve, I sprint over to him and take a seat on his lap, precisely where he’s patting his hands.

“I love you, temptress. It scares the ever-loving fuck outta me that you’re so willing to put yourself in their sights.”

“I wouldn’t be facing them alone. You’d be with me. That’s why I’m so brave about doing this. The only reason really. Otherwise, I’d be a coward who continues to live in the depth of the shadows. Julius, I want to be in the sunlight. I want to feel the heat of it on my face. I need you to give me that. Please.”

“Let me think about it,” he replies, hugging me tighter to him.

“In other words, that’s a no,” I grumble, tucking my face into the crook of his neck.

“Was that a statement or a question,” he muses.

“Statement. With the tone you used, I know you’ve already made up your mind, Julius.”

He sighs before rumbling, “Won’t apologize for putting your welfare first, baby girl. You talked about trust earlier. Trust in me to take care of this for you. Okay?”

“Okay, Julius,” I say, nestling further into him. “I’m tired, and ready for this to be done and dusted, so we can move on with the rest of our lives.”

“Just a little longer, beautiful, and this will be taken care of,” he promises. “I’ve got you. I’ll always have you. I’m your safety net, baby.”

“I know, and I’ll always let you catch me when I fall, Julius. I just wish you’d let me save you too.”

“You do. You have. In more ways than you’ll ever know,” he mumbles into my hair.



CHAPTER 20

JULIUS

“Now, they’re just toying with us,” I gripe, tossing the newspaper containing an article written the day the clubhouse exploded across the top of my desk.

Leo brought in the mail this morning, and this was in an envelope addressed to me, with no return label from the sender.

“They’re being obtuse. Acting like if they send it anonymously we’ll never make out who it came from,” Luca adds, sipping from a crystal glass that’s halfway filled with his favorite whiskey, a brand that cost three hundred dollars per bottle. “We need to make a riskier move.”

“What’s riskier than putting our family out in the limelight?” I ask my brother. He better, for his health, not be going where I think he is.

“Jules.” He sighs, shaking his head like I’m a numbskull who’s not smart enough to read between the lines.

“No!” I thunder. “Not happening, Luc.”

“Okay, Jules,” he says, deflating in his seat, his glass hanging loosely from the tips of his fingers. “Then we have to come up with something else that’d make them lash out and act erratically. What we’re doing isn’t cutting it.”

“I know this. We all know this. But I’m at my wits’ end, here. Toss me a line, Luc.”

“If taunting them with the boys isn’t working, there aren’t any more lines to toss out that you haven’t reeled back in, brother. The only other thing we can do is attack. Are we ready for that? Do we have enough intel to take them and all of their men out, in one fell swoop?”

“You know we don’t,” I seethe, lashing out at him. “They’re never in one place together anymore. They’ve spread themselves out and there’s no pattern to when they meet. We can’t get to them fast enough when it’s been reported to us that they finally gather in one area.”

“Then we need to pick them off one at a time,” he states.

“All that will accomplish is them coming here. With us not knowing their exact numbers, it means we don’t know if we have enough men here to keep our girls safe,” I argue.

“Then we send them underground until it’s safe and we can bring them back. It may be the only way,” he counters.

“You may be right,” I say, falling back into my chair.

“Boss,” Marco calls out, knocking on the door.

“Come in, Marco,” I order.

“The Fitzgeralds are on the line. They want to set up a meet at a neutral location. They sound desperate. What do you want me to tell them?”

Luca leans forward, his hands dangling between his legs, twirling his tumbler between them. “Julius, it may be a good idea. I know we’ve been putting this off, but it’s time. It’s the next logical step.”

“I know,” I snap. “We’ll need to bring Shayne with us. But no place we could go is secure enough to keep her out of harm’s way.”

“What about the bunker we bought a couple of years ago? It sits empty. We could fortify it with soldiers. Bring up the boys to add as backup security detail for her. That should give us the numbers we need to keep everyone safe,” Luca recommends.

“See if they’re agreeable to that, Marco. If so, we’ll meet with them in three days. That’ll give me time to get the men gathered, prep Shayne, and get the bunker strengthened.”

“I’ll let you know as soon as I get off the phone with them, boss. If they are, do you want me to get a head start at the bunker?” Marco asks me.

“Yeah. Take men with you. No one goes out on solo runs. Got it?” I command.

“Got it,” Marco answers, stepping into the hallway and shutting the door behind him.



Once Marco let us know that they agreed to the location and date, Luca went to talk to the boys while I sought out Shayne to tell her what we’ve decided and to get her prepared for the potential fallout.

Today is the day we set to assemble with the Fitzgeralds, and Shayne is a ball of tension. Her grasp on my hand has mine going numb. “It’s going to be okay, gorgeous. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“It’s not that,” she blurts, stalling. “What if they don’t like me? They could think we’ve double-crossed them and not believe I am who we claim I am. It could be a cluster of disasters.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is clusterfuck,” Luca asserts. “Go on, Shayne. Say it. Just once, give in and say it.”

“I’m not using curse words, Luca,” she returns. “I was raised to not use crass language.”

Mera snorts, and I chuckle. “I think it’s cute and refreshing that you don’t, temptress,” I whisper in her ear. “Don’t change and give in to Luca’s peer pressure.”

“I won’t,” she whispers back. “I have no need to change who I am just to satisfy his challenge. I don’t do or say stuff just because somebody needs to pull one over on me.”

“Good girl,” I say, pecking her temple with my lips.

We’re surrounded by revving motorcycles that we had stored in the garage for the boys when they’re ready to reclaim their lives, and our armored vehicles—which is the only reason I’m coming across as relaxed. Shayne and Mera have been enamored by them, waving at the men when they look in our direction to check in. Mera refused to be left behind, and my girl needed her with her, so we allowed it. Mostly because most of our force is with us, and she’s better protected with us than left at home on her own.

Forty-five minutes is what it takes to get from the estate to the bunker. As soon as we pull into the parking lot, my business mask slips into place. Thankfully, I remembered to warn Shayne of the difference in my personality so she doesn’t take me as cold and dismissive. This is the man I have to be in public during business transactions.

“Ready?” I ask them as I wait for Leo to come and open the door to let us out.

“As we’ll ever be,” Shayne remarks, steeling her spine.

“We go in there as a united front. Be aware of your surroundings no matter what’s taking place. Don’t get distracted,” I demand, looking at the girls.

“We’ll be right behind you,” Mera says. “After all, you are our human shields.”

“That we are, Curly Sue,” Luca concurs. “Always and forever.”

“Pompous ass,” Mera teases. The reason I know she’s not pissed or annoyed is due to the large smile plastered across her cheeks.

With Shayne’s hand tucked into the crease of my arm, and Mera mirroring the same pose with Luca, we walk through the door, surrounded by my boy and his men.

“Mr. Alvarez.” I’m greeted by the head of the Fitzgerald family. Their patriarch, Mazimo, stands up, holding out his hand.

“Mr. Fitzgerald,” I return, shaking his outstretched hand in a friendly, yet businesslike manner, showing him the respect of a man who’s risen to his station. “You remember my brother, Luca?”

“I do. It’s nice to see you again, Luca,” Mazimo states, shaking his hand. “And who are these lovely ladies? Was it necessary for the fanfare?” he asks, waving his hands toward the men.

“We have some news to share with you. I’m not sure how you’re going to feel about it. This is my fiancée and her closest friend. These men are here as their bodyguards. Not from you,” I quickly state. “But from your grandsons.”

“These ladies need protection from my family? Why is that?” Mazimo quizzes, confusion weaved into his facial expression.

“I’ll answer that once we take a seat,” I tell him. That way, we’re on a more even ground. He’ll need to be sitting once we share who Shayne is with him.

“I’m intrigued, Mr. Alvarez. Alright, let’s take a seat.”

“After you,” I instruct, not stupid enough to be lower than he is.

As soon as we sit, the boys fan around the girls as they’re seated snugly between me and Luca as an extra layer of protection.

“What’s this about?” Mazimo’s second, Geronimo, questions.

“Patience, Geronimo, they’ll get there,” Mazimo conveys, soothing his man.

“There’s a story behind this. I’d like for you to hear me out fully before lashing out,” I state, waiting for Mazimo to acquiesce.

“I’ll accept your terms. Though I can’t promise not to get upset, I am willing to listen to what you have to say before reacting,” Mazimo resolves.

“Fair enough. But I’m warning you, this information is going to upset you. I need you to know that it was all done *without*

the intent of deception, but with the motive to make sure she's safe," I stress.

"You've always been an honorable man, Julius. I'll take that into mind when you share whatever this is you have to say," Mazimo interjects.

"Told you so," Shayne subtly whispers beside me. "I'm not the only one who knows you're honorable." I nod my head and hide my smirk. In the middle of a tense interaction, she has to have the upper hand and give me a "told you so" scolding.

"That you did," I concur, to which she hums with jubilant satisfaction.

Something I've slowly come to learn about my woman is that she likes to hear the verbal affirmation when she's right about something, and I'll happily give her that.



CHAPTER 21

SHAYNE

I CAN'T BELIEVE THIS IS HAPPENING.

This is really happening! I internally let out a little eek.

I'm both excited and bewildered.

Petrified. What if they don't want me?

What if them knowing about my existence blows back in our faces?

They could truly not care. That's far scarier than answering all the questions they surely will have. The man across from me is my grandfather. *My grandfather!*

He has a kind face, but I can see something died inside of him a long time ago. His eyes hold a lifetime of anger. The long life he's had hasn't been kind to him, which shows by the way his eyes have lost most of their compassionate light that humans are born with. That light blinks out with each loss you face.

But again, losing his daughter may have killed a part of him he's never recovered from. It makes me want to reach out and wrap my arms around his neck.

But we aren't there yet. I'm not sure that we ever will be.

One of two things could happen in this scenario. He could either embrace me and forgive Julius for keeping this secret, or he could hate him and make an enemy of him.

My fingers are crossed underneath this table that it's the former and not the latter. I silently pray that things will work out in our favor.

I knew that my maternal grandparents were still around, but I never dreamed the day would come to fruition when I'd meet them. I always thought I'd stay tucked away and hidden from any family members other than my siblings.

Mera, feeling my anxiousness, reaches out and places a comforting hand on my knee to reassure me that I'm not alone, and that she'll always be at my side to help me through any mental distress. She always has been, and she always will be. I lay my hand atop of hers, squeezing it in acknowledgment and thanks. She's always been my rock, my closest confidant, and knows what this day means to me.

"I think your girl there is going to be sick, Mr. Alvarez," Geronimo announces, and all eyes twist in my direction.

"Are you alright, dear?" Mazimo asks me.

"Country, could you grab a bottle of water, please?" Julius demands as he turns in his seat to face me, pulls me into his arms, and kisses my temple. "It's going to be okay, baby girl. Try to calm down for me, alright?"

"Yeah," I answer him before turning my attention to the two men across from us whose eyes are glued to me. "I'm fine. Thank you for your concern." Geronimo nods his head, but Mazimo's eyes narrow into small slits, staring at me as if he's trying to dissect me and discover all my buried secrets. It's clear that he's not convinced I'm being the most honest with my answers, but soon, he'll undoubtedly understand my current discomfort.

Thanking Country for the water, I gulp it down, trying to keep my hands from trembling. Julius shoots me a wink, then gives my grandfather his steadfast attention. "We received information a few months back about a woman who was being sheltered, hidden, and acted on it. We weren't sure of the details surrounding her existence, or why she was tucked away and being kept a secret. We only knew we needed to speak

with her before letting anyone know she was with us. Then it came down to us keeping her safe from your grandsons.”

“I admit this is intriguing, but you’re beating around the bush, Mr. Alvarez. I’m too damn old to play games and solve riddles. I can appreciate your position here, but I’d appreciate it if you’d get past that and tell me bluntly what this has to do with me and the lady,” Mazimo exasperatingly snaps.

“May I?” I ask, leaning forward.

Julius nods his approval as Mazimo tilts his head to the side in curiosity, wondering why I’m interjecting myself into a man’s world. Business such as what they’re exchanging usually means women stay in the background, hiding in the shadows, and don’t speak out.

Peering into his eyes, I start to explain. “In a moment, Mr. Fitzgerald, you’ll see why I’m inserting myself into this conversation. I have more details than Julius does with how my life came to be and how it involves you. Some of what I’m going to say will be shocking, and it’ll make you mad, but I need you to let me tell my story in full before you begin any form of tirade. I know this is a lot to ask of you, but it would be appreciated.”

“I’ll do my best,” my grandfather professes.

“That’s all I can ask of you, and the effort on your part is appreciated,” I say, settling for what he’s capable of offering me. Taking a deep breath, I find my inner strength then launch into my tale, starting from the very beginning, even if the details are secondhand knowledge. “I don’t know much about my birth, but I was told about how I came to be at the convent, and that’s where I’m going to start. According to the sisters, my mother was caught in the midst of an ambush. In an attempt to save me from the attackers, she curled herself around me and protected me from the intruders. My brothers, even being teenagers, knew that my life was vulnerable. They chose to convince everyone that I’d died alongside my mother and tucked me away, according to them, to keep me safe.”

“Dear God,” my grandfather states, slumping back in his seat, his pallor turning ghostly white.

I nearly give in to my need to console him by rushing over to hug him when a single tear falls down his right cheek. It's hard to watch this otherwise hardened man show his emotions to a captive audience instead of behind closed doors where it's safe for him to break down without witnesses. But if I stop speaking now, I'm not sure I'll have the courage to continue.

"Are you okay?" I ask, needing confirmation before I get into the harder details.

He's become stilted, rising up and becoming somewhat composed, but I can tell that he's already started filling in a few blanks.

"I'm not sure if 'okay'," he air quotes the word as he utilizes it, "is the right term I'd use. Not yet anyway," Grandfather remarks. "But please, young lady, continue."

"From time to time, the boys would come visit me, and more pieces would fall into place. Mr. Fitzgerald, my name is Shayne Fitzgerald, and I'm your granddaughter," I announce, an incessant need to get that key component out consuming me until I could release it. I go on to tell him about life in the abbey, about our teachings, my solitary existence outside of Mera, how I always longed for family, but never let myself hope that I'd ever get the chance to see them and tell them I'm alive.

Julius added things here and there, telling my grandfather some things he was already aware of, and clarifying other things that he wasn't and had only had presumptions about. Like the fact that after blowing up their own clubhouse, the DreamCatcher men, women, and children have been living in a "safehouse", for lack of a better word because there's no way, even the Fitzgeralds, can be trusted with the insight about the underground city that's been constructed underneath the Alvarez estate.

We give him a few minutes to himself as he stands up and begins pacing. Stopping along the way to look at me, shaking his head, he'd huff, curse underneath his breath, then continue walking back and forth behind the table. Once he wears himself out, he retakes his seat and nods my way.

I take that as he's ready for me to pick things up at our current time. "I was never truly scared until my last meeting with the boys," I inform him.

"What changed?" Grandfather inquires through a clenched jaw.

"They told me it was time for me to repay their kindness for saving me and do my part. Family duty, they called it. My role was to dutifully accept a marriage contract they'd made on my behalf," I tell him.

"Who?" he counters, my grandfather's eyes becoming beady, anger shining in their depths.

I shrug my shoulders because I don't know. "I was never given that information."

"Paulo Ruiz," Julius declares, his body vibrating, hostility radiating from him.

"They wouldn't! That's blasphemous! Traitorous," Geronimo hisses, banging his fists on the slab of the table. "They made a deal with our enemy? That's a death sentence!"

Those words cause a riot to erupt. Things get chaotic, and Julius pushes me behind his son for safekeeping as Luca shoves Mera behind Kruger.

"I think your grandfather's head is about to explode," Mera whispers.

"He's fixing to call for a bloodbath," Gunner expresses.

"I hope you don't have any emotional ties to your brothers, Shayne. Because their lives are fixing to be snipped," Kruger states.

"They can take out all the Crumleys and I'd sleep easier at night," I confide. I'm a firm believer that all life is precious, but there are some that should be snuffed out to keep innocents safe.



When cooler heads prevailed, my grandfather and I found a private space in the corner to get to know each other without prying ears. It almost feels like a confessional without the walls and curtained window between us.

“When this is over, I’d like for you to come and visit your grandmother. When she discovers you’ve been alive all this time, she’s going to mourn the fact that she never had the chance to watch you grow up,” Grandfather states. “I can speak for both of us when I say that we’d like to be in your life from this day forward.”

“I’d like that too,” I admit. “When it’s safe, Julius and I would happily accept any invitations to your home.”

“You and Julius, huh? Sounds like there’s more than friendship between the two of you.”

“He’s my everything, Grandfather.”

“Grandfather is so aloof and impersonal,” he mutters.

“What would you prefer me to call you?” I ask him.

“*Nonno*. That’s the Italian connotation for grandfather used in our homeland. It sounds more intimate and less superficial,” he answers.

“Alright. *Nonno* it is,” I compromise. It is more personable, but I wasn’t sure we were at that stage just yet.

But if it makes him happy, I can allow this. It’s kind of nice to not be so clinical when it comes to my blood kin relations. Before, he was a person on paper, but nothing more.

“Are you happy, *Nipotina*... granddaughter? If you’re not, I can take you and your friend home with me. We can keep you both safe. I’ll even take you two and your grandmother to Italy until I can neutralize the threat of your brothers here.”

“I appreciate the offer, *Nonno*, but I’m going to marry that man. I’d like to stay with him. I hope you harbor no ill feelings toward him. He really did everything with the best of intentions. Nothing he did was to hide me from you, but he was forced to wait until he believed things were safe for you to find out about me. We weren’t sure what Garrick had told you

in regard to the rift between them, and we had to know which side you were truly on. We couldn't take the chance of being reeled into an ambush."

"We, huh?" He chuckles. "So, he lets you know about his business?"

"Only those parts that need my input or regard my safety. You should've seen his face when I asked to be bait to lure my brothers out from whatever rock they're hiding under."

"A worthy man would've said no the second the idea passed your lips. I'm assuming that's what he said," *Nonno* states, an eyebrow raised in my direction as he waits for me to confirm that is exactly what happened.

"I think he wanted to spank me and lock me behind closed doors for suggesting such a thing." I giggle. "Of course, he never said that, but it's the feeling I got. He did get all growly though."

"He's a good man. An honorable man in my opinion. I endorse this match between the two of you, if my approval means anything to you, *Nipotina*."

"It does, it really does, *Nonno*."

"Well. I think we better get you to your man before he comes and grabs you for himself. He's looking a bit antsy with you being so far away from him." *Nonno* chuckles.

"Yeah. Can I tell you a secret? I kinda love that about him," I divulge.

"I bet you do, little one." He stands and offers me his hand.

Before escorting me to the love of my life, he gives me a hug and tells me how proud he is of the woman I've become.

He admires my strength and adores my loyalty.

I may have shed a tear or two.



CHAPTER 22

JULIUS

AS WE MAKE OUR WAY OUT OF THE BUNKER, MAZIMO AND I come to a truce. An alliance I'm grateful to have because it's time to make our move. I want Shayne settled, and I want to give her the wedding of her dreams, which she can't have until this shit is resolved. The Fitzgeralds will assist us in drawing out Mazimo's grandsons and they'll help us subdue the siblings so we can eliminate the threat they pose.

He also admitted that the reason his ex-son-in-law has been so quiet and missing in action is because he's been captured and is being held prisoner by the Fitzgerald organization.

According to Mazimo, he'd become unpredictable and was acting like a lunatic. They weren't sure if he'd finally cracked or if he just didn't give a damn who was hurt. It was drawing attention that didn't need to be drawn to them.

Not knowing where he was had been a burden on mine and Luca's shoulders. With that being lifted, we can put our full attention on his sons.

Out of nowhere, a bullet pings on the ground at our feet, gravel flying up from the lot, sprinkling around us.

"Sniper!" Gunner yells, hovering over me as I yank Shayne into my arms.

My soldiers and the DreamCatchers circle around us, encasing us in the middle, acting as a barrier between us and the shooter.

“Back inside the bunker!” Kruger shouts, guiding us in that direction.

As soon as our feet hit the slab of concrete, a bullet hits the metal door in front of us, bouncing off it. The girls scream in terror. Shayne’s shaking in my arms, but we’re like rats in a maze being led from one end of the lot to the other. Every place we try to seek shelter gets hit.

“It’s a trap!” Country bellows, motioning to the trees adjacent to us. “We’re surrounded.”

Movement to my left has me looking that way. Master starts pulling broken down parts of his manmade rifle out from his pockets, constructing it with precise ease. I knew that he made his own weapons but I’ve never seen the beginning product before it’s been assembled. Less than three minutes, which feels like a lifetime later, he has it together and is looking through his scope as he scans the vegetation.

“How many?” Gunner asks him.

“I’m counting five,” Master comments.

“Can you take them out?” I inquire, pissed off that Shayne’s in the line of fire.

I knew, my gut told me, that bringing her wasn’t a good idea, but I was running out of alternatives. Even with the additional security, we aren’t as well protected as I had hoped we’d be. The Crumleys have grown impatient and are persistent in doing whatever it takes to get their hands on their sister, even if she gets injured along the way.

The way our vehicles are parked, the only place we could find coverage is in front of the cars. I have Shayne pressed firmly into the grill of ours, her head resting on the bumper. I’m praying that our bulletproofing withstands the amount of firepower it’s undergoing.

“I can reach three, but the other two are impossible. I don’t have the right ammo to pierce or get through because they’ve positioned themselves behind armor shields,” Master remarks, his body vibrating with rage.

“Shields?” Kruger asks. “Explain. Do you mean medieval-like shields used by knights and shit?”

“Exactly like that but they’re thicker, heavier, and look government issued. I’d heard talk of them being available at some point in the future. They’re intended to be provided to the armed forces who’ve been placed at the front lines during war for better protection. I didn’t know they’d already been released,” Master answers with a tinge of awe in his voice.

“Where are the other two?” Powerhouse asks, his mind already mapping out a way to get to them and take them out of the equation.

Instead of verbally answering, Master hands over his rifle and points them out so he can see them and memorize their layout in the scope.

“I’ll take that one.” Powerhouse aims his finger to the west, and with an inhuman speed, dashes toward the foliage and disappears from sight.

“Fuck, he’s good,” Kruger whistles.

Geronimo does some sort of kung-fu roll and asks Master to show him where the other is stationed. Once he’s had the enemy in his sights, he lets Master know that he’s going to “Make that motherfucker his bitch.” As if my eyes are playing tricks on me, and he’s made of smoke, he vaporizes into thin air.

I see his form sprinting to the east, but it’s more like a blur, like a shadow.

Swear to fuck, I’m starting to wonder if supernatural beings are realistic and not folklore. Realistically, I know it’s their training. My men are good, but it’s still unnerving the way they just disappear the way they do. It’s just unnatural. Ma always said there’s more out there than meets the eye. She was psychic in a way, but I’ve never seen anything, and I’ve seen some crazy-ass shit in my day. Which leads me to believe it’s anything other than make-believe.

“We need to get the girls into the cars,” I tell Gunner. “They need to be out of the open area and out of the direct line of

fire. They're too vulnerable and those assholes' goal is to get their hands on my woman!"

"They could get hit if we move them, Pops," Gun defends.

All the "should haves" begin roaming through my mind.

We should have parked sideways.

We should have left them underground with the others.

We should have forced the Fitzgerald organization to come to us, no ifs ands or buts about it.

But I caved, and that's on me.

I keep one eye on the fight surrounding me, and the other on my soon-to-be wife—my entire life.

"I'm scared, Julius," Shayne whimpers.

"I know, baby. I know. It'll be over soon." I lie because I have no idea if after we take these dickheads out if others will be waiting for us down the road.

Closing my eyes, I do something that's not normal for me, unless I'm under duress and don't feel there's any other chance of saving me from my enemies—I pray.

I pray for my men's safety.

I pray that Shayne never sees the death and destruction around her.

I pray that she stays as pure and innocent in the future as she is now.

And most of all, I pray that we all live to see another day.

What feels like hours later, the spray of bullets stops, and beautiful silence greets my ears.

"Is it over?" Shayne whines.

"It's over." Gunner responds to her question because I was too busy being lost in my head to give her an accurate answer.

"Take me home, Julius. I just want to go home. Now. Right now." My breathtaking woman cries in my arms, her entire

body slack in my arms, a drop of adrenaline wearing on her, causing her to become fatigued.

“Okay, baby. Let’s go home,” I say, cautiously hauling her up from her crouched position so her limbs don’t stiffen.

I nudge her behind me—sheltering her from probable harm by using my body to cloak her from any unforeseen danger.

“Julius, we’d like to add an extra layer of protection in getting you home,” Mazimo states. “In my experience, it’s better to separate the heads of the family in case another attack like the one we just faced occurs. If you’re both together, it makes it easier for them to target you and capture you. Someone still needs to lead in the aftermath of such a travesty.”

“What are you suggesting?” I question.

“That you and the ladies ride with us, and Luca is in your car. It’s the safest way to get you home,” Geronimo facilitates, doing his duty as the secondhand man of the Fitzgerald enterprise.

“It’s a good idea,” Luca insists.

“I’m going with you,” Mera adamantly states, grabbing onto Luca as if he’ll evaporate.

“Curly Sue.” He sighs. “It’s safer for you to go with Shayne and Julius.”

“Not happening, bad boy. I’m with you. Get over it. We talked about this,” Mera reminds him, gritting the words out between her teeth.

“So we did,” he murmurs. “Mera’s with me.”

The girls hug and we crawl into Mazimo’s car. Luca and Mera get into ours. Geronimo gets into the Fitzgerald’s secondary vehicle, and my men get into theirs. The boys straddle their bikes and take up the front and rear of our brigade. Soon afterward, we head out at a fast pace as we speed down the back road.

I feel like the president being escorted to the White House by the secret service.



CHAPTER 23

SHAYNE

WE DON'T EVEN MAKE IT FIVE MILES FROM THE BUNKER before more havoc greets us.

“Persistent motherfuckers,” *Nonno* grits out as he yanks a gun from the waistband of his trousers. “You have a weapon, Julius?”

“Always,” my man states, opening up his suit jacket, and pulling his own out from his shoulder holster. “Never leave home without it.”

I knew he had a gun on him. I felt it pressed into me on several occasions, but knowing, and seeing, are two different things.

“Down on the floorboards, baby,” Julius soothingly orders me, helping lower me onto the car’s carpeting. “No matter what, keep your head down, okay?”

“Yes,” I reply, using the only intelligible word I’m capable of speaking.

“Love you, temptress.”

“Love you too, Julius.”

The sounds of gunfire and squealing of tires meets my ears.

The sound is so loud, deafening, and disturbing that I lift my hands to muffle my ears. I begin spouting every Hail Mary I know and making the sign of the cross across my chest.

The car swerves around the bikes. Our windows are rolled down as *Nonno* and Julius aim out them and at our

adversaries.

I hear a few collisions, shouts, screeching tires, and other mismatched sounds that have me rocking on my knees and babbling like a baby.

This is insanity!

If I were braver, I'd offer myself up as tribute to save every man, as well as Mera, that are doing their best to protect me.

The wrath of my brothers is not something I want to face head-on. Their cruelty knows no bounds.

They'll make me pay with their heavy hands before flinging me to the man they chose for me. Pure evilness flows through their veins courtesy of our father.

I fear them more than I do death itself.

I'd kneel before the grim reaper and welcome him to pay me a visit. I'd even go willingly with him, invite him to sit with me for a cup of tea, before allowing my brothers to have me in their clutches.

Garrick, Gideon, Graham, and Gavriel are far scarier to me than facing the devil himself.

I fear no one on this earth like I do them. That's saying a lot since there are a lot of unknown demons and likewise devility that the nuns predict that walk among men.

My head ducks further into my chest as the ricochets of projectiles, which sounds like a multitude of rocks slamming into the car, picks up. I hear some sort of boom behind us which has me crying out.

"Wh-what was that?" I shakily ask, never moving my eyes from their subservient position. Whatever it was, gives me an eerie feeling and the fine hairs on my arms stand upright.

"No!" Julius shouts, his tone distraught.

Even with me not knowing what caused his howl of despair, tears tumble down my cheeks. I can feel his heartbreak.

"Are they alive? Find out if they're alive, dammit!" Julius thunders, his anxiety intense and contagious.

My teeth chatter as my body uncontrollably shudders.

The only reason he'd be freaking out would be if it was one of his boys or his brother that was injured.

Oh, God, Mera's with Luca.

"W-who, Julius? Who?" I shriek.

"Fuck! Fuck! Luca and Mera's car just flipped and they're surrounded. Someone find out if they're alive, dammit!" Julius roars.

Lifting up my shaking hand, I place it on his knee. Not only to console him, but to steady and ground myself as well. This is my worst nightmare coming true. It's the reason why I wanted to leave my best friend behind at the convent in the beginning. I knew if she came with me, she'd pay the repercussions from it, and that's what I wanted to avoid.

"The boys are going back," *Nonno* says.

It's then, with that proclamation, that I notice the purr of the motorcycles' engines are less noisy, and not as many are surrounding us. It means some of them went back to try and help my friend and Luca.

"Turn around. We need to go help them, Julius!" I yelp. "They need us."

"No, *Nipotina*. We can't, sweet girl. This entire thing rests around you. If we give them what they want, we're all dead," *Nonno* explains.

"That's not right, *Nonno*. Julius, tell him. Tell him that if they have me, this whole thing will end and everyone will be safe. Tell him, Julius. Tell him!" I screech.

"I can't, Shayne, because he's right," Julius laments. "If they get us all, they can take us all out in one fell swoop. Not only would they take you, but we'd die as a result, and my family would be compromised. That's something I can't allow."

"So we sacrifice them instead?" I bawl out the question.

"No, baby. Now, we get serious. We get them back, and we kill them all," Julius growls.

I lift my head at his snarling and notice his irises are just as dark as his pupils. I've never seen this side of him before. This is the monstrous side of him he's warned me about.

The one he never wanted me to see for myself.

But instead of fearing this side of him, it anchors me. I know that if Mera and Luca survived that, that he'll find them and my brothers will rue the day they were born.

There will be no mercy for them.



When we pull up to the mansion, things get hectic and erratic. Julius frenziedly drags me behind him, driven by paranoia to get me behind the safety of these brick-and-mortar walls. Then he begins to frantically bark out orders and ask for any updates from the men who made it back with us.

Kruger gets on some sort of two-way radio and begins shouting out question after question. The updates aren't good.

Not ones we want to hear. My heart fractures into so many tiny shards that they can't be glued back together.

Not until the rest of our family is back with us, anyway.

The chirping answers make my knees grow weak and I nearly tumble. The whooshing of my blood flowing through my veins can be heard in my ear canal, making me grow dizzy.

“Gunner's been shot. Country's bike was swept out from underneath him. It hasn't been confirmed, but we think he has a broken bone and can't stand up on his legs without going down. We think it's his hips. Shamus and Master took off to follow the car Luca and Mera were shoved in, but the prognosis on that isn't a good one because they're outnumbered.”

“No,” I whisper.

“They're alive, *Nipotina*. That's good. It means we have time to get them back,” *Nonno* soothes.

His cooing does nothing to dispel my inward misery. I'm still in turmoil. If anything, it makes my imaginary diagnosis ten times worse.

"They'll be tortured until they give in and answer their questions," I murmur. "This is not good news, *Nonno*. They'll know all the secrets of this house before the day is over."

"If they do break, temptress, they still won't get you. I'll have soldiers hidden in every nook and cranny of this place. I will get them back, Shayne. I swear to you," Julius states, stalling in his steps to wrap me in his arms. "I'll get them back if it's the last thing I do."

"I know you will." The only problem is, will it be the last thing he ever does?

Will I end up losing them all? Lose the only family I've ever had?

I should've kept my meeting with my brothers a secret and just did as they asked of me. At least that way, nobody would be crucified for me and my innate need for freedom.



CHAPTER 24

JULIUS

GUNNER ENDED UP JUST HAVING A GRAZE THAT MY DOCTOR ON staff easily treated by stitching it up, bandaging the wound and giving him a dose of antibiotics.

Country has a compound fracture in his femur, so he's off the streets and is on office duty, working behind the scenes, gathering intel from our sources.

Shamus and Master followed the car that shuttled Luca and Mera away as far as they could travel until they eventually ran out of gas. They were hours away from us so it took them over an hour to push their bikes to a gas station to fill up their tanks since they were in an isolated location. At least we now have a direction to head in.

Hours and days pass by with no word from the Crumleys. There's been no ransom call, and the longer they're missing, the further Shayne sinks into herself. She's hardly eating, barely sleeping, and the circles under her eyes darken by the minute. I can't stand to see the disappointment aimed my way as each hour passes by and I don't have any more answers to provide to her. I've chosen to evade her unless we brush by each other in the hallways.

It makes me feel like a coward, but the only way I can ever put a smile back on her face is to locate Mera and bring her home.

Some of the girls, Charlee, Hemmi, Star, and Dottie, have come above ground during the daytime, leaving the kids with the other women while they try to help Shayne cope.

“Pops?” Charlee calls out my name as I hang up the phone. She knocks on my office door to be polite since she knows I’m drowning, and most of the time, I’m angry—very, very angry.

So unlike myself, it’s bringing up feelings from the past, emotions from the time I lost my truest love. That’s not to say I don’t love Shayne, because I do, but it’s a diametrical love. My adoration between the two women isn’t comparable. It’s just different, but both just as strong and fulfilling.

“What is it, Charlee girl?” I ask, trying to sound more upbeat than I am so that she’s not worried about speaking with me.

“I don’t know how to broach this, Pops.” She sighs.

“Since when are you hesitant to speak your mind, little girl. Spit it out. I have a few more phone calls I need to make before I head into town to meet with some informants.”

“I need you to do something for me while you’re in town, Pops.”

When I go to ask what that is, she holds up her hand, her palm facing me to halt me from saying anything further. I bob my head down to indicate she has the floor, and I’ll hear her out while keeping my lips zipped until she’s through.

“I need you to stop by the pharmacy and pick up a pregnancy test, Pops.”

“For whom?” I suspiciously ask.

“That doesn’t matter until I can confirm my hunch,” she answers.

“The hell it doesn’t,” I growl. “Who, Charlee girl?”

“I think you may have knocked Shayne up, Pops. With a baby.”

Does she seriously think I don’t know what the term knocked up means? I may not have been born in this decade, but I wasn’t born yesterday.

“Say what now? Repeat that to me, Charlee. This isn’t the time to pull a prank on me. I’m holding on by a thread.”

“Pops.” She murmurs my name like I’m dense and need educating. “She’s throwing up more than she’s eating. Her belly is swelling, and her boobs are twice their normal size. She’s popping out of her bras and her clothes are tight. Have you really not noticed this? Have you even seen her lately or are you holding yourself up in the office twenty-four hours a day?”

“I’m trying to find and save my brother and her best friend, Charlee! I’m not trying to punish her or stay away from her on purpose. Don’t judge me!”

“I’m not judging, Pops. I’m not,” she says, holding up both of her hands. “All I’m insinuating is that maybe you need to take a few minutes out of your day and spend some time with her. She’s floundering. If she falls any deeper into her depression, you may lose her, lose them both if my intuitions are right.”

“Dammit,” I hiss, banging on my desk as my head hammers with a throbbing headache that hasn’t lessened in days. “This is the worst timing ever for this to happen.”

“Maybe. But is there ever a good time with the life we lead, Pops?”

“No. There’s not,” I answer my daughter honestly. “But until I know where they’re being held, I can’t stop and coddle anyone.” I’m disappointed that I can’t crawl into bed behind my woman and hold her until this nightmare is over.

“Pops. Coddle her, really? Don’t say stupid shit like that to her. Ever. It’s demeaning,” she berates me, quirking her eyebrow and popping out her hip.

“I didn’t mean it that way,” I defend myself. “However, if I stop following our leads, we could lose two members of our family who are depending on us to pull out all the stops and not quit fighting for their retrieval. Their survival rests on our shoulders. What do you think Shayne would want me to focus on more, that, or her? I’m not just doing this for me, Charlee girl. I’m doing it for her too... for all of us. We’d never be able to live with ourselves if something happened to them because I decided to take a timeout.”

“A few minutes without you won’t hurt anything, Pops. Stop being an asshole who uses every excuse in the books to not go see her. She’s depending on you too. You’re her emotional support person outside of Mera, and right now, you’re the only one here to give that to her.”

“Would you quit pretending like you’re my parent and it’s not the other way around? I’m your father for fuck’s sake! The way you’re speaking to me is unacceptable!” I roar.

“Then stop acting like a petulant child and be the adult you claim you are!” she shouts, slamming her palm on the doorframe before rushing out of my office with angry stomps echoing down the hallway behind her.

“Well, that was a fun conversation,” I muse, scrubbing my hands down my scruffy face. I haven’t seen a razor in several days. I hop in the shower to do a quick scrub down, then hop out and continue on with my mission.

“Pops.” Gunner sighs.

“You heard that, huh, son?”

“Yeah. As much as I hate to admit this, Charlee’s right. You need to go check on your woman. Reassure her that no matter what it takes, we will bring Uncle Luca and Mera home. Convince her that she’s done nothing wrong, and that this isn’t her fault. She’s spiraling, Pops. The only one who can keep her from falling down that hole is you.”

“Can you man the phones?” I ask.

“Of course, I can. That’s a ridiculous question.” He snorts, giving me the stink eye. “I’ve got this. Get outta here. Get some sleep while you’re at it.”

“Is that an order, President?”

“And if it is?” he counters.

“You and your sister have gotten too big for your britches,” I gripe.

“And who made us that way, Pops?”

“Touché, Gunner. Now fuck off.”

“You first, old man.” He snickers.

“I’ve got your old man,” I mumble, shuffling to the door.

“Don’t forget where you come from, boy.”

“The old man swinging between your legs?” he asks, making a gagging sound.

“Exactly!”

“Yuck, Pops. That’s fucking gross.”

“It’s the facts of life, son. Do we need to have the birds-and-bees talk again? Do I need to remind you of how it all works?”

“Absolutely fucking not. The first time was traumatizing enough. I didn’t want to fuck one of the bunnies for months after that detailed lesson. Where the hell did you get your hands on those books anyway? They were fucking graphic.”

“Your ma got them from the library,” I answer.

“Why is it that that’s not shocking,” he mumbles, his body quivering in distaste. “Some of those images scarred me for life.”

“As they should’ve. There are consequences to our actions, son. Your ma wanted to make sure you were well aware of what could happen if you didn’t wrap your willy up.”

“My willy, Pops? Really?”

“That’s all your ma, son. She couldn’t even think of it as a cock or a dick. Not when it came to her precious boy.”

“That’s not true. The time she caught me... in the act, she threatened to cut my dick off after she swatted it with a wooden spoon.” That causes me to laugh hysterically. “Not funny, old man. I wasn’t wearing any clothes and that shit hurt for days. I couldn’t even take a piss without having sharp pains.”

“Bet you made sure you were in the clear after that,” I guess.

“Never fucked one of the club bitches again unless I knew Ma was either out of town, or asleep in her bed at y’all’s house,” he confirms. “Now stop reminiscing over my scars and go take care of your woman.”

“Bossy fucker.”

“Again, Pops. Who’s fault is that?”

“Come get me if you hear any news, Gunner.”

“You’ve got it, old man. Now, shoo. The grownups have some work to do.”

The lightness of our conversation, the banter with my kid, it’s what I need right now. Along with the wake-up call both he and his sister just gave me. I tend to get lost in my head, especially when one of my own has been taken against their will or injured.

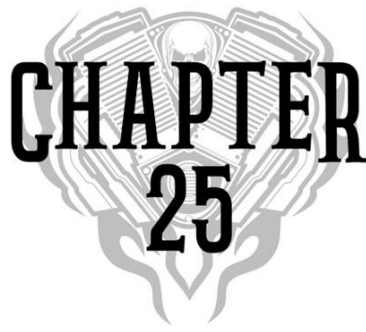
And Luca and Mera? I’m feeling guilty that I wasn’t as prepared as I’d thought we were.

I should’ve known better. The Crumbley assholes have been ahead of us every step of the way.

Not this time.

I’m getting my brother and his woman back, and once I do... I’m going to decimate their entire organization.

Limb by motherfucking limb.



CHAPTER 25

SHAYNE

I WANT TO CEASE BEING THIS ZOMBIE VERSION OF MYSELF, BUT no matter how much I fight off the depression, the harder it is to dig myself out of the foggy mass. It's encompassing me, dragging me into a dark pit of despair.

It's not just Mera's being in danger lurking in the background of my mind that makes it hard to breathe, it's that I miss Julius to the depths of my psyche. He keeps himself distanced from me which only adds to my bereft emotions. Food tastes bland, and sleep only comes with bad dreams where I relive that day in a cyclone of never-ending nightmares.

My heart isn't broken, it's taken a hiatus. I'm becoming numb with each passing second. The longer I experience the aloofness between us, the worse it becomes. Self-loathing has wrapped itself around me in a blanket of darkness. Even with the girls telling me it's not my fault, their words begin to feel like lies.

"Shayne? Temptress, are you awake, baby?" Julius asks as he scoots into the bed beside me. The depression of the mattress has me billowing back into him. "I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry it's taking me so damn long to bring your girl back to you."

"Not your fault," I rasp. "They did this, not you."

"In my head, I know that, but in my heart, I carry all the blame," he tells me.

“I miss her, Julius. I didn’t realize how vital she was in my life until she was gone,” I confide. “I don’t just want her back. I *need* her back.”

“We’re getting closer, baby. I can feel it,” he expresses, banging on his chest vehemently.

“But, Julius, I need you too. I’m so terrified and lonely without you.”

“I don’t mean to neglect you, baby. I’m working hard to bring her back to you. That’s all I’m focused on so that you and I can make our dreams come true. I know that without them, our lives will never be complete. We can’t get married without your maid of honor and my best man. Shayne?”

“Yes, Julius,” I say, rolling over to face him.

“Are you pregnant?”

“I—” I stop talking in order to lick my bottom lip that suddenly feels dry and chapped. “I might be.”

His arms band tighter around me as he digs his nose into my hair, breathing me in. “Charlee said your clothes aren’t fitting anymore, but, baby, I can feel your ribcage. You’ve lost weight.”

“I’m a conundrum. What can I say?” I tease.

This is the first time since the ordeal that I’ve felt like carrying on a conversation. If that doesn’t say how pertinent Julius is in my life, the fact that he makes me want to feel something other than numbness, then nothing else can express that.

He is the oxygen in my lungs. He’s become the key component to my survival. Mera’s all I’ve ever had, and Julius is right up there with her. He’s surpassed her in a way. Not that that’s lessened her importance to me, but he’s enhanced my viewpoint on the outside world and has opened my heart to love.

Even Luca has wormed his way in there. He’s not my best friend, he’s not my life partner, but he’s my family—my brother. What a brother should be, unlike mine. He’d never sell me to the highest bidder. Mera, as my sister, neither would

she, and that's why I think nobody's tried to infiltrate this stronghold.

They don't know how.

They haven't been told the secrets, which is why I'm in melancholic agony. I know that their loyalty to me means that they're being tortured for that information.

Neither of them will give.

They'd die first, and that can't happen. I'd never be able to deal with the survivors' guilt that comes with it.



I must've fallen asleep in Julius's arms mid-conversation, because when I awaken, Charlee is sitting on the bed next to me with a book in her hand.

"We got you one of those fancy pregnancy tests from the pharmacy. Did you know you have to ask a pharmacist for them? They don't put those suckers on the shelf like they do condoms. I've never seen Bull's face so red from embarrassment. It's a look I'll never forget and one he'll never live down," Charlee rambles, a mirthful smirk on her face and in her eyes. "It was hilarious, Shayne."

"Thank you?" I say, fashioned more as a question instead of a statement. Now, Bull's not the only one embarrassed.

"No time like the present, Shayne."

"Now? You want me to take it now?" I ask, horrified that she'll be on the other side of the door, listening to me pee.

"Grab life by the horns, Shayne. No time like the present," she rebuts, waving her hand toward the attached bathroom.

Groaning, I roll out of bed. On my way to the bathroom, a picture catches my attention. "Do you think she'd hate me?" I ask my friend, stroking my finger down her ma's face.

"For what? What would she hate you for, Shayne?"

“For this,” I say, gripping my lower belly with my free palm.

“Shayne, I’m gonna tell you something about my ma, okay?” She waits for me to nod, and once I do, she continues. “My ma was unique. She was the most generous, loving, and forgiving woman who ever lived. She loved Pops with a voraciousness that’s unheard of. All she’d want for him was to be happy, to find love again, and live his life with that woman at his side. She’d never view you as competition. If anything, she’d see you as an extension of herself. Anyone truly devoted to Pops, a woman who loved him just as fiercely, she’d be supportive of. As a matter of fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if she was playing matchmaker from the other side of the veil.”

“I’ve heard she was eccentric.” I giggle, remembering some of the peculiar stories Julius has shared with me of her “spiritual”, or as the guys have called it in passing when her name came up, her “freaky” abilities that she attributed to her Native American ancestry.

She sounds like she was an amazing woman—someone I wish I’d had the chance to meet. Although, I do have to say, there’s something familiar about her, as if I’ve met her in my dreams. But that’s ridiculous, right? She didn’t know me so that’s not a probability.

I say a quiet thank you to her as I march into the bathroom, determined in my demeanor. *I can do this*. It won’t be bad no matter what that little test says.



“What does pink mean again?” I ask Charlee as I pace the bedroom. She has the directions in her hands as I hold the testing strip in mine.

“It means you’re knocked up, have a bun in the oven. You’re gonna have a baby in T minus nine months give or take,” she teasingly remarks. “I’m gonna be a big sister!”

“Your dad is—”

“Gonna shit his pants.” She finishes my sentence for me.

“Yeah. That,” I agree.

“No he’s not,” Julius says from behind me. “He’s going to be thrilled because this is his second chance.”

“Julius,” I whisper, tears streaking down my cheeks. “You’re happy? You swear?”

“I swear it on my life, temptress.”

“Sure you’re not too old to start over, Pops?” Charlee taunts her dad. “I mean, you have grandkids that’ll be older than this kiddo.”

“Get outta here, Charlee girl. And wash your mouth out with soap while you’re at it. Your palate needs to be cleansed,” Julius rumbles, radically sighing while shaking his head at her playful antics.

“I’m happy for you, Pops,” she whispers, but not low enough that I don’t hear her.

“Thank you, baby girl,” he replies, his voice raw with emotion.

Julius shuts the door behind him with the heel of his boot. “What’s with the attire?” I ask as he winds me up in his arms, pulling me deep into his pecs, and kissing the top of my scalp.

“We found them, baby. We’re riding out in twenty minutes, but I needed to see you first. No matter what happens today, I want you to know how much I love you, how happy you make me, and how ecstatic I am about our future.” He cups my belly and strokes his thumb over it. “You and this little one, y’all are my everything.”

“Be careful, Julius. You have a lot to come home to now.”

“Even if it was only you I’d be coming home to, it’d still be a lot. You are my world. I’ll be back, temptress, and when I am, I’m going to have our wayward siblings with me,” he avows. “I’m not sure what shape they’ll be in when we find them, so I’ve called in our doctor to be here on standby. He’s going to give you a checkup in the meantime. This will be the only time

I won't be at your side when it comes to checking on our little one."

"I look forward to each visit. Do you have backup? Are *Nonno* and his troops going with you?" *Nonno* hasn't left town since finding me. He's been close by in case we need him—I need him. Secretly, I think he's scared that if he lets me out of his sight, I'll disappear again. And my *Nonna*, which she insisted I call her the only time I've spoken with her over the telephone, would skin his hide if that happened—his words, not mine.

Even though I barely spoke a word during the phone call and *Nonno's* visits, I've discovered that they can carry on a conversation without my input. They fill the awkward space for me.

With one last kiss, and a smack to my rump, he walks out the door.

"Be safe. Come home."



EPILOGUE

JULIUS

“IT’S TIME TO PULL YOUR CUT OUT OF RETIREMENT, OLD MAN,” Gunner says before roaring, “Grab your gear, pick a bike, because today, we end this war. Let’s reclaim our lives and let’s ride!” The men surrounding us hoot and holler.

“Asphalt on the ground and beneath your feet,” Kruger adds. “Don’t knock your heads on it. Got it?”

“We’ve got it. Stop stressing, VP,” Texas grumbles. “You’re like a damn papa bear.”

“Watch it fucker, or my claws will pay you a personal visit,” Kruger retorts.

Shaking my head at their bantering, I head to the one closet that hasn’t been opened in years. Cobwebs cake the surface of the jamb and knob. Opening it up, I go straight to the coat locker behind the dusty door in the garage. I yank my cut from its protective garment bag and slide it over my shoulders.

Instantly, this feels right. Like being welcomed by an old friend I haven’t seen in a very long time.

The buttery-silk leather feels good against my skin and cloaked around my torso. It reminds me of how special the men I’ve either raised, or the ones who I’ve brought into the stronghold of the DreamCatcher Motorcycle Club, are. It’s brought me back home, to my roots, to what was once mine and Ma’s new beginning.

Am I crossing boundaries that I once swore I'd never defy again? Abso-fucking-lutely. But sometimes, promises made, even if they're made to yourself, are meant to be decimated.

"Round 'em up, boys. We've got a mudhole to stomp in someone's ass," I decree, a vicious smile spreading along my face.

This is a new era.

The beginning of a unique partnership between the DreamCatchers and the *Familia*.

We'll be a force to be reckoned with.

It's time for Diablo to ride again.

LUCA

They made one crucial error when they stripped me down. They took my suit jacket, they took my shoestrings, and my belt, but these dumbasses, they left my tie hanging around my neck in a loose noose. Only it won't be me my necktie chokes. No, it'll be theirs.

"Touch her again, and I'll rip your fingers from your hands one digit at a time," I threaten the guard who has a hard-on for my girl.

He chuckles at me, then taunts me, "What are you going to do from your cell, pretty boy? You can't touch me and you know it. So stop with the theatrics, huh?" Guard one continues antagonizing me.

It's what guard number two says that has my ire amping up at an all-time high. "You're going to make us a pretty penny at the auction, sweet thing."

"I'll kill you!" I roar, yanking on the chains that have me anchored to the concrete block walls. "I'll kill you, your momma and your daddy, fuckface!"

"Aww, what did my folks ever do to you to warrant such threats?" Guard two inquiries.

"They spawned you," I remark with no shits given.

"I've got a surprise for you," Guard one murmurs.

“Yeah? What’s that motherfucker?” I grit out the question.

“You’ll be sold in a different sort of auction. Bids are already coming in. Seems you’ve made yourself a list of enemies, Mr. Alvarez.” Mera’s whimpering has goosebumps pebbling my skin.

“If I don’t end you, my brother will,” I inform him, my eyes catching Mera’s. I don’t remove them from her, watching her, silently telling her with my look that neither of us will be sold. Julius and the boys will be coming for us. And if they don’t make it on time, I will fight until my last dying breath to get us out of here.

“Ya think? Him and what army?” I don’t see which one asks this, but it doesn’t matter. Soon, they’ll both be eternally silenced.

“Prepare to meet your makers, boys. Because your days are limited,” I rage, harassing them.

“Is that a threat, Mr. Alvarez?”

“No. It’s a damn promise,” I state, staring deeper into Mera’s eyes, giving her an oath. “It’s a fact. We’re going home and you’ll be dead.”

THE END

Luca’s book is coming soon-ish. All of your open-ended questions will be answered in his and Mera’s story. Stay tuned for further details.

STALK LIBERTY



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6. Capone

7. A Twisted Kind Of Love

RGMC Box Set 1 (Books 1-3)

RGMC Box Set 2 (Books 4-7)

Rebellious Christmas (RGMC Novella) (with Darlene Tallman)

WHERE ARE THEY NOW:

(with Darlene Tallman)

Braxton

Hatchet

Chief

REBEL GUARDIANS NEXT GENERATION:

(with Darlene Tallman)

1. Talon & Claree
2. Jaxson & Ralynn
3. Maxum & Lily

New Beginnings:

(with Darlene Tallman)

1. Reclaiming Maysen
2. Reviving Luca
3. Restoring Tig

NELSON BROTHERS:

(with Darlene Tallman)

1. Seeking Our Revenge
2. Seeking Our Forever
3. Seeking Our Destiny

The Nelson Brothers Trilogy

NELSON BROTHERS GHOST TEAM SERIES:

(with Darlene Tallman)

1. Alpha

Bravo

RESCUING SAVIOR:

(Liberty Parker with Darlene Tallman)

SHARED WORLD BOOKS

Old Ladies Club:

(with Kayce Kyle, Erin Osborne and Darlene Tallman)

1. Old Ladies Club - Wild Kings MC
2. The Old Ladies Club - Soul Shifterz MC
3. Old Ladies Club - Rebel Guardians MC
4. Old Ladies Club - Rage Ryders MC

The Old Ladies Club Take One

SAVAGE WILDE:

1. Uninhibited: by Liberty Parker
2. Desire: by Darlene Tallman
3. Crave: by Kayce Kyle
4. Shameless: by Liberty Parker & Darlene Tallman... release date TBA

RAVEN HILLS COVEN:

1. Rise of the Raven
2. Whimsical
3. Enchantment
4. Prophecy Revealed

5. Crowning Triumphancy... TBA

Dishonored Angels:

The Beginning: Featuring Hide & Seek plus Search & Find