



Kidnapped
BY MY

MOM'S EX

FLORA FERRARI

CONTENTS

Kidnapped By My Mom's Ex

NEWSLETTER

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

[Chapter 32](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Top Reads](#)

[Professor Ink](#)

[NEWSLETTER](#)

[A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS](#)

[BRATVA BEAR SHIFTERS](#)

[LAIRDS & LADIES](#)

[RUSSIAN UNDERWORLD](#)

[IRISH WOLF SHIFTERS](#)

[INKED BY LOVE](#)

[TEXT ME YOU LOVE ME](#)

[Collaborations](#)

[About the Author](#)

KIDNAPPED BY MY MOM'S EX

AN AGE GAP, CURVY GIRL ROMANCE

A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS, 332

FLORA FERRARI

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

KIDNAPPED BY MY MOM'S EX

She thinks she knows me—her Mom's ex, but she's wrong. I'm a bad man, and I'm going to make her mine.

When Lena's mom goes missing, she's left with a ransom note and one hope—me.

I wanted Lena back then, standing at the door, perfect and curvy in all the right places. But I didn't want to make her mom's life more difficult. Now, there's no choice.

My job is to do bad things, and it's catching up with me.

"I'm doing this to keep you safe," I tell her when I lock her up in my penthouse apartment.

That's what I tell her. This is about her safety, and that's true. It's also true I can't stop fantasizing about her thick, perfect body.

I don't care if she's only twenty-one and I'm forty. I don't care if I had something with her mom. She doesn't know it yet, but she belongs to me.

** Kidnapped By My Mom's Ex is an insta-everything standalone romance with a HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.*

NEWSLETTER

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CHAPTER ONE

Lena

I sit on the couch, the note in my hands, the note that basically tells me they're going to kill my mom. They don't come right out and say it, whoever these assholes are, but I get the message.

We need your daddy's wallet, or you can say goodbye to Mommy. We will send a courier tomorrow at six p.m. to collect the wallet.

The message is written in jagged, almost angry handwriting. They're talking to me like I'm a kid, some scared twenty-one-year-old coward who will bend the second I see this, but I don't even know what they mean. I run my thumb over the words *daddy's wallet*.

I look around at the middle-class living room. The window looks out onto the suburbs. It's a Saturday morning, and a few children are riding their bikes on the street, making that part of me ache, the one that always longs for a family. But I can't think about that now.

This place, the expensive coffee table, the fancy wallpaper, it's all new. We moved in two years ago, five years after Dad died in a plane crash. The crash has been turned into a Netflix show since then. It was a huge tragedy for the world, but it obliterated Mom. She cried all day and night. In our neighborhood, we had to find a way to make money, not just to pay rent but because we were robbed, too.

I stepped up. I worked illegally, cash-in-hand jobs. I tied my hair up in a cap and wore overalls to the warehouse and hoped none of them noticed or cared I was a girl, a *teenage* girl. I had to grow up fast. Then, just like that, we were in a new world—this suburban paradise. I'd always assumed Mom's ex had given her the money. Just before we moved, she'd had a brief month-long relationship with a rich kingpin-type guy, Jamie King. I get the sense this type of cash is nothing to him.

With his dark hair, his strong jaw, those sharp blue eyes, and that smirk on his lips when he glanced my way as if he liked what he saw... No, I can't think about him, either. Although, I might have to call him. The cops were reluctant to register my mom as a missing person. Mom had a girls' trip to Vegas but was supposed to return the day before last. They probably assumed she was on a bender. This note would change their mind, but what if the kidnappers somehow find out?

I stand and grit my teeth. I have to know if Jamie's the one who gave Mom the cash for us to live here. My skin shivers just thinking about him, which is distracting and *not* what I should be doing.

I remember walking into the warehouse, the man laughing at me when I asked for a job and giving me one almost as a joke. Then, the look in his eyes months later when I worked hard and never missed a shift. Not that I liked the work, but I proved myself.

I don't know who's taken my mom. I don't know what they mean by my dad's *wallet*, but I've got a theory. If Jamie didn't pay for this place, then something to do with dad's *wallet* did, whatever that ultimately means. That's why people do things. I learned that the first time somebody broke into our house and took my battered old MP3 player. People are driven by money.

Walking into the foyer, I flip through Mom's address book. She was weirdly proud when she bought this chic table and the leather-bound address book, though she had a cell and had never used an address book before. It was just nice to see her smile. When she told me a barefaced lie about some distant uncle leaving her the money—she actually said this—I turned

off the critical part of my mind. I just accepted it to see her smile. Maybe that was a mistake.

When I find Jamie's number, a tight feeling grips me. I almost feel my legs getting weak. It was so hard not to stare at him the few times he and Mom were around the house together or when he came to pick her up in that ominous black car with the tinted windows.

He was always wearing a sharp suit, his dark hair combed back, old-fashioned, with streaks of silver in it. He had an expensive, shiny watch on his wrist, wearing it casually as he leaned against the car as if nothing mattered. I wanted to run out there and touch the top of his chest, where he'd left a couple of buttons undone.

But nope. My hands are shaking. I'm sitting on the bottom step, I realize. I've stumbled over here. Dammit, this is stupid. I'm on the verge of tears. Mom's missing, and here I am, thinking about her ex.

I take a few moments to gather myself, breathing slowly. Returning to the book, I pick it up, typing Jamie's number into my cell. I don't press *call* right away. I'm terrified I will say something I don't mean to. We never spoke much, literally just *hey* and *hello*.

No, it's time to get it together. Mom could be anywhere, held by anyone. I need to check this clue off the list.

CHAPTER TWO

J amie

Oh, fuck. I'm a bad, bad man, but I can't help myself. After a hard workout, my manhood gets hard, as if in response. All the rage and passion surges through me. Now, I stand in the waterfall shower, the hot water slapping against my body, running down my muscles.

I've got my dick in my hand, stroking, wishing this was happening for real. I shouldn't let myself think like this, not about a woman who's less than half my age—a woman who needs no part in my life. I haven't even seen her in over two years. She was *nineteen* the last time I saw her, standing at the doorway of their shitbox home, my curvy woman with those thick legs on display in her PJ shorts.

She had that *cute-as-fuck* smile on her face. Cautious but tough, like she could handle anything I could give her. In my fantasy, I walk down the path, bring my hands to her breasts, push them together, and feel she's not wearing a bra. I tear down her top and feast on her perfect, full nipples, grinding my hand up her thigh at the same time.

I'm rubbing her pussy, and she's already wet for me. I grab her hips and turn her around. I'm getting close, going far quicker than I would in real life. I'd want—need—to make her cream first. My blood is hot. My body is burning. Precome leaks out of my tip like it's fire.

In the fantasy, she turns, showing me her thick, round, naked ass. She's got that tough smile on her face. "*Fuck me hard. Make me pregnant.*"

Then, I'm doing it, the thrusts in my imagination timed with my hand stroking quickly up and down my cock, slick with shower water. I groan as I lean over, wrap my arms around her, and try to hold her at the end. But as my seed wastefully splatters on the shower floor, she disappears.

I open my eyes. I'm a bad, bad man. I promised myself I'd stop masturbating over her, a nineteen-year-old woman. Well, twenty-one now, but not the last time I saw her. I'm thirty-nine. I've never been much of a math whizz, but that makes me eighteen years older than her. I could've had a *child* who was older than she is now.

Quickly washing myself, I bury the feeling or try to.

"My life is simple," I tell Demon, my Great Dane, who sits very dignified on the corner of the living room couch, watching TV. I sit beside him and stroke his head, putting my feet on the footrest and watching the game or trying to. My hair's still wet from the shower, drawing my mind to what I did. What I *still* want to do. "I do some good, don't I? Enough good for a bad man?"

Demon yawns. He doesn't like it when I talk like this, but I can't talk to anybody else about it. My circle is small. My social life is nonexistent. I've got people I can call if I need them, and they know I'm always here, but I don't talk much. I do my work quietly.

I tilt my head when I hear it—buzzing from deeper in the apartment. I stand, my senses flaring momentarily, but this place is locked down to all hell. If I ever needed to keep somebody here, it'd take a tank to get in or out. Luckily, that's never been the case.

My cell phone is on charge, vibrating against the glass end table in my bedroom. Demon must've thought something bad

was going to happen. He looms at the door, his ears flopping down almost aggressively, his tail perked.

It's a number I don't recognize. I let it go to voicemail, then read the text that the same number sent to me.

It's Lena. I'm not sure you remember me.

I almost laugh at the absurdity of the statement. I remember that tight ponytail in her hair and the spark in her eyes. She's ready to start her adventure with me and our family. She's ready to give herself to me.

My mom's in trouble. I need to ask you a few questions. Please answer.

As soon as I finish reading her text, the phone vibrates again. I sigh and sit on the edge of the bed, wondering what new mess this is. Who has Simone gotten involved with?

I answer the call, making myself cold as I do before violence. Or a job. Or both. "Lena," I say, failing right away. My voice gets too husky. My throat is tight. I wish she were sitting on my lap, my hand resting on her leg. Or her chest, so I could feel her heartbeat. Then I'd lean in and taste her lips.

"J-Jamie?" she says, with a cute stutter. "I need to know something."

"Explain what's happening."

"No, I just... I don't know if I can."

"Can what? Trust me?"

She swallows. I imagine her twisting the phone cord around her hand, even if she's using a cell. Maybe she's biting her lip. Then I see me approaching her, wrapping my arms around her, holding her tight so she doesn't have to be afraid.

"Did you give Mom the money to buy this place?" she says, her voice firmer now. "Yes or no?"

I grit my teeth, goddamnit. "Explain what happened."

"No, I—"

I don't raise my voice, but my tone gets cold. Truly cold. It's how I speak to drug lords and dons and supposed kingpins. "Explain. What. Happened."

CHAPTER THREE

Lena

It's difficult to understand the effect his voice has on me. I'm sitting on the couch, picking at a loose strand of my pants, trying to be as brave as possible. However, his voice makes me feel like a terrified little girl. There's a hint of a threat in it.

Suddenly, it's like I'm hearing myself answer rather than consciously doing it. "Mom didn't return from Vegas. I mean, her flight checked in, the cops said, but she's not here. They think she's just extending her bender, I guess. When I got home earlier, there was a note. It mentioned something about my dad's wallet. Get them Dad's wallet, and I'll see Mom again."

"Read the note to me," he grunts.

I bite down. I almost snapped at him then, but he's speaking like he's used to being in charge. It's weird. There's this underlying threat to everything he says as if he'll somehow hurt me if I don't read the note aloud. He's not the man I've been fantasizing about, that's for sure. Is that a surprise? I never really knew him.

"Lena." Just as gruff, his voice sends a jolt through me. "The note."

I read it aloud. "See, just what I said." Maybe this addition is a little petty, but I'll take what I can get at this point.

"Are you still at home?" he asks.

“Y-yes.”

“Stay there,” he says.

“Wait, you’re coming?”

“Don’t move.”

He hangs up. I almost call him back, but there’s no point if he’s coming here anyway. I walk into the foyer and see myself in the full-length mirror. I’m wearing jeans and a baggy sweater, the outfit I threw on for the library. I’m currently working at a restaurant and also a grocery store. I didn’t do very well in high school, but I enjoy staying busy. The library’s my way of trying to catch up, I guess.

Is it crazy that I want to change outfits? I imagine going upstairs, finding something... feminine, maybe. Maybe he’d like it if I wore an outfit that hugged my curves. I’m not even sure I have any outfits like that, but—

Outfits? I’m standing here when Jamie King is on the way, thinking about *outfits*? What if he’s coming here to hurt me? I never got that sense from him. Scary and intimidating, but he wouldn’t hurt a woman. Not an innocent. He’d always give off that vibe, but maybe I’ve massively misjudged him.

Should I even be at the house when he gets here? Maybe I should go straight to the cops and explain everything, give them the note, and tell them about Jamie’s reaction. If I told them that Jamie King was *instantly* interested, to the point of quickly driving right to me, that would be suspicious, right? They’d be able to question him and get more information.

This is assuming the cops do their jobs right. I’ve seen police do bad things, but I’ve also seen civilians do bad things. I’ve seen people—cops or not—do good things, too. If this was our old neighborhood, there were a couple of beat cops I could probably talk to. I’d seen them do the right thing over the years.

But we’re on the other side of the city, far away from the reek of the docks and the general neglect, the decay. There’s something else, too, that makes absolutely no sense. I trust Jamie King on a deep level, even if I shouldn’t.

Perhaps I'll find a middle ground. Pulling on my sneakers, I walk across the street. It's quieted down now, the kids inside. Music plays from a house at the end of the road, but not loudly, not the ever-present thud-thud-thud that came from our previous neighbor in our old home.

I'm halfway across the street to Joan's house when I realize I have zero clue what I'm doing. I've only known Joan for a year since she moved into the neighborhood. She's a friendly, loving woman in her later years, but that doesn't mean I should get her involved in a potential crime.

"Lena?" she calls, opening her door, wearing a purple, flower-print apron, her black hair up in curlers. "Just on time. I've baked a pie."

"I..." *I wanted to ask if I could hide out in your kitchen to see if Jamie King is here to kill or help me.* Yeah, like I can say that. "I'd love some pie, Joan."

She waves me inside, talking about her son in the Navy. I do my best to listen about his latest escapades in Malta, but mostly, I'm listening out for the *screech* of tires outside or trying not to think about what these people could be doing to Mom. I always did my best to protect her.

"When's Simone back, Lena?" Joan asks, slicing me a piece of pie.

I take the plate and then stand at the counter. "Uh... soon."

She sits at the table without a slice of her own. "Wouldn't you like to sit down?"

"No," I say. "Is that okay?"

She spreads her hands. "You've got young knees. That's it."

I stand at her kitchen window, eating pie from a plate. Joan sits at the small table, looking up at me with a frown. "Something eating you up, dear?"

I swallow a mouthful of pie, delicious, the best pie I've ever had. It is every time. "Oh, no, you know..."

That is a *nothing* statement if ever there was one. I keep eating the pie, making *mmm* noises that have Joan smiling, even if I

can tell she's still suspicious. When I finish the pie, I put it in the sink, then run the faucet.

"Really, dear, you don't have to—"

"Please, and I'll get these for you too." Joan handwashes all her dishes, so there's a stack ready for me to attack. It gives me an excuse to stand here. Luckily, offering to wash her dishes is the least suspicious thing I've done since walking in here. "How have you been, anyway?"

"The sink is almost full, dear."

I look down. She's right, and I haven't put any dish soap in. "Ah, sorry." I pull the plug, my hand burning in hot water, and then refill it properly. "Sorry about the water."

"I have my job at the kiosk, dear. I'm not destitute yet, and dear Martin left me a sizable sum." Her intense pride in her job selling ice cream and candy at the park is one of the reasons I like her so much. "Use all the hot water you need. More importantly, have you found a nice man yet? Or woman?"

I roll my eyes. "You still think the jury's out on that one then, Joan?"

The older lady giggles like a schoolgirl, drumming her fingernails on the table. She loses six decades when she laughs like that. "I haven't seen evidence either way, so for me, yes. Aren't you interested in *anyone*?"

"I know, I know. I'm twenty-one. I'm almost too old."

"Don't get sarcastic with me, young lady," she laughs. "There's a lot you could offer a man."

Maybe there is, but I don't want just any man. Wrongly, I want the person driving the car currently approaching my house. It's the same sleek black vehicle he always drove, with a long hood and gleaming silver spokes.

He steps from the car, not dressed as sharply as usual. He has on baggy sweatpants and a black T, his arms bulging, his fit body moving sleekly toward the house. He goes at a light jog

and then leans against the door, getting ready to drive his shoulder into it. He's going to *break in*.

Just before his shoulder hits, he reaches for the back of his pants. He doesn't lift his T-shirt, and the fabric's color makes any outline difficult to see. What else would he have in there except a gun or a bouquet of flowers?

He shoves the door open, almost like the material is paper, and then runs into the house in broad daylight. Whatever's happening is so extreme that Jamie King, a possible crime lord or a hitman, is willing to break into my home and kill me in broad goddamn daylight.

"Lena?" Joan says when I suddenly walk from the room.

While he's still inside, I've got to do it *now*. My heart hammers as I run from the house. There's still a crazy part of me that wants to trust him. Maybe he thinks somebody could be in there with me. Perhaps he's trying to *save* me, but that's fairytale bullshit. Where I'm from, that's not how the world works.

I grab the car keys from my pocket and quickly climb into my car. I almost fumble the key, but then I get it just as Jamie King appears in the doorway like a horror movie villain, except he's way more handsome.

My tires screech as I pull out of the spot, my breath coming fast. Turning, I drive down the road, but not quickly. I don't want to panic and hit somebody. What's he going to do, anyway? Run me off the road?

Once I leave the street, I turn toward the highway. He's following me, his big black car stalking like a jungle cat. I keep going while working my teeth from side to side, grinding, a bad habit. I had to wear a mouthguard when I slept as a kid for years, only getting worse after Dad died.

Breathing slowly—no panic attacks today, no way—I drive onto the highway. I'll head straight to the police station, all via public roads. His black car stalks onto the highway behind me, but there's nothing he can do. He tried. He failed.

I've got to look out for myself.

CHAPTER FOUR

J amie

Sometimes, I think of myself as a bad man. I've done things in my life, used violence. I'm familiar with firearms. I've made men bleed and scream out for their mothers. There's always a line with me, but not with the men who will take my woman if she doesn't slow the damn car down. Her father's *wallet*. Eugene and his scheme, and my part in the whole mess.

Nobody's touching her. I glide through traffic, trying not to panic. My thoughts are getting damn bloody. There are visions of Lena and the monsters who'd do horrible things to her. All for Eugene. I had no choice but to...

"To what?" As I drive, it's like Jack is floating in the road. Not literally. I'm not nuts, but I imagine what he'd say. *"Stage an impromptu hostage rescue in broad daylight with that little peashooter? Without wearing a mask? Sloppy, kid. Sloppy."*

I tighten my hold on the steering wheel, trying to think. Immediately, without question, my primary mission is to get Lena somewhere safe. It's like this hot fire in my chest, burning away any other impulses. I went about this the wrong way. I'm going to have to lie to her.

I don't want to do that, but what choice do I have? She can't go to the cops. If I'm right about this, she can't go to any law enforcement. I should've said something on the phone and calmed her down. I've never been very good with women, but I've never really cared to be.

Pushing the car ahead, I glide beside her, looking over. She's driving determinedly. She's not even wearing her seatbelt. I slink back, letting her overtake and get ahead. I'm not going to risk her life more than she already is. She should wear the damn thing. It'd be sweet to get in the car, lean over, kiss her cheek and neck, and slip her seatbelt into place. A man could call himself happy if he had that.

"Focus, kid."

Imaginary Jack is right. She's taking an exit. I follow her, two cars behind, then slip in beside her at a four-lane intersection. Rolling my window down at the red light, I call over, "I know where your mom is."

She must hear me through the glass. She lowers her window an inch. "What? Where?"

Poor thing. She's looking at me as if I'm the bad guy. She thinks I'm going to hurt her. I've sometimes wondered if men like me have hearts, but now I know. She's damn near breaking mine. "She's at my apartment. I left you the note. I didn't think you'd figure it out."

I've made my tone cold and dark again. I'm shaking, hating myself for this, for the way she's looking at me. She's my woman. She belongs to me. Her body. Her womb. Her life. She should never look at me like she's afraid. I'll protect her from anything, but I have to say it anyway. The light has turned green. People honk their horns behind us.

"You can follow me," I tell her, "or I'll text you a photo of Simone in roughly an hour if you can recognize her."

Dammit, that hurts to say. I feel like a scumbag. I've spent enough time around criminals to know how they speak and the threats they use. I pull away from the light, turn, look into my rearview, and there she is. It's not like I can even console myself with the fact she'll learn the truth soon. I didn't take her mom.

She won't like what I have to do. Even if she's mine, she won't like it. She has too much toughness and spirit to be caged, but she has no choice.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lena

In my efforts to become a better reader, I've come across the phrase *white-knuckling the steering wheel* a few times. I've always struggled to think of a time I might've done that. Even during those risky years of driving without a license, I was underaged and looking for illegal work around the city. I don't think I did that, even with all my dangerous situations.

However, I am now. My knuckles are straight-up bone. My hand hurts as we drive through the financial district and into the upscale apartments. This is where celebrities and moguls live. Each apartment is upwards of a million dollars, and that's for a small one. It was on a TV show I watched a couple of months back.

He stops his car, climbs out, and walks toward me. This is my chance to drive away. Even if he has Mom, what does *going* with him accomplish? But I can't let him hurt her. I'll have to find a way. Even as he gets closer, even with that dark look in his blue eyes—so bright compared with the black in his hair—I don't believe he'd hurt me. Somehow, I have to get used to reality.

He *said* it. What's wrong with me?

He taps my window with his knuckle. After I lower it, he leans down and looks into my eyes deeply. He stares at me as I've often dreamed he would, but not with this implication. "Get in my car."

I try to think of something to do other than obey the command, not just in his voice but in those searing eyes. It's like his gaze is burning into me, the way he stares like he'll happily reach in and lay his hands on me, but not how I've dreamed about.

"You can park up there." He nods across the street. "On the curb."

"On the *curb*?"

"It won't be there long."

It's like I'm watching myself again, or maybe that's a way of absolving myself of responsibility. I do as he says, parking curbside and then climbing from the car. He walks over, standing close, but doesn't touch me. It's like I can feel the heat emanating from him.

He opens the back seat, and I climb inside. I realize we're at the rear of the building, and the spot he's pulling into has a small garage door. "Lena," he says in his gruff voice.

Repressing the urge to shiver, I stay in the car. He shuts the door immediately, then walks over and opens the rear garage door with a *key*, not a code—a key he has in his pocket. This must be a personal entrance and exit, and we're at the rear of the building. Are there any security cameras out here? I can't see any.

He returns after pushing the garage door open. The whole time, I think I could run now, but the moment never comes. I can't ignore his threat long enough to open the door. He climbs into the driver's seat, pulls just far enough into the spot, and then climbs out.

"Wait here," he grunts, slamming the door.

"Where is my—" *Mom*, but the douchebag slammed the door.

He closes the garage door and leaves me in the semidarkness of a small electric light. I open the door and look around the small space. There's nothing except a door a few feet from the car. I try the door. It's locked.

I pace, wringing my hands like that will bring any relief. I guess he's getting rid of my car. No evidence. I should think of

a way to hurt him when he gets back here—maybe break the glass in the car’s window, grab a shard, and cut him.

He’s opening the garage door again. This time, he pushes it just enough to slip through, then closes it behind him. He walks into the glow of the electric light. “I don’t have your mother.”

“What. The *fuck?*” I don’t even think. I just throw myself at him, a stupid thing to do, in all honesty. It’s like all this pent-up pressure explodes out of me.

He moves deftly, much quicker than a man his size should be able to. He’s six-three, at least, upwards of two-thirty pounds. His muscles bulge and have crazy definition, making me want to squeeze each one. He wraps his big hands around my wrists and pushes me against the car.

He’s *right there*, his body pushed right up against me. When he leans down, his breath is hot. It tickles, teases, and makes me think silly things. I wonder if he kissed *Mom* like this. Yeah, I remind myself of that. This prick is her ex.

“I’m going to try to find Simone,” he growls, sounding more like a beast than a person. “But you need to understand something. There are bad, bad people out there, Lena. They’d cut you into tiny little pieces, keeping you alive for as long as they medically could.”

I freeze in his arms, then suddenly, insanely, want to lean against him for comfort, wishing for him to wrap his arms around me and hold me close.

“I’m only telling you this so you understand. You’re staying with me. Until I figure this out, you don’t leave my apartment.”

“People will notice. Joan, my neighbor. My employer.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he grunts. “I can handle all that, but you need to be obedient now.”

My skin tingles. No, *no*. This is wrong, but when he says *obedient*, his voice gets husky, just like my fantasies. It’s probably not husky, per se. It’s deeper and more angry, but at least he didn’t hurt Mom unless he’s lying.

“I need answers,” I say, pushing past the strange and inappropriate feelings. “Who took Mom? What does Dad’s wallet mean? Is she...” I swallow. “Going to be okay?”

“You’ll get your answers.” His hands are still on my wrists, but it doesn’t feel like he’s pinning me there now. It’s more like he’s holding me, and I’m staying in this position purposefully.

I pull my hands away, then almost push against his chest. “I’m fine.”

“Not going to pounce again?” he says with a smirk.

It’s the smirk I remember, the one I was sure he aimed my way when picking up Mom. I turn from him. I can’t look, can’t let him play with my mind. If he figures out I’ve got a crush on him—because that’s *all* it can ever be—he might use it against me.

“Where. Is. My. Mom? What. Is. Dad’s. Wallet?”

He sighs. “You’re a persistent girl, aren’t you?”

“I’m not a *girl*,” I say, spinning on him. “I was working two jobs at fifteen. If you think you can bully me, manipulate me, or *anything* me, you’re shit out of luck!”

He chuckles like I’m here to amuse him. There’s a tiny part of me that wants to laugh, too, and a warped feeling of pride for making him laugh. “Okay, Lena. I get it. Does it make you feel immature if I call you a *girl*?”

“I think it’s immature for you to have such a big smirk on your face.”

“But you are, Lena, a very persistent *girl*—”

“Can it. I’m twenty-one.”

“I know you’re not *literally* a girl,” he says, with that easy smirk, “but maybe it’s worth it to see you get worked up.”

I glare at him. “Seriously, this isn’t funny.”

His smirk falters. He raises his hands. “You’re right.”

“Why are you laughing, then?” I ask, the sudden anger still pulsing in me. Why do I care so much if he refers to me as a *girl* or thinks of me as a kid? He must be forty now, or at least almost. To him, maybe that’s all I am.

“Just...” His eyes narrow like the fierceness is returning. “You, Lena. You’re fiery as hell.”

I don’t know what to make of that, especially now that he’s back to his glaring routine. Maybe he’s going to do bad things to get the fieriness out of me. Maybe some twisted part of me wants that to a point.

“Just give me some answers. I deserve that. You don’t have to sing me a song, but just let me quickly ask you some questions.”

He shakes his head. “No.”

“But I deserve—”

“Right this *second*...” Suddenly, he’s directly in front of me, looming. “They could be torturing your mom. How would you think of me, Lena, if I let her die?”

He’s got his hands on me again. My skin shivers temptingly, wrongly. He grabs my hips through my clothes, holding tight, staring at me with that blue fire in his eyes. Why does he care how I think of *him*?

“I’m taking you upstairs,” he groans, taking my wrist and pulling me toward the door. Fine, I walk *with* him, not giving him a chance to drag me off my feet, but would he if I didn’t go willingly? “You’re going to go upstairs and hang out on the couch with my dog.”

“You trust me not to run?” I ask as he opens the door, showing what looks like a small elevator.

He gently pushes me ahead of him, then walks in after me. It’s narrow and tall as if it was built just for him. I’m pushed up against him again, but this time, it’s my body pressed against his back. The elevator begins to go upward smoothly. We ride it for around thirty seconds before I lose my patience.

“Did you hear me?” I snap. He does that annoying laugh again. It’s like he’s so fascinated I can stand up to him. I say, “I’m not even sure you’re telling the truth about Mom. Maybe this is a lie to get me up here so you can put a bullet in my head.”

He turns, making the elevator unsteady. Now, I can feel something hard against my upper belly. He’s so much taller than me. That’s where his manhood would press *if* he were hard. Why would he be hard right now?

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he growls, “and I won’t hurt your mom. But no, I’m not relying on trust.”

“What does that mean?”

He leans lower. I’m almost sure of it now, a rock-hard pressure against my belly. If I had the space to look down, I might see his outline in his sweatpants. I’m panting, unsure what to do or if I should touch him. “My apartment completely locks down. You won’t be going anywhere, whether or not you want to. I’ll see you later.”

“See you...”

Gently, he takes my shoulders and pushes me backward. I expect to bump into the wall. Is he going to kiss me? Then I realize I’m standing in a corridor, staring at a hidden door in the wall. It’s already closing.

“Wait,” I yell. “You can’t leave me without an—”

It closes, showing an almost smooth section of the wall, except for some faint creases in the wallpaper. I turn to find a Great Dane sitting at the end of the corridor, watching me. We never had pets. I’m not usually afraid of dogs, but this one is staring with demon eyes. He’s got floppy ears, but somehow, they’re not cute.

He huffs, turns, and walks away. I carefully follow him, glancing into an open-plan living room with large windows. We’re so high up, nobody can see into here. We must be in the tallest apartment in the city or close to it. I find the front door, or what *used* to be the front door.

It's a sheet of metal, gleaming, mocking. A moment later, a robotic voice announces, "*Soundproofing enabled. Silence mode activated. Glass refraction altered. Entrances barred. User, please ration any food and use water appropriately. Use the approved word sequence with the recognized voice to alert law enforcement of your location. Thank you.*"

Somehow, I doubt I'll guess the word sequence, and I clearly don't sound like Jamie.

I turn, almost jumping, when I see the dog sitting right next to me. How did such a big dog move so quietly? Like his owner, he's deceptive for his size. He grunts, turns, and leads me into the kitchen, attached to the open-plan living area. He huffs and paws at a cabinet. It has some sort of child lock on it.

"Is this where the bad man keeps your treats, boy?" I ask, sounding defeated even to myself. What can I do? How can I escape?

The dog huffs again, causing his nametag to swing back and forth. I lean close, relieved when I see his tail wagging. "Demon, huh? I guess it fits."

I unlock the child lock and take out a treat. I'm tempted to let the dog feast, but I don't want to make him sick. After handing him one, I walk across the living room and drop onto the couch. There's nothing I can do.

For a girl—for a *woman*—who likes to think I have some control, this is almost worse than anything. There's nothing I can do except sit here, my belly churning, my head exploding with all the evil things that could be happening to Mom. Maybe Jamie was lying about helping me. He could be going to hurt her right now, but I don't believe it. I felt him in the elevator. I felt how badly he wanted me. I don't understand why he'd get like that unless he's a sicko who's turned on by destroying lives.

We almost kissed. I groan, stand up, and start pacing. It's the only thing I can do: pace up and down, grind my teeth, and wonder why Jamie wouldn't tell me anything.

CHAPTER SIX

J amie

I drive through the city, sticking to the speed limit, hoping nobody saw me swing Lena's car around to my hideout two streets over or saw her get into my car. Somebody probably saw the commotion on the street. I may have to change my plates or use my contacts.

I could've given her some answers, but that would mean revealing what I did to her mom, Simone. I'm not sure it's fair to think of it like that—in terms of what I did *to* her. We did it together, but I knew better. I was the one with all the power.

In the elevator, I couldn't control myself. It was the worst setting, inappropriate as hell, but I couldn't stop it. My manhood flooded and lust filled me up, making it difficult even to think. I was bursting from the base of my shaft, seed trying to reach her.

I could've held those hips again, squeezed tighter this time. It took everything I had not to pull her sweater up and sink my teeth into her hips, her curvaceous fullness. She's thick in the best possible way.

"Focus, kid," Imaginary Jack says, staring at me with his grizzled grey beard and scarred bald head. *"Save her mother first. You can romance her later."*

That's precisely how Jack would phrase it: *courting* or *romancing* a lady. Those are civilized terms. There's nothing

civilized about what I want to do to her. It's pure animal impulse. It's hunger. It's the urge to tear her clothes off and bend her over, spank her big juicy ass to show her I own it, own *her*, then slip my shaft between—

A car honks behind me. I'm blocking traffic. I really need to focus. I drive to the edge of the city, the cartel basement bar. A cartel man is sitting out front on a stool. He's wearing a leather jacket over a white tank, covered in tattoos, music playing from some speakers on an upturned crate. It's a rap song in Spanish. When I walk across the street, the music gets louder, the lyrics clearer. The artist is rapping about killing somebody at midday and burying them at midnight. It doesn't seem practical to me.

In Spanish, I say, "I'm here to see Diego. I have an appointment for my hair."

The man, a little older than me, sits up, suddenly on full alert. The hair appointment is a code that means he has to take me straight to his boss, Diego, a low-level cartel member controlling this sad corner of the city. The man stands and gestures to the basement. I didn't bring any guns. They wouldn't let me in here with any.

But I'm walking out of here alive. Before, when I'd think that, it was just a matter of basic survival. Now, I have the motivation—to see my woman again.

Diego is a short man, always sweating. He dabs at his balding forehead with a handkerchief, his gold watch flashing on his wrist. He's let his hair grow long down the sides. "You said we were done."

"We were," I say, keeping my voice low despite the music Diego switched on when he saw me. He doesn't want anybody to know he's worked with... with what? What am I? Not a cop. Not a hitman. Not an angel. Not a devil. "But things change. This is about the Gutierrez family's cryptocurrency wallet. I'm sure you've heard some whispers about it."

Diego is already shaking his head, but his eyes give him away. His eagerness to pretend he doesn't know what I'm talking about tells a lot, too.

"I don't need anything from you," I say, leaning forward slightly. Just enough to remind him I'm twice his size. Just enough to remind him that the last time he saw me, I had just finished killing one of his cartel buddies who liked to hurt little kids. He helped me. Against his will, but he helped, and they can't ever learn that. "Except for a name. You've heard about that old cryptocurrency wallet. You know it was stolen. Who's making a play for it?"

"Is this about the woman?" Diego says, reaching into his top drawer and taking out a small table for chopping lines. There's already some powder on it.

I slap it off the table. It crashes into the wall, powder lacing the air. I slam my fist close to Diego's hand, causing him to leap into his chair. "A name. Now. Or you can call your men in here. Have me killed. Try to, at least."

His mouth opens and closes like a fish searching for water. He's only in this position because of family connections. He'd be eaten alive by the real cartel down south.

"Better start talking, Diego."

"You don't understand. They'll kill me if they ever find out."

"They'll kill you if they find out what you did last year. You took me to his house, Diego."

"You had a gun to my head."

I laugh, but it's for show. I don't enjoy bullying men like this. Weak and pathetic and defenseless. Even when they deserve it, it leaves a bad taste. "Do you think that will make any difference to them?"

He leans forward, lowers his voice, then gives me a name. Antonio Romero.

"I don't recognize it," I tell him.

"Up-and-comer," Diego says, "but he's been bragging all over town. He's going to find the famous crypto wallet and give it

to the Gutierrez family as a sign of his loyalty. Word is he's holding some woman for ransom."

"Very talkative for a narco."

"Like I said, an up-and-comer. He will be gone soon."

"You might be right, Diego," I reply. "You said he's been bragging *around town*. Where, exactly?"

"Listen, man—"

"*Where?*"

He swallows and gives me another name, this one of a bar.

I stand and turn, popping my neck from side to side. There's a violent feeling gripping me, slowly seeping over my body, into my bones, like a call to war—a call to do whatever it takes to make this right. I can't let them hurt Simone. Her daughter would never want me then—*could* never want me if I let her mom die.

Leaving the bar, I get into my car and drive for roughly ten minutes, taking the quieter roads until I come to another cartel bar. I don't even know what Antonio Romero looks like, dammit. I need to do some prep. Get his appearance.

Yep, I'm a jackass. I was so damn concerned with my hard-on when I left Lena in the apartment and eager to get away from her, I didn't bring my laptop, which is my lifeline with all the governmental databases a man could need.

I can't just walk in there and hope I run into him. Dropping his name might work over a sting, with some time, but it will look too obvious. Plus, there's the obvious fact I'm visibly not a cartel member.

I'll have to drive home and return here. If I could avoid wasting that time, I would. If only there were somebody back in my apartment who could... She's motivated, clearly, and it's not like it would be complicated. I could use the voice password so she won't be able to reaccess the laptop.

I sigh and take out my cell phone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lena

I almost run to the phone when it starts to ring. It's cordless, sitting on a small table near the tall window in the kitchen. I quickly answer it. My chest is getting tight again. My mind is filled with ugly, twisted images of Mom.

"Hello? Mom?"

"It's me." Jamie's voice is grim, making me think the worst. "I haven't found your mom yet." I sigh, unsure if that's a good or a bad thing. "But I need your help. I have a laptop. It's in the left drawer of the TV unit. I need you to get it for me."

"What's happening?" I ask.

"Just get the—"

"I *am*," I tell him. "Your apartment's huge. I'm walking, all right? You can tell me what's happening in the meantime, right?"

I expect him to call me *fiery* again. He says, "I've got word from an associate in the cartel world that a man called Antonio Romero has got Simone. I need to learn more about him. Have you got the laptop?"

Opening the drawer, I take out the laptop. Or, rather, the small briefcase. It's one of those military-grade laptops I've seen on TV shows before. It doesn't seem like something a drug

kingpin would have, and his friendly dog is throwing me off. I'll have to ask about that later, not that he'll tell me anything.

"Yes, booting it up now." I set it on the coffee table and open it up, relieved I've been practicing using computers. We never had any at home, at least before the move. "I need a passcode."

"Click the audio symbol and put me on loudspeaker."

"That's a passcode?" I ask.

"It's voice-activated."

"Oh, uh, okay." My heartbeat suddenly picks up. This is so wrong. This is so sneaky, but he is my kidnapper. Why should I have to play by the rules? "Two seconds. My loudspeaker is annoying on here."

"Annoying?"

I quickly go to my phone, find the recorder app, and click *record*. "It's not on the main call screen. Sorry. I've got you now."

"You can hear me?"

"Yeah." I swallow. The symbol at the top of my phone blinks, telling me it's currently recording. I hold the phone toward the laptop. "Okay, ready..."

"Unlock," Jamie says clearly, and the screen flashes blue. There's nothing on the desktop except one icon. *Anybody*, it's called, with a small symbol of a person. "Are you in?"

"Yeah."

I want to click the bottom left, explore his files, and snoop. If he won't tell me what's happening, I'll learn that way.

"Search Antonio Romero on *Anybody*—the app at the bottom left."

"Yeah, I've got it," I say a little testily. I open the app, type in his name, and swallow when I see the advanced search options. *Select database: NCA, FBI, CIA...* The list goes on. "Which database do I use?"

And who the hell are you?

“All of them,” he grunts. “When it loads, take a photo of each page and send it to me, then video-call me.”

“Video-call you? Why?”

“Just do it, Lena.”

“Who said it was okay for you to talk to me like your pet?” I snap. “This isn’t exactly fun for me, you know.”

“I need to see you close the laptop.”

Ah, so he doesn’t want me snooping. “What if I don’t?”

“We haven’t got time for this, but if you don’t, I’ll confine you to your room.”

“I didn’t even know I *had* a room.” The screen loads, and he’s right. We haven’t got time. A mugshot of Antonio Romero fills one side of the screen. He’s got a thick neck and a shaggy mop of black hair. His face is covered in tattoos—*covered*. His pupils are small, making the whites of his eyes look huge. “*This* is the guy who has Mom?”

I take a photo, then switch through the pages—assault, kidnapping, armed robbery, *murder*. My bones are cold.

“You need to tell me who you are,” I whisper. “How can you go up against the cartel? What if he hurts you? How will I get out to look for Mom?”

“This worm won’t hurt me,” he growls. “I’m going to get your mom back. Now be a good g—I mean *woman*—and video-chat me. I need to get to work.”

I do as he asks. Or maybe *orders* is a better way to think about it, though he corrected himself on the *girl* thing. Putting the phone on selfie mode, I resist the ridiculous urge to smooth my hair. He appears on the screen, his eyes as sharp as ever. “Close it,” he says. “Then put the camera on it so I can see properly.”

“You’ve got trust issues, Jamie,” I say, but I can’t summon any sassiness, sarcasm, or anything without knowing what’s

happening to Mom. I can't *flirt* with this man until she's safe. No, not even after then.

I close the laptop and then flip the camera.

"Good," he grunts. "Now I have to work."

"Be—" *Careful*, but the jerk hangs up on me.

Fine, then I don't need to feel guilty about opening the laptop again and finding the recording on my phone. I don't need to doubt myself when I cycle through until he says *unlock*. I bring it to the laptop, and then it opens up.

It's time to find out exactly who I'm dealing with here. It's better than sitting around and doing nothing. On some level, I think part of me wants to discover that Jamie is a good man. He's not lying to me. He's going to help me save Mom.

Then what? We're going to live happily ever after?

Yeah, right.

CHAPTER EIGHT

J amie

I sit outside the bar for two hours, watching people come and go. Antonio is difficult to miss when he finally makes his appearance. He's several heads taller than most men, maybe a head taller than me. He's built like a slab of brick, a rectangular body with relatively small arms. He doesn't lift. He is just huge as some men are.

After waiting for another couple minutes to be sure the street is quiet, I leave my car and go to the trunk, grabbing the tracking device. Luckily, it's always in here. I hurry across the street and place it behind the tire of the beat-up car he arrived in.

Then I return to my car and drive around the corner, parking in an alleyway. After that, it's more waiting, just like so much of this work is. I watch the tracking app on my phone, trying not to think about returning to Lena, crushing her against me in a fierce embrace.

"You're not leaving me. Ever. You're going to stay exactly where I want you."

Then I'd kiss her, but I know that would be the end. If I ever let myself kiss her, I won't be able to stop. I'll tear her clothes off after tasting her, needing to taste every part. I'll have to feast on her young soaked honey pot, tongue her eager hole, lick her excitable clit, fucking *own* her in every way.

My phone starts beeping. The tracker is moving. Good. Something to focus on. I can't keep obsessing, but I can't stop, either.

Even as I follow the tracker, always keeping one or two streets between us, Lena is in the back of my mind. When I save Simone, she might never want to see me again. I wouldn't blame her. Simone wanted a better life for Lena. That was the whole reason I agreed to it in the first place. I saw a desperate mother.

Maybe this is all my fault, but I can make it right. I keep driving.

I pull up outside the house. It sits on the end of a row, all one-story shack-type things. The beat-up car Antonio arrived in is parked on the lawn. He sits on the porch, smoking a cigarette, another man sitting beside him. I reach into my glove compartment, scan my thumb, and take out my pistol. Then I walk to the trunk and quickly take off my T, put my vest on, and pull my T over it. It's not ideal, but it's better than nothing.

I watch the windows for threats as I walk past the beat-up car. Antonio stands slowly and flicks his cigarette away. Up close, he seems his age. It's his confused smile. Despite his face tattoos, he looks young. He's only twenty-two. Hell, that's still older than Lena.

"You want trouble, gringo?"

The other man stands, shorter, wider, with a tattooed belly poking out of a white tank. He glares at me. Antonio laughs a moment later. "You are dressed for war, my friend."

His tone has completely changed. His pupils are far wider than in his mugshot photo. He's clearly on something that could work to my advantage. His hand is twitching, so I slowly put mine behind my back, glancing at the windows, hoping like hell there isn't a gunman posted across the road.

This is sloppy, but I have to work fast for my woman.

“I am ready for war, my friend,” I reply. “I need some information.”

Antonio sits just as slowly as he rose, but the other man keeps glaring at me. “I see no gun, gringo. I see no reason to be scared of you.”

“So, am I scared?” Antonio says, looking up at the man. But he’s so tall that he doesn’t have to look up *that* much. “I’m sitting. I’m ready to talk. This is interesting to me. But if I take your word as gospel, I’m *scared*, is that it?”

“No, I—”

I leap back when Antonio springs into action. He moves far quicker than I would’ve guessed. He explodes into a right-hand punch, hitting his so-called friend across the face. It’s a routine I’ve seen before. The drugged-up boss beats up his own men. I step back as he hits him twice more, then spits on him.

He turns to me, smiling shakily. “Where were we?”

The man on the ground groans. I don’t have the time to give a shit. Anyway, he probably deserves it, as pessimistic as that might be.

“Simone Harwood,” I tell him. The other man has rolled onto his back. He’s carefully probing his nose, and there’s something about the movement. It looks like he’s done it before. “How much do you want?”

He places a hand on his chest, looking genuinely offended. “It’s not a question of money, sir.”

My hand twitches, urging me to go for the pistol and shove it in his face, but there’s no telling where Simone is. If I had backup, a team, but this has all happened in, what, an *hour*, maybe a little more?

“Enlighten me, then, *sir*,” I say coldly.

“Do you speak Spanish?” he asks.

I nod, answering in Spanish. “Tell me where she is.”

“Relax. Listen, Sebastian Gutierrez is a very big figure in the town where I am from. We all heard stories of the great Sebastian Gutierrez, who came from the mud like us, who bled for us and brought schools and hospitals.”

Cartel-owned conveniences. It’s a common tactic of theirs.

“Get to the point,” I snap.

He sighs. “I have now had the honor of meeting Sebastian Gutierrez. He is in his later years. I’m unsure if he knew I was there, but he came alive again when I mentioned this wonderful thing—this data disk that held millions. He cried on my shoulder. He’d never met me before. I was a friend of his son’s, but he cried. I would die for that man. I made him a promise.”

Some people say the narcos look at their bosses like royalty or gods. I’ve seen glimpses of this kind of behavior before, but never like this. Whether it’s the drugs, his messed-up upbringing, or maybe he was just born like this, he’s a zealot. He’s ready to die for the narco cause.

“It was a custom build,” he goes on. “This data disk.”

“Portable hard drive,” I say in English, and he repeats it.

“And this could hold all that money?” he says, not even looking at his buddy dragging himself into a chair.

Yes, it could. It *had*, and that was my mistake. Or maybe it was selfishness, but a man needs money to operate. I could’ve handled it alone. I saw a lonely, lost mother; perhaps she reminded me of my own. Maybe she reminded me of what she did, so I helped her. Now look at me.

“Why do you think Simone knows where it is?” I ask.

“She *told* me. She said it right to my face. I was at a bar, minding my own business, and this drunk American lady stumbled over with all her friends. They wanted to take photos of me for my face. Drunk American women, eh?” He gestures at his facial tattoos that cover most of his features. “They go crazy for any little thing.”

I swallow. It's something I warned Simone about in the past—her behavior in public. I'd told her she should always be aware of her surroundings, and she'd replied with something about being able to handle herself. So naïve, but she wasn't my responsibility.

“So she took the photo, then...”

“Then drinks and stories. She thought it was so funny. A friend of her husband's stole it. Then, her husband stole it from *him*, but he was too scared to do anything. He hid it. He died. She kept it. Then, somehow, she found a way to make the money real.”

“That's quite the tale,” I say. “Let's call it a million.”

“We're not discussing *price*, sir,” he says with an intoxicated conviction. He stares at me without any hint of doubt. “It's the data disk, the *hard drive* I need. It had a unique whalebone cover and his daughter's name inscribed. He was going to give it to her. She died.”

I almost groan, massaging my head. A good operator incinerates anything he never wants to be discovered, but I remember the inscription. I remember how it generally looked. It will take time, though, dammit.

“I may be able to help you,” I say, switching back to English.

“Is that so, gringo?” He seems amused.

“I know where the wallet is,” I reply. “I was the one who helped Simone to launder the cryptocurrency.”

He nods, smiling. “Yes, okay, this is good.”

“For obvious reasons, I've hidden it. I'll need time to get it.” To *create* it, the closest replica I can get. I need to make some calls. “In the meantime, I need to know that Simone is okay. Her daughter is worried about her.”

“Her daughter will be more worried if I don't keep my promise to *Señor* Gutierrez.”

I almost go for the gun right then, like a flash of violence surging through my body. It almost takes complete hold of me.

The second he threatens my woman, I almost blow the operation.

“Have you hurt her?” I ask. “How bad are her injuries?”

“Easy, easy,” Antonio says, laughing. “I haven’t touched her yet. I made friends with her. She came to the location willingly. She doesn’t smell too good. Not the best toilet facilities, but I haven’t touched her.”

He doesn’t say *yet*. Other men would. They’d need to assert some kind of warped dominance, but Antonio isn’t like that. I know a truly dangerous man when I see one.

“I need a video of her talking to her daughter.”

“You’re the boss now, then?”

“I’ve got what you need—”

“No, you said Simone spent it. You laundered it for her. I’m not slow.” He gets an edge to his voice. “Do I seem slow to you?”

“You said this wasn’t about money. Do I seem slow to you?”

He grins. “Not *just* about money, my friend.”

I’d love to punch this asshole across the face, but I have to play his game. “I only laundered a small portion of it. I’ll make up the difference and return to you with the hard drive.”

His eyes *gleam* at this. As far as jobs go, this is on the surreal end of the spectrum. It’s the religious zeal. “I could work with a deal like that.” His hand twitches for a glass object on the porch sill. Ah, his pipe, already dirty with its previous uses. “I will call my friend. Wait here. You can speak to her. Maybe record a little video, eh? But not a porno, eh?”

He chuckles, lighting the pipe, inhaling and blowing out nasty-smelling smoke.

CHAPTER NINE

Lena

When the front door opens, I lie on the couch and close my eyes. I don't want him to know I've spent several hours going through the laptop. There wasn't a massive amount on there, but *loads* of photos of Jamie when he was a kid, those bright eyes a complete giveaway. He was fishing with a man called Jack, his name on one of the rods, with a bald head and a stringy silver beard.

There was more, too, but it was confusing. A special type of internet browser that opened directly onto a website called *The Answer*. There was a short tagline. *Are you brave enough to fight?* When I clicked *create an account*, it asked me to deposit ten thousand dollars into some Bitcoin wallet or something.

Obviously, I couldn't do that, so I went through the photos slowly. I found myself thinking about if Jamie and I had kids and if they'd look like him, a big grin on his face as he hefted a large fish. A few photos show a young woman, maybe his mother. They were the ones I stared at the most. She looked at him with so much love in her eyes. Hours went by like that. How sad, but it was better than wondering and stressing.

Demon walks over to greet Jamie. I sit up as if it's just woke me. Then I quickly spring to my feet. I just wanted him to think I'd *been* sleeping, to explain what I did with all this time. "Where's Mom? What's happened?"

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “It’s complicated. I need to feed—”

“I fed him. I gave him the amount on the label.”

“Oh good, thank you.” He walks into the living room, sitting on the chair, massaging his forehead. “It’s complicated.”

I sit on the edge of the couch. The spacing of his furniture tells me he rarely has guests. We’re sitting very far apart. The space is so open that I have to raise my voice. It would be better if he were sitting over here, and that’s not for selfish, steamy reasons.

“Complicated *how*?”

He sighs. “Antonio thinks your mother has a hard drive with a cryptocurrency account on it.”

“What? Why the *hell* would he think that?”

Jamie leans forward. His shoulders are tense, like round boulders pressing through his T-shirt. He stares at me with those sharp, biting blue eyes. “Because she told him in Vegas. She got drunk, stumbled over, and told him the whole damn tale, all because she found his facial tattoos amusing.”

I shake my head. “*What* tale?”

“Your dad’s friend stole it. Then your dad stole it but didn’t want to use it. So they just hid it for years. Later...” He shakes his head. “She figured out how to use it.”

“You *helped* her use it, you mean,” I say.

He laughs grimly. “You think you’ve got it all figured out?” His gaze moves to the TV unit and then to the drawer. He looks at it for a moment, then at me, then back at the drawer. I try not to show any fear. I don’t have to be afraid of this man. His gaze returns to me. “In any case, it’s gone. I’m currently having a new one made. It should be a decent replica. In the meantime...”

He takes out his phone, swipes a few times, and then hands it to me. “I managed to get you this.”

I eagerly take the phone, ignoring the strange shimmer that travels up my arm when our fingers touch. Mom is standing in a kitchen in front of the sink. Her clothes look dirty, and her hair is pulled back and greasy, but I don't see any injuries.

“Hey, little pattycake,” Mom says, and I almost cry, blink hard, and feel the tears stinging against my eyes, but they don't fall. I push them back. I have to be strong. “I've got myself into a bad spot. I love you. I'm not hurt. They've told me Jamie is looking into this. You remember Jamie, right?” Mom smiles, her eyes getting that excited shine they used to when he came back.

How evil is this? I can't even watch a video of my mom, seeing her alive, *unharm*ed, without getting jealous. It's pathetic. It's immature.

“I'll be with you soon. I know I will.”

The video ends. I replay it and watch it again, looking for any details.

“Can we track this?” I ask.

Jamie shakes his head, idly stroking Demon on the top of the head. He won't look at me—Jamie, not the Great Dane. Jamie is staring off into space. It's like he's purposefully avoiding my gaze.

“How much money was in this wallet, then?” I ask, wondering if he'll tell me *something*, at least.

“One and a half million.”

I gasp. “What if he checks the wallet? What if he realizes the money's not on there?”

“The money *will* be on there,” he grunts, “but there are programming tricks I can play. He won't get a dime, and we'll get your mom back. If he comes looking for you after that, I'll put a goddamn bullet in his head.”

The sudden confession shocks me. He stands quickly and stares down at me for a few moments. His hands are shaking. It's like he cares about me. It's an insane thing even to let

myself think, but what else *can* I think? He's looking at me like he'd die for me.

I want to let him. I want to follow this energy if I'm judging it correctly. It's not like I've ever done anything like this before. "When will the replica be ready?" I ask.

"Tomorrow evening. That's when we'll do the handoff. Until then, you're staying here. I'll pick you up some clean clothes tomorrow."

He marches off toward the corridor. My stomach drops, and I almost call him back here. We've got hours left, with nothing to do but sit around, think, and wonder if our kids will have those sharp blue eyes.

Demon grunts and walks over, laying his chin on my knee. I'm sure there are worse prisons than this.

CHAPTER TEN

J amie

It's midnight. She's probably asleep. I logged into my laptop and checked the activity log. She must've recorded my voice. She spent hours going through my photographs and then tried to log in to the site. I wonder what she was thinking as she looked at me, Mom, and Jack.

I'm not thinking about family now. I shouldn't be here, slowly opening the guest bedroom door. My cock is hard, just like in the elevator. I'm solid through for her.

I can see her shape in the bed. She's on her side, on *top* of the covers. Oh, hell. I'm a bad man. Her curves are perfect as a silhouette, but I know she'll look even better with the light on. She's a scared twenty-year-old woman. Her mom is in danger. I shouldn't be doing this. I'm taking advantage.

"J-Jamie?" she whispers.

"Don't turn around," I grunt fiercely.

"Is it Mom?"

"No. I'm going to save her for you, but this isn't about that."

"What's it about, then?" she says softly, but I can hear the nerves in it.

"You were snooping today." I walk right to the edge of her bed. From the window, a patch of light falls across her. She's wearing a tank top and her underwear, nothing else. Her

gorgeously thick thighs are on display just for me. She was made for me. “Only a bad girl does that.”

Her eyes snap open widely. I’ve probably gone too far, but I can only hold myself back for so long around her. My dick is aching, pushing against my shorts. I want to tear my T-shirt off and all my clothes.

“I already told you—”

I lean down, planting my fist on the mattress. She gasps and sits up. “You’re a bad, bad fucking girl, Lena,” I say fiercely, almost howling, almost salivating. I’m the bad one, but I can’t stop. “Bad girls get punished.”

She whimpers when I grab her thigh, greedily sinking my hand into her thickness. I’ve dreamed of this so many times. My balls are swelling and aching. I’m leaking more precome than I ever have before.

“You’re going to get *close* to drenching your young pussy for me, then I’ll hold you there. Understand?”

“Jamie, what about—”

Mom. That’s what she’s going to say, but I can’t let her. I cut her off with a kiss. I push my lips against hers hard, squeezing her leg with more possession at the same time. She moans, then kisses me *back*. I can feel her tongue moving, getting more enthusiastic.

She moans, then grabs my face with her hands, pulling away. I can feel how hard it is for her and me. “We shouldn’t do that.”

“Tell that to your horny young body,” I say, sliding my leg higher up her thigh, feeling her heat and wetness. “Anyway, this is your punishment for snooping.”

She pouts. I bet she doesn’t even know she’s doing it. She tries to act tough, but that pout is cute and sexy as hell. “You don’t have the right to punish me.”

“No? Maybe I’ll do it anyway.”

I grab her hips, then flip her over gently. She moans again, giving away her feelings, letting me feel how badly she wants this. I pull her top up, revealing her ass.

“We’re not having sex,” she says breathlessly, looking over her shoulder. “I mean it. Not—”

“Tonight,” I finish for her with a smirk.

“We shouldn’t...” She gasps when I spank her lightly on her beautiful, round ass, causing her body to shake for me. “Jamie!”

“Tell me you didn’t like that.” I spank her again, on the other side, captivated by the way she shakes for me. Her body dances with her lust. “Or that.”

She bites her lip and shakes her head, but she can’t hide the desire in her eyes. “I wanted to know more about you.”

I spank her thick ass, looking at her face this time. Her smile twitches when I make contact. It’s not like I’m hitting her hard, but it’s enough so she knows who she belongs to. I can’t say it. I can’t go that far, but she gets the message.

“You snooped,” I growl, spanking her.

She raises an eyebrow. When she speaks, she’s breathy, as if holding back a moan. She’s making me so damn hard. “You won’t tell me anything. What was I supposed to do? Any... anyway...”

She trails off when I smooth my hand over her ass between her legs. I start rubbing her through her underwear. The fabric is already wet for me. I was right about the spanking, my horny Lena. She loves it. She might deny it, but her body is keen. She wants to give herself to me.

I push her panties aside. “Fuck, you’re already creamy for me.”

“But Jamie...”

“Just let yourself go,” I tell her firmly. “Don’t think about tomorrow. Your body wants this. You’re fucking *glistening* for me. You want this.” I slip my finger inside her, just a little, just enough to feel how tight she’ll be when I slide my cock inside her.

“Not... too... deep,” she says.

“Just like this?” I say, moving my fingers in circles.

She nods.

“Tell me,” I snarl. “Tell me how you want me to play with your tight pussy.”

She moans. “Like that. In circles. Hmm. That’s... yeah...”

I keep moving my finger. Maybe she’s been too busy for romance. Or perhaps she’s never been interested before, but as I finger her pussy, I sense she hasn’t much experience. I hope I’m right.

I remember what I thought before, how kissing her would break me. I can still taste her on my lips, and I’m able to coax her shy pussy slowly. It’s how she’s moaning, her pleasure pushing past her toughness, the walls she puts up. I don’t need to rush anything with her.

“You’ll want answers after this,” I growl, “but first, you need to understand something. I’m in charge here. You don’t go somewhere unless I tell you to. You don’t talk to anybody unless I give goddamn permission. Not until your...” *Mom is safe*, I was about to say, but hell no. I won’t talk about Simone. “You do what *I* say.” My voice gets louder, the emotion flying like I never usually let it. “You don’t make that pussy all creamy with your release until I fucking tell you.”

I move my hand faster, smearing my palm over her wetness, pushing against her clit as I finger her deeper. She gasps and falls flat on her front.

“Turn over,” I say, my voice one of complete command now. I’m talking about control, but I don’t have control of myself. More than I thought, maybe because I don’t want to push her too hard. What if she touched my manhood? Would I be able to stop then?

I’m still shaking as she rolls over, lets out a whimper, and stares at me wide-eyed as if I’m the bad man I always suspected I might be.

With a grunt, I lean down and pull her underwear down. Then I tear off her top, revealing her large, perfect tits and tight, perfect nipples. I’m losing the ability to go slowly. I kneel

quickly, push her tits together, start sucking and licking her nipples. Then I smooth my hand down her body, over her belly. She cringes when I touch her stomach.

“What’s wrong?” I grunt, leaning back slightly. Her nipples glimmer in the low light. Her eyes are like two anxious moons. Damn, I’ve never been so poetic before.

“Nothing. Just that’s not the part you’re interested in, is it?” She gestures at my hand on her belly. “I mean...”

“What the *fuck* are you talking about?”

She gasps and tries to move away, but I keep my hand on her stomach. I indulgently feel her curviness, sinking my hand into her fullness. “You can’t find *that* sexy.”

“Every part of you is sexy,” I’m almost roaring now, relieved soundproofing mode is still on. Neither Demon, nor anybody else, will be able to hear me. “Every. Single. Part. Your curvy belly. Your perfect, plump tits. Your soaked pussy. Your wide, tough, scared eyes. The nervous flush in your cheeks. *Everything.*”

I realize I’m rubbing her belly, luxuriating in her sensuality and the idea that, one day, she’ll swell with my child, with our future.

She leans up and blinks nervously. Then that just-Lena toughness shapes her lips. She leans forward even more and kisses me. I groan as I taste her again, massaging her belly momentarily before sliding down to her core. She’s even wetter than a few moments ago. Her thighs are slick.

I press my palm against her clit and slip my finger inside her. She’s so receptive to me. She starts twitching against my hand as I finger her deeper. Her kiss gets frantic. She finds my tongue eagerly. Our teeth buck together like she can’t contain herself for much longer.

I lean back, ending the kiss. It’s the only way I can remain in control. Slowly, gently, I slip my finger out of her. She bunches her fists into handfuls of the sheets, staring at me with every feature touched with lust. Her tits rise and fall with her heaving breaths.

“You’ll wait until I say you can,” I groan, reaching out and gently massaging her belly.

“You’re a bad, bad man.”

My skin shivers at her words. It’s how I’ve often thought of myself. I rub her belly, then gently squeeze it. She’s watching me closely. “You really like that, huh?”

“So do you,” I groan. “It’s just as sexy as your big, round ass and succulent tits. Maybe I’ll use your big, beautiful belly to punish you.”

“What do you mean?” she whispers, in that excited way.

I bring my hand down in a light spank on her belly. She sits up, eyes wide, shaking her head. Her eyes go up and down. It’s a confused expression. She knows this is weird, but she likes it, and I feel the damn same, too.

“Jamie,” she says, but not *no*.

“You’re a sexy, bad girl,” I growl, then spank her belly again. “I know this is getting you closer. I know this is making you wetter.” Again, her gorgeous body shakes for me. “You’ll melt for me when I finally touch your soaked slit.”

When I spank her again, she writhes on the bed, her legs moving with neediness. She tugs on the sheets. “Jamie.”

I softly stroke her belly, moving lower toward her crotch. “I could spend hours massaging every curvy inch of your body,” I snarl. “I’d be rock hard the entire time, then finally pound your pussy. Finally, I’d drive deep and stretch your tight hole out.”

“J-J-Jamie.”

“Say it.” I hold my hand near her clit. “Tell me what you want me to do.”

Shyness grips her again. She’s always had to act so tough. Even before, when I was “with” her mom, she’d look out the window or stand at the door with a fuck-the-world look on her face. She groans. “Touch my pussy.”

“Say, please.” Lower, I brush her clit, and she moans. “*Beg.*”

“Touch my pussy, please, Jamie...”

I know I’ll never forget the sight of my woman completely melting for me. She falls back onto the mattress as I finger fuck her eager slit, pressing my palm against her clit. The buildup must’ve been insane for her. She’s shaking, causing the mattress to shake, the whole room, the whole world.

Suddenly, I’m panting. I stand and tear at my pants, freeing my dick. I’m so hard. My entire length is slick with precome. I climb onto the bed, palming her sweet, young, eager pussy. My woman’s hole. She belongs to me. I’m going to fuck her as hard and for as long as I want.

My. Woman. Only. Mine. I kiss her neck, rubbing my tip against her clit.

“W-wait.” She gasps in my ear. “Jamie. No. Not tonight.”

I roar as I jump off the bed. My senses return. Christ. I went full beast. I *don’t* lose control like that. Nobody has ever made me lose control. Never even come close.

I quickly pull up my pants. My shaft aches as if my seed is angry at me for tasting her clit, her juices, and not sliding down to her hole. I stare down at her, my eyes adjusting to the light. Her belly is slightly red. Her thighs glimmer with her release. Her nipples are full and red, too. I’ve used her. I’ve indulged all the darkest parts of myself.

Turning away, I make for the door. What the hell is wrong with me? I was right. *She* was right. I’m a bad, bad man.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lena

I stand in the bathroom in my underwear, looking down at the faint redness on my belly. I haven't been able to sleep. It's been *hours*. It's almost morning. If my mind wasn't on Mom, it was on what I did with her ex: the weirdly pleasurable spanking—normal and otherwise—and how he lost control. I wanted it. I almost let myself do it.

Then I remembered Mom's smile in the video when she mentioned Jamie. I couldn't go through with it after having that in my mind, even for a second. Jamie was like a wild animal. His cock was *massive*. I've got no frame of reference, but it was so big it bobbed at the end like it was too heavy. Huge.

Even his finger had felt big and so good, especially at the end, but big. How would I ever...

Maybe Jamie's right. I need punishment. This is the last thing I should be thinking about right now. I need answers. When Jamie saves Mom, I'll have to do something so difficult. I'll have to pretend this never happened and turn Jamie back into a crush.

My belly is still sore, but only a little. I run my hand over it again. Maybe other women would freak at how he behaved, but I felt weirdly privileged. I'm not sure that's the right word—maybe lucky he was showing this part of himself to me. It's not exactly special since he already showed it to Mom.

As I have a shower, I think about the look Mom would get when Jamie was on his way. That light in her eyes. *“I wonder where he’s going to take me. He always plans the best dates.”* I’d nod and smile and go along with it. I can’t imagine the Jamie I know planning the dates he took Mom on: the cinema, restaurants, and even the theater. *“We just have so much fun. I think that’s what I’ve been missing—fun!”*

Jamie is the only man Mom has been with since Dad died—the only one. She loved Dad so much, and Jamie, for a brief time, was the only person who could break down her barriers. I stand on the bathmat, gently stroking my belly. It’s still sore. His eyes were *alight* when he did it. He found it so hot, which somehow made me find it hot, too. This man who brightened my mom’s life and changed her world...

I splash cold water on my face. Mom will be home soon. I’ve had to push down my feelings all my life. After Dad died, Mom just lounged around on the couch. No, that’s not fair. She was depressed. She was basically catatonic, and the booze didn’t help. Still, I can do the same now. Swallow how I feel, pretend earlier didn’t happen.

It’s hard to pretend when I walk into the living area and see Jamie standing shirtless at the kitchen counter. His black-silver hair is messy, almost wild, and the clear cuts in his arm muscles catch the electric light. The sun hasn’t risen yet.

He looks over and winces. He gets the same look on his face he got last night after he went into full crazy mode. When he rubbed his manhood against my clit, I wanted it so, so badly. Even if he’s huge. Even if it might initially hurt, something inside me called out to do it, but then came the thought of Mom.

“I didn’t think you’d be up yet,” he says.

“Couldn’t sleep,” I reply, walking to the kitchen bar and sitting. “I was thinking about last night. You never gave me

any answers.” I think about the name of the website. “Or *The Answer*, I should say.”

“You shouldn’t have snooped.”

“Well, I’m all spanked out right now, Jamie, so why don’t you tell me something?”

He stops whisking, putting the bowl down. When he rests his hands on the table, every muscle in his bare arms bulge. His chest swells. I keep my hands under the bar, where he can’t see them, so he can’t catch me fidgeting. “You’re so, so fiery.”

“And you’re so, so bad,” I counter, remembering how he looked when I said that last night.

“If you really want to know, ask,” he grunts, turning his back to me and switching on the gas stove.

“What is *The Answer*?” I ask as I look at his turned back, thick with layer upon layer of powerful muscle.

“Some shit went down as I was a kid. Jack—the man you saw in the photo—was sort of a father figure to me because of the aforementioned shit.”

“Very specific.”

He turns and glares at me. His blue eyes have effects on me they’ve got no right to. “I won’t tear open my chest and give you my heart on a platter. I’ll tell you about my work. I’ll tell you what led there. I’ll even tell you about the wallet, even if it makes you hate me, but not before. Not the flames.”

Before I can respond, he turns his back, almost as if he regrets saying anything. He pours the eggs into the pan and moves them around almost aggressively with a spatula—the *flames*. I want to know everything about him, especially when my body is still sore from our closeness, but I must pick my battles.

“Okay, Jamie. I understand.”

His back shifts up and down as he sighs. “After everything that went down, Jack wanted to teach me how to defend myself. He taught me how to shoot, hunt, and fight. I enlisted in the Navy at eighteen and became a SEAL. Those skills helped when Jack found his new gig.”

“Helping people for money?” I ask.

Jamie glances at me over his shoulder. “Yeah, but not how you think of *helping*.”

“Maybe I’m not as naïve as you think. Let me guess. You did bad things to bad people.”

“There was an underworld growing,” Jamie says, adjusting the heat on the stove and returning to me. He seems calmer now that he knows I won’t ask about the *flames*. That must involve his mom. He hasn’t mentioned her. “Ex-soldiers, law enforcement, vigilantes who were communicating via the internet. I never got involved, but Jack was in deep. It was how he made his living. Eventually, it turned from a loose collection of people to the website you tried to login into. After I retired from the SEALs, I joined up.”

“But who pays for this?” I ask. “I can’t imagine people spending...” I look around his huge apartment. “*That* much for people to make the world a better place.”

“Some might call that pessimistic.”

“Some might call it *realistic*,” I counter.

“In the beginning, it was small-time jobs. A thousand bucks here. A thousand bucks there. Mostly regular folks who couldn’t go to the police. These were intimidation jobs. Then Jack found some... *unorthodox philanthropists*. That’s what he always called them. Basically, they were rich people who were tired of their cities turning into hellholes. Now, people can pay via the website. Everybody is anonymous, but I know we have several millionaires on there, and I suspect a few billionaires, too.”

I sit back, my head spinning. “This is crazy.”

Jamie shrugs. “I thought the same, but when I do the work, I get the pay. I vet every single job. Every time, they’ve been scumbags.”

“Have you...” I swallow. “Killed anyone?”

He turns back to the eggs, angrily pounding them. “I was deployed in combat twice, once for a double. That’s eighteen

months in total. Of course, I've killed people."

He says it so casually. I've had to think about whether I could do something like that before. When we were robbed, or assholes in the neighborhood ran around the house, banging the windows and scaring us like it was a sport. I was never sure if I could.

"How many?" I ask.

He turns off the stove, leaves the eggs on, and stirs them again. "Overseas or here?"

My heart is pounding so hard. Did Mom know any of this? This is the same man who was *spanking my belly* recently, whose manhood was pushed against my clit, ready to take me. "Both."

"It's difficult to say overseas. Firefights are hectic. Seven for sure, and possibly more. Maybe five or six more. At home, eleven."

So that means I'm talking to a man who's possibly killed almost twenty-five people. He's talking about it as though we're discussing a sports team he's not even interested in.

"And every one deserved it," he grunts, walking to the cupboard, taking out a plate. Demon pads into the kitchen, pausing, ears flopping as he looks from Jamie to me and back again. I almost expect him to open his mouth and ask, *Why are you up?* "Morning, boy." Jamie puts a plate in front of me, then grabs another. "So now you know, Lena. I'm a bogeyman. I'm a man who's become rich from killing, threatening, and stealing. Do you want to run?"

I should say *yes*. Nothing matters except Mom. I can see her now in that grimy kitchen or whatever room they're keeping her in. She'll be on her knees, her cross pendant in her hand if they let her have it, praying. Mom prays *a lot*. She believes. It was drilled into her as a kid. She never pushed it on me, but she never apologized for it.

But I can't. I can't say *no*, either. I can't just give myself to him.

"I'm your prisoner. It's not like I've got a choice."

He frowns. He knows it's a coward's answer. He knows it's running away from the question, but I don't have to answer. I don't owe this man anything. Not yet. What if he saves Mom? I'll reward him by telling him I never want to see him again. That's going to hurt so badly.

"Anything else?" he grunts as he plates up the eggs.

I swallow. I really don't want to ask this, but it's important. "Why did you break up with Mom?"

He sits back and waits a moment. "I thought you were going to ask about the wallet."

"You helped Mom use it, but you told her too much. I know Mom. She would've been asking and asking. She wouldn't have ever told Antonio if you'd kept your mouth shut. I get that, Jamie."

He flinches as if surprised by my guessing it. "Other women might hate me for that."

He's right. Other daughters wouldn't even be able to look at him, but Mom's the one who unloaded it on Antonio. "Maybe you shouldn't have told her anything, but we'd still be in that hellhole if you hadn't."

"And Simone would be safe."

"No, maybe she wouldn't have been kidnapped, but she wouldn't be safe. Neither of us was there. I tried my best, but..."

He reaches across the table. He looks boyishly nervous at the last moment before taking my hand. It's so different from how he was last night, as if he's letting me see the good man and the bad. It's wrong, but I squeeze onto his hand.

"We shouldn't be doing this," I whisper.

"Lena, I'm sorry. Your mom and I lied to you."

I pull my hand away. "About what?"

"We were never in a relationship. That was just a convenient excuse for us spending time together while I helped with the wallet, helped her fix her credit, bought the house..."

I shake my head, my mind going to all the moments Mom talked about him. There are so many memories of her looking much happier than she had in years, her eyes bright. “What about when you kissed the cotton candy off her nose at the fair?”

This memory is stunningly vivid, bursting to life in my mind undeniably. I remember it in complete detail because it often stabbed me with guilt and jealousy. Mom was sitting at the kitchen table, daintily placing her hand on her nose. “*He kissed me right here.*”

Jamie looks at me like a gaslighter. “That never happened.”

“Mom *talked* about it.” I stand up, shaking my head. “In detail. Mom might lie to me—white lies sometimes, but not like that, not giving me a play-by-play of the date. She’s not sick. I didn’t even ask her about her lame excuse. An uncle leaving her money...”

He smirks. “That’s what she said?”

I could slap him right now. Not spank, but slap him right across his face. There’s nothing smirk-worthy about this. “So, this is a joke now?”

He walks around the counter and reaches out to touch me. I raise my hand, wondering if he’ll stop. He did last night, just. Maybe he’ll throw my hand aside and pull me into his embrace, crushing me with a kiss. Perhaps I’ll like it, knowing I shouldn’t. “Don’t touch me.”

He steps back, his eyes narrowing. “I’m sorry, but your mother lied. We weren’t in a relationship.”

“Mom wouldn’t *lie* about that,” I hiss. “Maybe she’d avoid the issue. Maybe she’d say something general, like, ‘*We had a nice date,*’ but she wouldn’t create these crazy elaborate stories. What about when you danced in Abigail Park?”

He shakes his head. I search his eyes for any sign of deceit, but Mom doesn’t lie to me. Even when she scored some small lottery win, she told me. Even when she relapsed again, she told me, and I helped her. Through everything, we’ve always

had honesty. She had God. She was always praying. I didn't need that. I had my purpose. It can't all come crashing down.

"Lena..." He raises his hand. I step back so I don't slap it away. I want to hug him and hurt him. It's messing my head up. I thought I saw something *genuine* in him. "It's true."

"Maybe you're just saying this because I didn't let you fuck me," I say, knowing it's bitter, knowing it's vicious.

He suddenly surges forward, takes my shoulders, and holds me tightly. His firm body is taut all over. He looks ready to explode into lust, like he will take me whether or not I want it, but that's a false comparison. I *do* want it, even when I say I don't. With him, my man, but my mother is *not* a liar.

"I could fuck your tight pussy right now," he growls in that almost possessed voice. "Don't act tough with me."

"Is that a threat?" I snap.

He lets me go, shuddering. "I'd never hurt you," he says darkly, "unless you were enjoying it."

Perversely, my belly and ass tingle, the physical evidence of his darkness. "I mean it, Jamie. She wouldn't lie. If you're making this up, just... just tell me now. Right now. Maybe I can forgive you then."

"It's the truth," he says, returning to the kitchen. "Throw a tantrum if you want. It doesn't change anything."

I rush forward and grab the plate, scrambled eggs going everywhere. I *almost* throw it at the wall, but then I see Demon looking up at me, head tilted, staring like I'm nuts. I put the plate down. It clatters against the obsidian surface.

"I'm not going to trust some paid killer over my own mother," I tell him, even if it hurts to say these words. "When you save her, I'll ask her. Until then... just... just leave me alone."

I don't mean it. I'm going through the motions, but these are the *right* motions. This is how I should behave as a loyal daughter. I can't just believe him because of how he makes me feel. I have to be smarter than that. Yeah, brilliant, like telling

the person who's going to save my mom to *leave me alone*. That's real clever.

"You'll be with your mom soon," he says. "You can ask her. If she lies to you again, it's your choice if you believe her."

He stares at me firmly, no flinch, no mercy. I stare back, trying to be brave, but I look away first, almost running into my bedroom. That was a mess, but I can't believe him. I can't trust him even if I want to. I've known Mom all my life, and this man feels like the love of my life, but he's a stranger.

CHAPTER TWELVE

J amie

Demon watches me as I approach her bedroom door. It's been several hours since the standoff this morning, before sunrise. It's ten a.m. now. Lena hasn't come out of her room. She didn't believe what I told her, but I had to say it. I couldn't let her think I'd kissed her mom and been with her. She couldn't believe that about me.

I place the duffel bag on the floor, then knock. "Lena, there's clothes and sundries out here for you. I'm leaving now. I'll be gone all day. When I come home..." I swallow. I shouldn't say this, give her too much hope, but I can't stand her being mad at me. "I'll have your mom."

Nothing, no response, but when I turn away, the door opens. She's wearing her tank top and pants, making me almost lose it again, especially when I see she's not wearing a bra. I have to tame that part of myself. From how she looks at me, last night was a one-off for her, but I can't ever let her go.

"Good luck," she says, stepping over the duffle bag and giving me a quick hug. I barely have time to lay my hand atop her before she steps away. She won't look at me. "I'll talk to Mom, then. I'll ask her, but no, get her back, please." She brings her hand to her wrist, then lowers it. It's like she was going to bite on her sleeve and then realized she doesn't have one. "And, uh, thanks."

Things are so awkward between us now. I turn away. It doesn't matter. It does. She matters more than anything, but none of this means anything if I don't save her mother. Then... then what? Then she leaves me? I can't let that happen.

One thing at a time. I head for the exit. I've got a lot to do today—arrangements to make. Antonio Romero's erratic, cracked-out violence routine might work on regular criminals, but I'm a very unusual criminal. This isn't going to go how he wants, and if he decides to make it nasty, I'm happy to do that. I've already made all the necessary phone calls. Favors can get a lot in this world, especially if you've got as many *IOUs* as I do.



It's getting dark when I drive out to an abandoned fair in the middle of a field. It must've been quite the location once. There's a sense of irony as I pull up to the discolored sign with the giant faded clown on the front. A fair is where Simone said I kissed the cotton candy off her nose. That's a sick image for Lena to have in her head.

I focus on the driving. I demanded the meeting location two hours before the meetup time. It's been tight, but I've got everything in place. Antonio was reluctant until I sent him a photo of the hard drive with the custom whalebone design. The unit itself, with the extremely fast timeline, cost me an obscene amount of money, but Antonio won't get a penny of that.

The only standing structure is the small house on the rear of the abandoned lot. There are no rides left, just plots of uneven grass where it's growing up between old wooden foundations. I pull up outside the house. There's a hill to the east of the building, a perfect spot. I don't even have to look up there to know what's what.

Parking sideways, I slip out of the driver's side, keeping the car between me and the house. When I peer over the top, I find Antonio walking down old, crumbling stairs. Visibility is

getting low, but I can still make out the curve of his lips and the gleam in his eyes.

He's got his hand wrapped around Simone. She's wearing a baggy shirt that makes her look skinnier than she usually does, plus I doubt they've been feeding her much. As they get closer, she looks at my car. I think a note of hope touches her features. Maybe she has feelings for me. Perhaps that's why she said what she said. I can't have that. Jesus, that would be a *mess*.

"*Focus, kid,*" Imaginary Jack says, and I snap into the moment. Behind Antonio, there are two men holding rifles, with masks covering their eyes. One of them is wearing a cap.

"My friend," Antonio says, stopping near the car. "Would you look at this? Alone. Truly a man of your word, but you'll understand why I must ask you to drop your weapon."

I stand slowly but keep the car in a cover position, my gun ready. I'll be able to pop one and get behind cover before they can get me, but I'd rather not risk it. "Tell your friends to do the same. Then we can make the trade, and all go home."

"We have a laptop. This man here is a computer whizz. He's going to check it first."

"No need for a gun to do that."

"Then, please..." Antonio spreads his hand, then shakes Simone with his other hand. She chokes back a sob, but she doesn't look broken, not like when I met her when she was still mourning her husband. "Drop yours."

I'd do as he says if he had his hand on Lena, but I can think clearly when it's not my woman. "You have a hostage. I'm assuming you have a weapon. I'm putting myself in a bad position by giving up my gun anyway. Meet me halfway."

Antonio laughs erratically. "Gringo, yes! See? You understand us. The media says narcos are all loco. Can you believe that? But we respond to *logic*, my friend. Just like any other man."

I wonder if it was logic that made Antonio invade a family of four's home and torture the father for some imagined riches.

This isn't the first of his schemes. Luckily for Simone, it's the least bloody. So far, anyway.

In Spanish, he grunts, "Drop your weapons."

The men kneel, placing their guns down. I place my gun on the ground, then put my arm behind my back as I carefully walk out of cover, keeping my eyes on Antonio the whole time. The men could go for their guns any moment, too, but I have to trust. Not them, though.

Antonio grins, then quickly reaches into his waistband and grabs a gun. I get mine out just in time. We're aiming at each other's heads, but then he grins even wider. He's enjoying this, the sick bastard. He moves sideways so that Simone's head is in front of his.

"Silly American," Antonio says, laughing, as I watch the other two men, waiting for them to do the smart thing and grab their guns. They seem to think it's over. "Do you know how much I can sell this bitch for?"

"Goodbye, Antonio. I'm sorry you turned out this way."

He laughs again, and then Simone starts screaming when a shower of red erupts from his head. I kneel and discharge my pistols into the two men, four apiece, then quickly reload. They've both got vests on. They're groaning and gasping in pain. With Antonio's bulkiness, it was hard to tell. When I look closer, I see the outline of the vest. It's a shame my buddy wasn't aiming for the chest.

The men slowly start crawling toward their weapons. I jog over to Simone and haul her over my shoulder. She's screaming in complete shock. She's got Antonio's blood in her hair and over her back. I quickly place her in the back seat, a point of guilt stabbing me that I had to touch her like it's a betrayal to Lena. It feels that way.

"Focus, kid."

I grab my gun on the ground and get into the car, screeching away before the men have a chance to shoot back. Simone sits on the back seat with her knees drawn to her chest,

shuddering, staring into space. I wish I had some words of comfort.

After joining the road—not the gravelly path I drove in on—I take my burner cell from the glove box.

“Good work,” I tell Russel, an old team buddy.

“Narco, piece of shit,” Russel grunts. “You didn’t even have to ask.”

“Where’s you-know-who?”

I’m talking about our other team buddy, Trent. They’re both involved with *The Answer*, though on a lower scale. I’ve thrown myself into the work because it’s what Jack did. Maybe I’ve been too mindless in that way. Perhaps it’s time to settle down.

“Hit the road when I popped the cork,” Russel says. “I’ll be doing the same. In the meantime, find yourself a lady to settle down with.”

I laugh gruffly. Russel and Trent were married and had children when we served together over a decade ago. “Maybe I’m just a late bloomer.”

“There’s being a late bloomer, brother, then there’s *this*.”

I laugh again, maybe insensitively since Simone is breaking down in the back seat, sobbing into her hands. It’s how we always used to deal with things. Laugh it off. Try not to let it eat away at us. “I hear you.”

“Stay safe.”

“And you.”

I hang up, then guide the car with my knees as I quickly dismantle the phone and seal it in a plastic bag.

“Th-thank you, Jamie,” Simone says from the backseat, her voice distraught.

“Are you hurt?” I ask.

She flinches as if she’s stunned at my bluntness. It’s not fair, not after what she’s been through. Maybe I’m bitter about

what she told Lena, but I can't take that out on her. "No. Not physically. My ears are ringing."

"That will go. Don't worry." What I don't say is she's lucky Russel is such a good shot. A bad aim could've resulted in the shot injuring her. "Lena's waiting for you."

"L-Lena." Simone slumps against the seat, a small smile touching her lips. "How long have I been gone? Days? It feels like weeks, but all I had to do was close my eyes and think of her—my perfect daughter. I don't deserve her. I failed her. God help me. Jesus can't save me from this. I failed her."

She's hyperventilating, dammit. I bring the car to a slow stop, looking in the rearview. "Simone, you need to listen to me. I need you to count your breaths with me."

"I c-c-can't... I'm a t-t-terrible... m-m-mother..."

"*Simone*," I say fiercely. "Breathe in for two seconds like this." I breathe in slowly. "Then blow out slowly, for two seconds if you can, like this. Nothing else matters. Not right now. Just your breath, okay?"

Thankfully, she lets me lead her through it. The whole time, an unfair question is niggling at me. Why did Simone have to tell her? Why did she have to say that?

Once she's able to breathe normally, she clasps her hands in front of her, a small cross hanging from a gold pendant. She starts praying with more zeal than anybody I've ever seen, probably more zeal than Antonio Romero had for the old narco with the whalebone wallet.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lena

I can hardly believe it's her voice when I stumble down the hallway into the living room, but she's right there, her hair bundled up in a ponytail and covered with what looks like Jamie's baseball cap. Or a man's baseball cap, at least. No, I won't let myself feel a stab of jealousy now just because she's wearing his *hat*.

I run toward her. We collapse into each other's arms, both crying so hard we can't hear each other. I'm saying *I love you*; I know she's saying the same. Finally, we sit together on the couch.

"I thought I'd never see you again," I say, holding her hands tightly.

"It's my fault." She squeezes me just as desperately. "I've had time to think, to pray. Oh, Lena, it's *all* my fault. After your dad passed, I let my mind get all twisted up. I forgot about God. I forgot myself."

I don't care where Mom's getting her strength from, only that she looks far tougher than I expected, ready to face the evil of what happened to her.

"You can both stay here tonight," Jamie says, but I keep my eyes fixed on Mom.

I can't look at him, not entirely. He's at the periphery of my vision, looming. He's just saved my mother. In an ideal world,

I'd be able to rush to him, throw my arms around him, kiss him, and thank him in other ways.

Then Mom turns with that familiar smile touching her lips, her *Jamie* smile. "Thank you."

Another sick wave of jealousy washes over me. I need help. I need to get my head straight. It's not like I can do anything about it tonight. She's just happy to be alive. I can't ask her if she lied.

"Are you hungry?" I ask. "I can make us something."

Mom gives me a look when I stand, almost like she's saying, *Oh, comfortable here, are you?* It's a look that makes me sick, almost like we're competing.

That's another thing I need to add to the list of things I never let myself think about. Mom nods slowly, her eyes still on me. I can't let myself, yep, *think*. I'm so repetitive, even to myself, but I have to remind myself every few moments, especially when I feel Jamie's eyes on me as I walk into the kitchen.

"What do you want, Mom?" I call over.

"Anything, dear. Anything you care to make me, and thank you. I'll have a quick shower and be right out."

Mom stands and walks over to Jamie. I finally look at him. He's changed since earlier. He left the house in dark cargo gear and a hooded jacket. Now, he's wearing a long-sleeved shirt without a collar, the type that hugs his thick arms, and plain blue jeans. He's slicked his hair back, too. For *Mom*?

Jamie waves a hand, leading her to the bathroom. "I have some clothes, too."

I have to concentrate hard so I don't break the dishes as I heat the frozen pizza. There's no reason to be healthy tonight. We're celebrating. I hear Jamie's footsteps as I lean down toward the oven, checking the progress. The cheese is beginning to melt.

"She'll be out soon," Jamie says.

I risk a look at him. My heart is thumping so hard now we're alone. We can't ruin this moment. I can't look back on this day

and think, *I wasn't thinking about Mom. I was thinking about him.*

He's staring down at me, his blue eyes sharp, just like when he threatened to kill Mom at the stoplight, but now he's saved her. "I was just talking to a buddy of mine. The man who kidnapped your mom had two men with him. It turns out they were hired guns. They don't give a damn he's dead, and I didn't hurt either of them except to bruise a couple of ribs. It looks like we're free and clear."

"And the man..."

Jamie grits his teeth. He looks so fiery. That's what he always calls me, but that's him all over. "He's gone. You don't have to worry about him. You never have to worry about anybody hurting you, Lena. Never again."

I don't want to say it, but he's heating me up too much. He's tempting me too fiercely. I stand and wave my hand at him. "Except *you*."

He shakes his head and blows out a breath. "I'm not fighting with you. You need to talk to your mom."

"I'm not going to do that *tonight*."

"I get it. Just be with your mom. You've earned it. I've got business to take care of in my office, anyway."

"Really? It's late."

He takes a step back. Demon stands beside him, all smiles, completely contrasting his owner. "You deserve time alone."

"I guess we'll be going home tomorrow," I go on, "since we're safe now."

Suddenly, his expression gets even darker. He takes a big step toward me. He reaches out and grabs my shoulders. Oh, no. This is bad, but it feels so good as he kisses me passionately, lifting and placing me on the counter. The pleasure explodes in my mouth, my soul. I grip his arms and rub myself against him.

Then I push him. Hard. In the chest. He grunts and steps backward, rubbing his mouth, his eyes wild. "Don't talk about

leaving,” he snaps.

“But—”

“Don’t say a word about it.”

He turns and marches away, Demon at his side. I watch him go, tasting him on my lips. He got so mad then. It’s as though the worst thing he could think of is me leaving him. I want so badly for him to feel that devoted. It could all be so simple if...

If he wasn’t a liar. If he wasn’t a killer. If he wasn’t a bad, bad man.

When Mom returns, her nose wrinkles. “That smells *cooked*.”

She’s right. It’s almost burning. I’ve been sitting here remembering the kiss, wishing we could do it again, knowing we can’t. “Sorry,” I say, standing.

Mom turns to me quickly. She looks younger now that she’s washed, somehow. Her hair is frizzy and wet. The pain in her eyes looks raw. “You don’t have to be *sorry*.” She looks like she might cry. “I’m the mother. I’ll prepare the dinner.”

“Mom, it’s fine.”

She raises her hand. She’s got her cross necklace wrapped around her wrist like a bracelet. The pendant swings back and forth. “I thought I might die in that place, Lena, but I saw God, and I saw you. I saw my failings. I saw how I can do better. I can be the mother you deserve.”

“Mom, it’s not about that. You’ve been through a—”

“No, puh-please. Please.”

I’m unsure what to do when she hurries across the open-plan area. She seems more determined than when we moved into the new house. I follow her into the kitchen as she pushes her hand into the oven mitt and carefully leans down to the oven like it’s going to hurt her.

She takes the tray out and turns to me, tears glistening in her eyes. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I’m sorry I told that evil man. I’m an idiot, a drunken idiot, but I’ll be better.”

“*Mom.*” I walk around the counter, pick up a dishrag, and gently take the tray from her. Laying it down, I bring her into a hug. “I thought you were going to die. I don’t care about anything else.”

Except for Jamie.

“I hate lying to you.” She sobs, squeezing me tightly. “I *don’t* lie to you, Lena. Say what you want, but I don’t do that, do I?”

“No,” I say, swallowing a ball of emotion. It’s just like I was telling Jamie. “Nobody could ever say that.”

“Let’s eat this pizza and forget about all this nastiness. Tomorrow, we’ll be home, where we belong.”

“Yeah,” I say, even if it hurts my chest, the idea of leaving Jamie and being apart from him. My two-job life of basically just existing seems so tame and small now. “Shall we watch a movie or something?”

“Let’s watch something silly. Something we used to watch when you were a girl.”

“With Dad,” I say, smiling.

She turns away, nods, and looks for the tray. She won’t meet my eye. “Yeah, with Dad.”

What was *that*? Soon, we’re eating pizza and watching an old animated movie. It’s enough to sit here and pretend, just like I did last night, that nothing else matters. Nothing else exists.

Toward the end of the movie, Mom sits up, glancing at the hallway. “I wonder what Jamie is doing.”

My belly tightens. I try not to show my reaction. I feel like I might be sick. Weirdly, I imagine her response if I told her about the belly spanking. It’s so weird. So *us*. Maybe they did it together, too. *Oh, ew!* “Yeah,” I say lamely.

“He’s a good person,” Mom says. “I think he’s done some bad things, maybe, but I can tell he’s a good person.”

My throat gets tight. Maybe this is my chance. “Do you think you’ll give it another try?” I ask.

She turns to me sharply. She looks almost manic again. I regret the question right away. She squeezed her hand tight. I know she’s got the cross in there, digging it into her palm. She’s going to need a lot of healing after this. “Why? Has he said anything?”

“What would he say?” I reply.

“Well, anything about *us*. About the past. Anything like that.” She won’t look at me again, just like when I mentioned Dad.

“I was just wondering,” I say. No, let’s be honest. I *lie*. I could tell her what Jamie said about them not being together but look at Mom. She clearly cares. She didn’t just make it up. “I remember how excited you used to get about the dates and stuff.”

Mom laughs strangely. She’s staring at the TV, not at me, even as the credits roll. “Oh, oh, yes. I remember that.” Is she lying? “They were... memorable.” But could she be lying?

I’m not going to push her on it tonight. I’d feel like the lowest of the low. She’s being so shifty, though. It’s so different from how she used to talk about the dates. I can’t help myself, but I should leave it. “You know, Mom, if you sort of exaggerated stuff, so I wouldn’t think anything suspicious was going on, I wouldn’t blame you.”

She looks at me again. It’s pure hate. It’s like an animal response. “I do *not* lie to my daughter,” she snaps. “We were together. Now, we’re not. I’d rather not talk about it.”

What does that mean? Did it end badly? Did he do something? “No, you’re right. I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry.” Mom nods, glances at me, and looks away. “Shall we watch another movie?”

There’s nothing else I can do. Not unless I’m willing to interrogate Mom after she watched a man die in front of her. I haven’t mentioned it, but I can still see the red in her hair as it dries. It must be blood.

I'll need a narrative going forward. That's what the library has taught me. People can tolerate almost anything if they can frame it in a story. So my story can either be I'm the woman who fell hard for her Mom's ex, the crazy guy who kidnapped her and could never let him go. Or I'm the woman who had a fling. Things got steamy and confusing, and then I shrugged it off—no big deal.

I swallow. This is going to be tough.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

J amie

As I lead Demon toward the main entrance of my apartment—not the door to my private garage—I think about Lena leaving today. The idea of her not being close to me, even if she’s pissed, even if it’s confusing, drives me nuts. I need her there. Her womb, her soul, her future. Everything.

I pause at the panel. What if the hired guns Antonio hired spread stories about the hard drive? Spread Simone’s name? They’d be able to get to them. Antonio was low level. He was clearly on drugs all the time. I doubt anybody would take him seriously, but is it worth the risk?

Maybe I’m giving myself an excuse. I touch the panel, swipe my thumb, and then start selecting features to activate fifteen seconds after I lock the door. Soundproofing, complete lockdown, subtle shifts in my glass, making it more difficult to see inside, even with lenses. Jack would be astounded. He was never rich enough to afford all these gadgets, at least when I knew him.

I don’t hang around long enough to second-guess myself. Demon walks at my side as I leave the apartment, lock the door, and enter the elevator. Two cops talk to the security guard as I walk across the lobby.

“Mr. King?” Tim, the security guard says, turning to me. “I’m sorry, sir...”

“Are you Mr. King? Jamie King?”

I stroke the top of Demon’s head. We’re standing just off to the side of the desk. This is an upscale building. A lady in a fur coat gives me a sour look as she clicks past on her heels like I give a damn.

“Yes, I am,” I say casually.

One of the cops is a tough-looking woman who looks like she’s got a bad attitude. She’s eyeing me up, lip curled. The other is a tall, lean man with soft eyes and a smile. I guess this is good cop, bad cop.

They give me their names. Good cop is O’Malley, and bad cop is Ramirez.

“Do you mind if we speak upstairs?” Ramirez says. “Most people prefer that.”

“Especially around these parts,” O’Malley says with too much cheeriness.

“I’d love to, but it would mean abusing the little man here.” I gesture to Demon. “Once he gets it into his head we’re going for a walk, he won’t accept anything else. Unless you’re down to wrestle with him, we should probably talk here.”

Ramirez flinches, glancing at her partner. I wonder if she’s trying to make detective. She’s definitely the keener of the two.

“Fair enough,” O’Malley says with a nervous laugh.

“Do you know Simone and Lena Harwood?” Ramirez asks bluntly.

“Yes. I dated her mother a while ago.”

“Define a while ago.”

I shrug. “I’m not sure.”

“Do you suffer from memory problems, Mr. King?”

O’Malley sucks in a breath. This isn’t how cops usually speak to people around here.

I just smile, presenting a confused man. “I can’t exactly remember.”

“Ha, ha,” she says drily. “The Harwoods are missing. Before Lena Harwood was last seen by her neighbor, she texted and called *you*, Jamie King.”

This is what I get for having a personal cell phone, not just burners. But these days, it’s more suspicious *not* to have one. I nod. “She did.”

“Our records show you spoke for some time.”

“Maybe a few minutes,” I say, leaning down and adjusting Demon’s collar as if none of this matters to me but not *overselling* it. That’s where most people would screw up.

“Would you mind telling us what was said?” Ramirez snaps.

“Lena was terrified because her mother had mentioned feeling uncomfortable around a possible cartel member at the casinos in Vegas the last time she spoke to her. His entire face was tattooed, apparently, and he was tall. She was babbling, in all honesty.”

O’Malley is eagerly writing this down. “What did the man look like? Any details? The names of the casinos?”

I give a basic description of Antonio, enough for it to be feasible for Lena to provide me with enough information quickly. “She didn’t mention any specific casinos. I’m sorry.”

“Why would she call you?” Ramirez asks. “You’re a stock trader, aren’t you? Move money around on a screen and make millions. It’s some gig.”

I don’t take the bait. I don’t give a damn about trading stocks, but if you can pay the right people, any money can seem legitimate. “I have a military background. I’d mentioned it to both Lena and her mother. Perhaps she thought I could help.”

“Hmm.” Ramirez nods, never taking her eyes off me. “But you didn’t call the police.”

I shake my head, confused. *She’s* overplayed her hand. “I assumed Lena would do that. I didn’t see it as my place.”

“Hmm.” She nods again. “There are also reports of a car pulling up outside the residence.”

They obviously didn’t get the plate, not yet, at least, but it wouldn’t help them anyway. None of my plates are registered in my name. It’s a risk, basically meaning I can never be pulled over, but cops tend to leave me alone. It helps that I never break the law when they’re watching.

I wait in silence. Most people break here. They feel a need to say something to save everybody from the awkwardness, but I wait until Ramirez snaps. “Do you know anything about that?”

Yeah, as if I’m going to answer that. “This has been a pleasure, but you’ve taken up enough of my time. I’m going to walk my dog now.”

Some people might be socially uncomfortable to walk away from the police, but they can do nothing as I lead Demon onto the street.

I can’t have Lena and Simone’s reappearance linked to me in any way. Even if they find Antonio’s body, nothing ties him to me. Unless somebody has video footage of me meeting with him, which is unlikely, I will be fine. Anyway, narcos don’t talk to the cops. We’ll have to come up with a cover story for them, something plausible. The cops won’t look too deeply if their stories are the same and they’re safe.

I stop on the corner of the block, looking up at the tower, knowing my woman is at the very top, and she can’t escape. She can’t go anywhere. She belongs to *me*. However, I can’t keep her there forever, not with the police getting suspicious.

Maybe I should call some cop friends, but that could make it worse. It would eliminate this current situation but alert them to my presence. So far, for years, I’ve had almost no dealings with them. I like the police. I don’t want to waste their time, but my best choice is to let Ramirez chase her tail until Lena and Simone are home.

I’m almost tempted to go out to the fair and clean up the body, but it was safer to leave it there. I was wearing gloves. I wasn’t anywhere near him. No DNA at the scene. No security

footage. Hell, it's not like I even pulled the trigger, though I'd never tell anybody about Russel, not for any price.

No, it's better to leave it. Law enforcement isn't going to break its back over one dead narco, a serial abuser, a sicko who preyed on women and children and terrified them in their own homes multiple times.

As Demon walks beside me, owning his portion of the sidewalk, I almost smile. It's so wrong, but I feel it tugging at the corner of my lips.

Now Lena is right where she belongs—locked up with me. She's *mine*.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lena

I stand in front of the door, looking at the metal blocking it, sealing us in. I thought that was over. I thought I wasn't his prisoner anymore, but the evidence is right there.

I don't want Mom to see. She'll panic. But what happens if she tries to leave? And why did he shut us in again? Is something wrong?

I return to the living room and sit on the couch, chewing on the sleeve of the sweater Jamie gave me. My mind is spinning so hard as I try to process everything, from the website to the kidnapping, both mine and Mom's, to the possible lie Mom's telling. Or Jamie is, and now I'm a prisoner again. Does part of me like it?

"Hungry?" Mom says breezily, walking into the room. She's got her hair in a braid over her shoulder.

"You look great, Mom."

She smiles widely and takes a deep breath, nodding. "It's all about the mindset. That's what I think. I need to remember that, and my mindset now is I'd like to make my pattyckake some breakfast."

I roll my eyes, but I can't stop myself from smiling. "You haven't called me that since—" *Dad died.*

Mom rushes toward the kitchen. “You used to *love* that nickname.” If she didn’t run away so quickly, I might smile and reminisce with her, talking about how we came up with the nickname. It was Dad and I playing pattycake together, and I loved it so much and would go crazy anytime he wanted to play. That’s why that nickname warms me up so much, but Mom doesn’t seem to want to talk about Dad.

“How about some eggs?” Mom calls over. “Or look, there’s bacon here. Jamie won’t mind, will he?”

“I’ll have whatever you’re having, Mom,” I say, hating how her voice gets high-pitched about Jamie. My mind’s on the next steps. Mom seems content to exist moment-to-moment, but how does going home actually work? What is Mom going to tell people? Presumably, Jamie won’t want us telling the world about his involvement.

Whatever happens, it’s going to mean leaving Jamie. Even if I don’t *feel* like he’s a liar, I have to look at the facts. Mom basically swore to me they were together. I can’t think of a reason for her to lie when I told her I’d understand. Surely, if she cared that much, it would’ve been better to come clean last night when I asked her.

Yet my feelings won’t leave me alone. Maybe it’s just the longing for Jamie. I want to do more with him. I want to sink into his arms, feel his strength wrapped around me, not having to worry about any of this complicated stuff.

Mom returns with two plates loaded with bacon and eggs. She puts hers on the coffee table, interlocks her hands, and says grace. Then, Mom tucks into her food with enthusiasm.

“When do you think we’ll head home?” she asks. “My poor plants must miss me.”

I don’t want to tell her about the metal across the door, sealing us in, the fact Jamie could leave for days if he wanted to, and there’s nothing we can do. “I guess we’ll ask Jamie when he’s home.”

“Home,” she says with a weird smile. “We’re *going* home, pattycake.”

“Yeah, I know. Just a figure of speech.”

She’s looking at me closely, almost like she’s guessed something, almost like she’d be jealous if she had. I’ve just finished my eggs when I hear the *buzz* of what must be the metal retracting from the door.

“What’s that?” Mom says, looking across the room.

I shrug. “I guess Jamie’s home.”

Demon pads ahead of him. Jamie’s wearing a black, light jacket, the same color as the shadowy beard across his jaws. He looks at me for too long and locks his eyes on me, silently saying so much. He wants me. I want him. Need him. But *he lied*. How many times do I have to tell myself that until I believe it?

Jamie walks over to the seating area, drops into the armchair, and rests his elbows on his knees. “We need to discuss how we will sell your return home.”

“Sell it?” Mom asks.

“To the cops. Without implicating yours truly.”

“I was just thinking that,” I murmur.

Jamie smirks and shoots me a look like he’s proud. Then he remembers the game we’re supposed to be playing. He becomes serious again.

“I’ve got an idea. I’ll take you both out to the fair. You’ll walk from the fair to the road. Flag somebody down. The story is they left you a note, Lena, demanding that you bring ransom for your mom. You were terrified. You didn’t have the money, but you went to beg for her life anyway. They held you hostage, but then the men got into an argument. You couldn’t hear what they said. They were speaking Spanish, but one of them got shot. You were scared. You hid. Then you finally dared to sneak out.”

“Will they buy that?” I ask, knowing I need to get out of here *fast*. I can’t hang around Jamie much longer. Even now, with Mom right there, I want to grab hold of him, squeeze tight, and never let go.

“They may have their suspicions. If they run ballistics, the gunshot might confuse them, but they won’t be able to disprove it. I’ll need to tell them what you supposedly said to me on the phone, Lena. Simone, you can be honest about everything except the wallet and stick to the relationship story.”

I cringe when Mom leaps to her feet. “The relationship *story*?” she snaps. “It’s not... It wasn’t... It’s not a *story*. You can’t call it that.”

Jamie groans, seeming to realize his mistake as he massages his forehead. “Simone, I don’t know what to say. We were never—”

“Will you *please* just *be* quiet,” she hisses. “All my daughter and I care about is getting home. If I have to return to that evil place to make it happen, then okay, Jamie, I’ll do it. I’ll tell the police whatever I must, but *don’t*... just *don’t*...”

I wait for Mom to go on and outright challenge him, but she hasn’t said anything concrete. She hasn’t said, “*We were together*,” “*We were in love*,” or anything definite. I wonder what’s going on. It seems more complicated than I first assumed.

Jamie sighs, looking at me like a challenge, wondering why I haven’t got the truth from her yet. Or whatever her version of the truth is.

“So we agree?” Jamie says.

“Are you sure we’re not putting you at risk?” I ask. Mom glares at me as if wondering why I’d ever care about putting him at risk. I glare back as if to say, *He saved your life, Mom*.

“A few people might be suspicious, but police resources are thin. One dead narco and two safe-and-sound women will be enough for them. As long as you keep to your stories.”

“We will,” I say firmly. “We’re grateful, Jamie, for everything you’ve done.”

“We are.” Mom raises her hand like she’d put it on his arm if he’s sitting closer. Luckily, he’s not. “Without you, I’d be dead. You saved my life.”

“Don’t mention it,” Jamie says, leaving the room quickly. It’s like he can’t tolerate being in here any longer. Soon, I won’t have to worry about resisting him. It will be back to my regular life, the boring day-to-day stuff. It’s for the best, I remind myself.

“I’m sorry,” Jamie says, returning with blankets clutched in his hand. “You’re going to have to hide in the trunk on the way there.”

Mom walks over to me, reaches down, and takes my hand. She looks down with so much bravery and more. It’s *pride* at how brave she feels like she’s finally ready to battle her inner demons. It almost makes me cry again. “We can do it. Don’t worry. Can’t we, pattycake?”

“Yeah, Mom,” I reply, as Jamie stares at me with those sharp, hungry blue eyes.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

J amie

I drive out into the countryside, Demon sprawled out in the backseat. If somebody wants to search my trunk, at least his bulk will delay things and give me time to strategize. I don't like the fact my woman's back there, in the dark, but at least she has her mom.

Who will I have once she's gone? Damn, that's some self-pitying thinking, but I can't help but think about it. As surreal as it's been, this time with Lena has been the most... hell, what? The *brightest* time of my life. The most emotional. I've felt like a man, raw and hungry and primal, instead of numb, instead of mechanically focused on the task ahead.

The fair ground seems somehow bleaker in the daylight. I drive up the same path, past the grass growing up through the old wooden foundations, out to the same structure as before. Antonio's body lies right where he fell, flies buzzing around the wound.

"Stay here, boy," I say, pushing the door open.

Then something strange happens. At least, it'd seem strange to regular people. This borderline six-sense feeling is something I recognize from countless gunfights and near-death run-ins. Somebody's watching me. I turn and take one step to the side.

A bullet crashes into the car window right where I was just standing. It splinters across the reinforced glass. I jump back

into the car. A bullet tears into the seat of the open door, a smoking, smoldering scent filling the air as it blackens.

I slam the door. Another bullet hits the side of the car. I spin out of the spot. I can hear my woman and her mother screaming. Demon is barking with enough ferocity to earn his name. The whole car is trembling with his barks.

Driving away from the fair, I take another bullet in the vehicle's rear. They're probably going for the gas. Who is this, the cartel? Were they waiting here for me? Or did somebody follow me? If that's the case, they moved like a ghost. Is there a tracker on the car?

Two more shots fire, the discharge ricocheting across the grounds, but then I'm back on the road. I speed away but not toward the city. Luckily, I brought Demon with me. There's no reason to go back tonight. Screw the police. Screw the consequences. If I end up doing time for this, fine, but at least my woman will be safe.

I speed away from the city, mentally replaying events, trying to figure out where I made a mistake or which of my enemies would go to this effort. But anybody that would want *this* kind of revenge is already dead. It would be one of my targets. A paid job, then?

I keep driving, whispering to Demon, trying to settle him down. Eventually, he starts rumbling, looking out the rear window. He's ready for battle. I want to pull over and talk to Lena, reassure her, and offer what I can. For the first time I can remember, I'm spooked. I'm downright terrified.

I can't let anything happen to the future mother of my children.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lena

Mom clings to me during the car ride. I don't know what's happening, except the car swerves several times, and Demon starts barking like crazy. I think it was a gunshot, but now we're speeding away to who knows where just driving. I'm not sure how long it's been.

"I can't breathe," Mom whispers urgently.

"You're okay."

"No, I can't... Oh, thank God."

The car is slowly coming to a stop. The thought hits me that this might not be Jamie. Maybe those sounds were gunshots. Maybe they got him. They somehow knew we were in here and drove us farther away from the city—a better place to bury us.

The door opens. Jamie peers down, the sun glaring behind him. It's a clear blue sky. It looks clearer than the city skyline.

Mom quickly climbs from the car, stumbling to the side of the road and puking. Jamie offers me his hand, with Mom standing just a few feet away. Her back's turned, I see, as I climb out *without* his hand. Even so, it's risky. We're standing on a dirt road, a collection of trees just down the road, more dirt on the other side.

"Why are we in the middle of nowhere?" I ask.

“Because it’s the middle of nowhere,” Jamie replies. “I don’t know who that was. That’s not good. People shoot at me occasionally, but mostly, I know why. I know who. We need to regroup. I’m taking us to a safe house.”

“Wait.” Mom stands and wipes the vomit from her mouth. “We’re not going home?”

“Not yet,” Jamie says bluntly.

“But-but...”

“I’m sorry.” His voice softens, but not by much. He sounds more like a man intent on carrying out a plan to the end wherever it leads. That kind of leadership will make him such an excellent dad. “There’s no choice. I can’t take you back to the city until I know what’s happening.”

“But...” Mom shakes her head. “I thought it was over. I thought we were *done*.”

“So did I,” Jamie grunts, “but I was wrong. This is about survival now.”

“*Survival?*” Mom yells, shuddering.

I go to her quickly. She’s trying to put on a brave face, but she’s been through a lot. Perhaps I have, too, but I think she *saw* that man die. She was close enough to get blood in her hair. “Mom, it’s going to be okay—”

“Just give me a minute,” she snaps, turning away and folding her arms. She looks like a petulant child. I might say that if it wasn’t for the guilt or her pain.

Jamie nods, gesturing for me to follow him closer to the car. He lowers his voice. We’re standing so close it feels natural to collapse into his embrace, slide my arms around him, and cling on for comfort and strength, but I keep my distance.

“There must be a way we can go home,” I say, looking over at Mom, her trembling back. She’s trying so hard to keep it together. “What if we use crypto money to pay for security or something? She’s been through enough.”

Jamie suddenly looks so pissed. His voice is quiet but fierce, like he’s struggling to contain himself. “I’m not letting you

return to the city until I know you're safe. You can either help me convince your mom or not. Either way, you're coming."

"What if we ran?"

"I'd catch you. Maybe not both of you, though. Your mom might get away. It wouldn't be safe for her."

"So I am just going to be your prisoner forever?" I'm grinding my teeth again, a bad habit. "It's never going to end, is it?"

"You say that like you *want* it to," he growls. "Make your goddamn choice."

"You can be a real douchebag sometimes."

"As long as you're breathing, call me anything you want."

I look around at this little corner in the *middle of nowhere*. Realistically, there's nothing much I can do. Mom and I could make a run for it, and then what? Get home, get shot at? A cold thought slithers into my mind. What if Jamie arranged this to continue this kidnapping episode of his life? He likes it. I remember how excited he got.

Not. Now. *Jeez*.

"I better talk to Mom, then," I say shortly.

"I'm doing this for us," he replies, voice blunt.

"Us?" I say, stopping. I was about to walk away.

His eyes are twin hot blue flames. He steps closer. Mom's back is still turned. I think she's crying, trying to stop the tears. She could turn and face us at any moment. She could see Jamie reach over, take my hand, and briefly squeeze it. "I'm not letting anything happen to you. We're getting through this. Together."

He lets my hand go, then goes to the car and takes Demon out. "Come on, boy, but not far."

He leaves the last bit as a threat, giving me those intense eyes again. Mom returns to me as if she's been waiting for Jamie to leave. I'm sure she didn't hear anything. We were talking quietly, but I still feel a pulse of guilt and shame, my hand burning from where he touched.

Is there even a reason to feel guilty? I need the truth out of Mom, but life keeps getting in the way.

“Did he tell you anything?” she says quietly.

“Somebody was shooting at us. He doesn’t know who. I guess he wants to take us to a safe house to keep us safe. I don’t know what other choice we have.”

“There’s a word for that, Lena. When somebody does something just because they don’t have a choice. It’s *victim*. We don’t *have* to do anything.”

This is such a crazy position to be in, convincing my mom to be a prisoner, but what else am I supposed to do?

“I know, Mom, but I think it’s for the best. He saved you, didn’t he? He clearly wants to protect us.”

I’m doing this for us. But when he said that, I didn’t get the sense he was talking about me, Mom, and him. It was just *him and me* like he was hinting at the future I know I shouldn’t want, but I can’t *stop* wanting.

She looks around, biting her nails. “What do you think we should do?” she asks.

There’s something in her tone, almost defeated. I don’t have to ask to know that she’s angry with herself for asking for my opinion. She feels she should be in charge, and I get that. I’d be the same as a mother, but it’s not our usual dynamic.

“Go with him,” I say, with maybe too much conviction. “It’s our best choice. He’ll keep us safe. I know he will.”

Mom looks past me, past the car, at Jamie walking with Demon at his side. Jamie is scanning the area as he walks. He catches us looking, turns, and heads back. He looks at Mom, not at me. It’s like he can’t look at me. Guilt, or will he lose control again?

“What’s the plan?” he says.

Mom laughs humorlessly. “You say that like we have a choice.”

Jamie sighs. “This is the best option. Believe me.”

Believe me, he says, like it's the easiest thing in the world, choosing whose story to accept, his or Mom's.

"Fine," Mom huffs, "but we're not going in the trunk."

"That should be okay from here on," he replies. "The tinted windows will be enough. Hopefully, we can get to the safe house without needing to switch cars. It's not too much farther." He frowns at the bullet marks on the splintered glass in the window. "It was *this close*." He measures maybe half a foot with his hands. "Luck. Instinct. I don't know what saved me."

I bite down. We've been so selfish, not even considering how this affects Jamie. I want to reach out, touch his arm, and hold tight. Let him know he's not alone and will never be again.

Mom steps forward as if *she's* going to offer him some comfort. I need to untangle this strange web they're weaving together. It's not "*will they/won't they*" like on some sitcoms. It's "*did they/didn't they*." If Mom lied, though, then she must've had a reason. I've already told her if it was about that surreal whalebone wallet, I don't care. What *else* could it be?

Eventually, Mom looks at the ground. She doesn't reach out to him. Maybe I'd be able to keep myself composed if she had. Maybe I wouldn't go into complete freak jealous mode, but I'm not sure, and that's scary.

"Let's get going," Jamie says, all tough again, shield back up. "My closest safe house isn't too far."

"Your *closest* safe house?" I ask.

"A man like me has to have contingencies," he replies.

"Have you made lots of enemies?"

He looks off toward the trees, but it's really like he's staring into the past. "I've been careful to avoid it. Some people might want me dead, but they're already dead."

He speaks coldly, not looking at us. Mom gives me a look of fear. Maybe there's some judgment in there, too, as if she's wondering how somebody could be so coldly casual about taking a life or multiple lives. I don't judge him. Even Mom

said he's a good man, but when she's faced with the fact of it, she cringes away. I won't. I can't.

"But maybe there's one," he says, his tone getting darker. "I never would've thought it, but yeah, maybe." He walks toward the driver's side door with Demon at his side. "Let's go."

Mom throws her hands up and looks at me for an answer, but I have nothing to offer. Sadly, that feels as if it's been the story of my part in this—nothing to contribute. I don't like not feeling useful. This isn't my world, but I wish I could *do* something.

I open the back door, but then Jamie grunts from the front. "Demon needs space. Sit up here."

It's the same tone he used in the bedroom. It sets my body alight despite the smell of vomit that fills the car when Mom climbs into the back beside Demon. Despite the fear and the paranoia, I'm burning for him as I remember that commanding, unflinching tone.

He looks at me. His blue eyes gleam. *Good girl*. I know he wants to say it, bait and test me, and I know where it will lead after.

I stare at the road. I grab my legs and squeeze way too hard.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

J amie

The house sits on the edge of a small lake, bordered by trees, many of them evergreens. It makes the foliage thick, meaning we have to walk much of the way. My car is parked in a custom-built storage unit disguised as an old electrical unit just off the road. Lena walks beside me, glancing up every few moments, that silent plea in her eyes.

Stop looking at me like that, but I can't help it. My mind is spinning into the past, wondering if it could be possible. Imaginary Jack has nothing to say about this. I'm thinking about after Lena leaves me. She can't. I have to keep her right there. She's my woman—every inch of her.

Simone walks up on my other side, teeth gritted and determined as she climbs over a log. This must be difficult for her, but she soldiers on. My future children's grandmother is strong. That's good. They'll be able to look up to her.

The house comes into view as we break through the trees into a short clearing. The water in the lake is dark. Everything is getting gray as clouds move across the sky.

"It looks like a holiday home," Simone says breezily.

She's right. I keep it clean and maintained on my trips to my safe houses, usually every three months. Some creepers have returned, but they're clear of the roof, and the faded wooden structure looks sound.

“There are clothes inside and food, too. Nothing stylish. Nothing tasty, but we’ll be safe here while I make some calls.”

“To figure out who shot at us?” Lena asks, looking up with that stubborn, tough glint in her eyes. My woman is clearly in a determined mood.

I nod, but she keeps staring. She knows I’ve got a suspicion, and it’s eating me up. She can read me far too easily. Damn, it’s bad of me, but I find myself wishing Simone wasn’t here. Or that we had a separate, secure lake house. Simone could stay in Lake House Number Two while I indulged in all my darkness with her daughter, while I owned her body, spanked her thick...

I grit my teeth and push on, not letting myself think about that.

I sit on the porch, looking over the lake, my senses alert and my gaze scanning the trees. The upside to this place is that it’s difficult to find. It’s not listed anywhere. I’m the only one who knows about it. The downside is that if gunmen were to emerge from the trees, I’d have less time to react. Demon lies beside the lake, watching.

Russel sighs down the phone. He’s been working with intelligence agencies for years. After the SEALs, he joined the CIA and is now a freelance operator. “This is tough.”

“I’m asking you to save my ass twice, I know,” I reply.

Russel laughs grimly. “I’d still owe you. Popping the cork on that narco wasn’t exactly hard, but this will take time. I’ll need to be careful. If there’s a hit on you... I don’t know, man. It’s a challenge. Do you have any ideas?”

I bite down. I should tell him, but I can’t let my mind go there. Maybe that’s cowardice. “Call me on my third cell when you have something.”

“Will do, brother.”

I end the call, then take out the SIM and place the phone and the SIM in a sealed box that blocks any signals. I won't use the same phone twice here, just in case. Not that this attacker would have any way of knowing which burners I'm using. Still, when my woman's involved, paranoia is an advantage.

The door beside me opens. I stand quickly. It's Lena, her hair tied up, wet from the shower. She's wearing a plain, long-sleeved black shirt and pants a size too big. She hasn't got a bra on, her nipples shaping the fabric, swaying as she gestures inside.

"Mom's taking a nap," she says. "You said to tell you if we went anywhere."

"Which bedroom is she in?"

"The one at the end of the hallway." Lena looks so damn shy and hot. She takes a small step toward me. "Do you want to talk about it?"

I walk to the edge of the porch and lean against the wooden railing, looking out on the water. "Talk about what?"

She moves up beside me, standing close. Our arms almost touch. The thought of making contact with her has me howling inside. I'm getting hard just thinking about it. "The person who shot at us. You know who it is."

"What makes you think that?"

"I don't know, Jamie. Maybe because you said you had an idea. Maybe just everything about the way you're acting."

I glance at her and smirk. She's got that stubborn expression that ignites me so quickly. "Maybe I'd rather talk about you."

She rolls her eyes and tries to act like my words have no effect on her, but she can't hide her desire from me. It's in every inch of her body and how her eyes flit around like she can't look at me. She finds it as difficult as I do, looking at her. My cock is rock hard, the head bulging.

"I think that's called changing the subject."

I move closer, even if I shouldn't. It's not like Simone is in a different state. She could walk out and catch us any second if I

give into this need.

I didn't like how she reacted at the house when I called the relationship a *story*. She started mumbling, saying it wasn't a story, as if it was more than that. I don't know what game she's playing, but she's too vulnerable right now for me to press her. I won't do that to my woman's mother. Yet it's making things difficult with her daughter.

"What do you want to do, Lena?" I ask. "In life. In the future."

She laughs as if the question is ridiculous. "So I guess you think you're in charge, huh? You're the one asking the questions?"

Yep, I'm bad. I can't stop. My hand smooths around her back. I grab her hip and pull her right up against me. She must be able to feel my hard dick pushing through my pants. She makes a moaning, almost defeated sound. It's like she wants to fight, but she can't. I know the feeling.

"Don't forget who's in charge here." I squeeze my hand into her hip, obsessed with the fullness of her curvy body, with her moans, her eyes flashing up at me. "You can pretend you don't like being my prisoner, but your body can't lie to me."

She turns, glances into the house, then slowly puts her arms around my shoulders. "Jamie..."

She's begging me, begging me to stop, and begging me to kiss her. I lean down, claiming her hips with my hands and pushing my lips against hers. She sinks against me, tearing her nails down my neck, so much horniness unleashing from her. Precome starts leaking hotly from my cock.

I slip my hands lower to her ass and start massaging her thickness. I can't stop myself. Hell, I don't even try. I spank her round, plump ass, feeling it shake for me. Her mouth snaps open like she wants to scream, but our mouths are too close. She falls against me.

I spank her again, harder each time.

"You're going to make my ass red," she moans through the kiss. "Jamie..."

“You want your ass red for me,” I growl. “It’s a mark. It shows who you belong to. It shows that your round, perfect ass is *mine*. I can spank it. Bite it. Massage you as I pound you from behind, as I fuck your tight, tight pussy.”

She leans back in my embrace, looking into the cabin again. I’m not even bothering to check we’re not being watched. All I can think about is her body and lust. I’m not even watching the trees. I’m just obsessed with her.

“Jamie, we can’t,” she says, trying to sound tough and in control. “Not until Mom—”

“Tells the goddamn *truth*,” I snap. “I’ve never kissed her. I’ve never touched her intimately. I’ve never *wanted* to. The thought makes me sick because it would mean I could never be with you, and that’s all I want.”

I kiss her again, hard, pushing against her lower back. The kiss is more intimate. There’s emotion in it. I groan as our tongues slowly caress each other. She presses down on my shoulders, squeezing so hard. “I want to believe you.” She gasps. “I have to, but—”

“Don’t worry about ‘*but*.’” I kiss her harder, then take her hips and lift her off her feet. She moans as I place her on the porch rail, pushing forward, my manhood grinding through my pants against her crotch.

She starts to rock with me. I wonder if she’s looking over my shoulder into the cabin, watching for her mom. All I can think about is my dick grinding against her pussy, my seed making my shaft so hard, bulging, wanting her naked skin, her hole, her future.

She moans again when I pick her up. Then I slip my hand beneath her knee, my other arm cradling her back. Demon walks over to the porch from his spot at the lake, looks up at us, sits down, and looks out onto the trees. He’s on alert. Good.

Lena smiles nervously up at me as I carry her inside. When a floorboard creaks, she winces, her gaze snapping to the hallway. It’s only a short walk, then a turn, and Simone would

be out here. Whatever she says about a so-called relationship, I don't want Lena's mom catching us.

Yet I can't stop, and neither can Lena. I put her on the couch, then kneel next to it, kissing her passionately as I stroke her over her pants. It's impossible to do this for long without wanting to feel her naked flesh.

When I reach for her pants button, she places her hand on my wrist. "What about Mom?" she whispers.

I move my hand to her belly, slipping it under her shirt. Oh, fuck. She's so curvy, so perfectly thick. I massage her belly, then squeeze, knowing her skin will be just as red there as it is on her plump, juicy ass. "Don't make me punish you again. Don't make me spank your big, perfect belly again."

While I can, I almost add. While there's not a baby in there.

She shivers against me, rubbing her hand up my arm, touching my face. "I never thought somebody could want me like you do," she whispers. "Want every part of me."

"It's *you*, Lena," I say fiercely. "*You're* perfect. Of course, every part of you is, too."

I smooth down her belly again, going for her pants. This time, she doesn't stop me. She nods, biting her lip, her legs trembling. Her lust is sending her into overdrive as quickly as possible. She knows we can't indulge for too long.

I want her all. Damn. Night. I want to take my time with her, but I know that if her mom caught us, it would change everything. Maybe it would ruin everything.

Moving my hand into her underwear, I rub her clit, leaning back so I can watch the way she trembles. She looks up at me with those wide eyes, pulsing against my hand, shifting against me. I'm rubbing her so damn fast already, but she urges me on. She squeezes my wrist, moving in time with me.

"Fuck, you're so hot when you're horny."

"Hmm," she moans quietly. "Y-yes."

I move my hand lower. "Your hole is so tight, but you'll take it, Lena. Every inch of my dick. You'll moan and cream all

over my dick as I stretch your tight, young slit, won't you?"

Her eyes snap open wider. She nods, but her eyes move from side to side. It's like the reverse of her expression when I first spanked her belly. Then, she was willing me to keep going, but something is stopping her here.

I gently massage her clit, lean down, kiss her cheek, and speak against her ear. "Tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing's *wrong*," she says. "Just... You should know. I've never done it before. Gone all the way, I mean. Not that it's a big deal."

My hand pushes harder against her clit, my finger slipping into her. It's instinct that drives me. I was right before. She's inexperienced. *Completely*. No other man has ever claimed her, and no other man ever will. I'm the only man she'll feel. I'm the only goddamn one.

"Good," I growl, then start fingering her eager slit, pushing into her wetness. She lies back on the couch, both hands wrapped around my wrist, gasping as I push deeper, harder, claiming her. Owning her, like I always will.

"G-good?" she whispers.

"You are mine," I grunt. "You never act like this for anybody else. Just me. You don't moan like this. You don't shiver like this. You don't *come* like this for anybody except for *me*. You're my perfect girl."

I slip another finger inside of her, her walls stretching around me. She closes her eyes as I softly slip in and out, taking it slow, watching her expression as her pussy gets used to it. To me. After a minute, I lean back and glance into the hallway. There's no Simone. A smile spreads across Lena's face.

She opens her eyes, moans, and nods urgently at me to go on. I fuck her virgin slit with my fingers, going deep, the tip of my cock aching as my seed roars at me to slip inside her. Fuck her hard. Make her cream run down my length before exploding inside of her.

She gasps and bites down. She stops moaning. It's like she's caught in the pleasure. I can feel her pussy pulsing around my

fingers. She bites onto her shirt, moaning as if fighting back, not wanting to let all her pleasure go. Finally, she slows down, staring up at me.

Then, quickly, she sits up and looks over the couch toward the hallway. She sighs with relief when she sees her mom's not there, but when she turns back to me, she gasps when she sees me with my cock in my hand.

I can't help it. This is what a bad man would do, and that's who the hell I am. I take what I want. I can't hold all this seed inside of me. Not when my woman is right *here*. My balls expand, almost hurting, with all the tension working through me. I'm on the verge of exploding already.

"Jamie," she moans, looking at my dick. "I don't... I want to... What should I do? We have to be quick."

"Get those beautiful tits out. Suck the precome off my dick and stroke your hand up and down my length. I'll be quick then, Lena. I'll explode in your fucking mouth, and you better swallow every last drop."

I place my hand on her head and guide her mouth to my tip. "Don't forget those tits."

She whimpers, pulling her shirt up until her big, juicy breasts spill free just for me. My tip aches hotly when her mouth opens around it, her tongue nervously moving around as she lifts her hand and grabs my base.

Like this? she tries to say, but her mouth is full. She smiles around my dick. It's so damn alluring. I smirk, too, then gently push my hand down, sliding my cock across her tongue.

She pumps her hand quickly. Her tits are shaking, bouncing as she moves faster and faster. I'm shaking all over and shaking inside. If I were inside her virgin hole, maybe I'd be able to stop myself and wait until she spilled come down my cock.

Now, I can't. I'm too lost in the moment. The warm wetness of her mouth, her palm stroking quickly with heat...

I bite down when the come erupts from my shaft, burning so intensely I know I'd be roaring, beating my chest like a madman, an animal claiming its catch and claiming my

woman if her mother'wasn't just feet away. I put both hands on her head, coming harder when she looks up at me, that toughness in her eyes. *Do it, do it.* I hear her voice in my mind.

I keep coming, wave after wave, filling her mouth. Her throat shifts as she swallows. Stumbling back, I look at the hallway. I imagine what would happen if Simone walked out here now, my dick wet with her daughter's mouth and her daughter bright red and horny from my touch. She's unstable. She'd go crazy, and that would break Lena.

"We need to get cleaned up," Lena says quickly.

I nod. The romance, if there was any, has faded away. Lena deserves so much better than this. Dates, proposals, and all the stuff men do in those cheesy movies. Maybe I only thought they were cheesy before because I hadn't found her yet. I hadn't felt what it was like to want somebody, *need* them so fiercely.

Lena wipes her mouth. I pull up my pants. I wish I had a bunch of roses or a ring. If I had a ring, I'd drop to one knee in a goddamn second.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Lena

We're on the porch again. I'm wearing a different sweater and a fresh pair of pants. Jamie had a box of plain clothes of various sizes, but it was all for men. My sex tingles from what we did, my core aching from his two fingers. His response when I told him I was a virgin blew my mind.

He said I could only be that way for *him*. He owns me. I know he doesn't mean forever. I know he doesn't mean white picket fences, kids, and all the stuff I'm too embarrassed to talk about. Still, in that moment, he meant it.

What about Mom? It's wrong, but I'm starting to think she lied. I believe Jamie. I can't keep denying it. A part of me also watches with a frown, like I'm the Old Lena, suspicious of everybody except Mom. Now it's reversed.

Old Lena is telling me to stop until I know everything *for sure*. Just because I have lovey-dovey feelings about Jamie doesn't mean he's telling the truth. People lie all the time. He could easily be lying, too. I need to think, not feel, but I can't. I'm lying to myself if I say I can fight it.

Mom is still asleep. It's been maybe twenty minutes since the *stuff* went down. As the world grows darker, we've just been sitting out here, Jamie across the short table from me. It's strangely comfortable, sitting silently without talking, Demon sleeping on the porch.

I'm not sure how long Mom will be asleep, though. "You never answered my question."

He smiles over at me, almost sadly. "You never answered mine. I asked what you wanted to do, and you looked at me like I was crazy, Lena. Like you've never stopped to think once about what you could do with your life. Or that you could do anything."

I fold my arms, staring stubbornly at the lake. He's hit my most sensitive spot without even trying. At least, I hope—think—he wasn't trying. *Think, not feel.* Yeah, right.

"But you can be," he says fiercely. "You can be anything you want. Find a career. A passion. Or find a man, settle down, maybe have some kids."

His voice gets husky. I look at him. He's watching the lake. It's like he won't look at me. My thoughts go to a depressing place. Not for him, if it's true, but he's older than me. It's possible.

"Do *you* have kids?" I ask.

He looks at me sharply, almost offended. "No."

"Sorry." My heart drops. "Are you against the idea of having them?"

"No," he says, his tone savage, equally offended. "It would be a good thing, Lena, to raise children and do it right. Give them the time, the attention, the love they need. Support them and protect them."

There's a tickling deep within. I won't let myself think insane things, like my desire is talking to me, urging me to do the right thing. To climb into his lap and grind against him, feel that huge manhood between my legs, slide up and down, coax him inside. Take his seed—all of it.

"I'm sure you could've had a family years ago."

He shrugs. "Maybe. Maybe not. I've seen what happens when a man doesn't love his woman. It's a sad sight."

"Your mom?" I ask.

He somehow smirks and frowns at the same time. “Nothing gets past you.”

“Who was it, Jack?”

His eyes get that furious glint. Before, I thought it was aimed at me. When he pulled up at the red light, when this first began—hell, *days* ago—I thought he’d hurt me. I can’t imagine it now. There’s too much between us, even if a lot of it is unspoken or *imagined*.

“No,” he says. “My dad, a cliché as old as time itself. He used to beat my mom. We lived out in Cali in the middle of nowhere. It was a good place. Picturesque. I could’ve been a real-life cowboy in a different life. Then Dad beat up Mom badly one night. She thought I was staying at a friend’s house. She decided to burn him down. Then she heard me yelling and tried to save me. Got herself killed... and Dad.”

He lists all this off like it’s instructions for some military tutorial. His voice is numb as he calmly relays it, but there’s a slight note of pain. He’s burying it. “You don’t have to be tough with me all the time, Jamie.”

He smirks. “Says you?”

“Maybe neither of us has to be as tough as we think.”

“You’re wrong,” he says fiercely. “The world’s a nasty place. A man has to be tough.”

“But not a woman?” I counter.

He reaches across the table and slides his hand toward mine. I know it’s, yeah, *wrong*. Everything we do feels like that, but I grab his hand anyway, hold it tightly, praying he’s telling the truth every moment we share. What a horrible position to be in—hoping my mom’s a liar.

“Not if she’s got a man who’ll always look out for her,” he says passionately.

I squeeze his hand. My heart is thumping fast again. If we didn’t have to sneak around, would we ever be able to keep our hands off each other? “I think a woman should still be

tough. What if her man's not around, and she needs to protect the kids?"

He presses against my hand warmly. Sometimes, it's like a ball of fire is expanding inside him. He becomes so hot. So focused. "You're right. That's how a good mother thinks."

I lick my lips, moving my finger over his knuckles. I know he wants to do it as badly as I do. I know he wants to grab, spank, and get obsessed with me. "I hope I'll be one."

"So you want kids, too?"

"Yes," I say passionately. "I never..." *thought much about it before you.* I still don't know if he's talking about having kids with *me*. Even if our steam comes as naturally as a married couple and burns hotter each time, it doesn't mean he wants to make me pregnant.

What if I said it? *Make me pregnant, Jamie.* Then he dropped my hand, stood, and turned. He'd smile at me indulgently, an older man with his silly, confused young girlfriend. "*I didn't mean it like that...*"

"Never what?" he says, leaning down, staring right into my eyes like he's going to kiss me.

"I was never sure," I murmur, "but lately, I've been thinking about it. I'd want to give them the best life, Jamie. Not like you had. Not like..."

"It's okay," he says, more emotion in his voice than I can remember. We're so close to kissing. His warm breath moves all over me. "You can still love your mom and admit you didn't have it easy."

I let out a croak. He's taking me on an emotional rollercoaster—first the lust, now this. "It's not the same. Your mom, your dad... Jamie, I'm so, so sorry. It's evil. Nobody should have to go through that."

"Your father was taken from you. A random act of... I don't know what." He sighs darkly. "A plane crash... It's not fair."

"Let's not make it a competition," I say. "Let's say we both had it crappy. Let's say when we're parents, we'll both be

better.”

Suddenly, he stands. It’s an almost violent way of standing. His chair screeches across the porch. He walks to the railing and squeezes it like he’s going to break it. Demon looks up at him like something’s wrong. “Is that what you want? For *us* to have kids? Together?”

My head is swimming. He’s gaslighting me. Or is he? Surely that’s what *he* meant? But now he’s acting like it’s the craziest thing ever. Which, okay, maybe it is. Perhaps it’s something I shouldn’t even think, let alone say, but he was *basically* saying it too.

“N-no,” I reply, panicking. “I was talking about the future. Whatever. When you find a wife. When I find a husband. I don’t know. I need to... check on Mom.”

“Your mother’s fine.”

But I’m not listening. I walk into the cabin and down the hallway. I need to find the truth from Mom. I have to know why she got so awkward earlier. I have to hear her admit she’s lying. It’s a vicious thing to do. She was only rescued yesterday. She probably still has some of that man’s blood in her hair.

I knock on the door and wait. “Mom?”

No answer. No big deal. She’s exhausted. I probably shouldn’t even be waking her up. I should let her sleep and recover, but now my heart is pounding for a different reason. It has nothing to do with steaminess. I knock on the door again and again.

“Mom?” My voice is getting louder now. I look down the hallway at Jamie. He marches toward me. “She’s not answering.”

“Simone?” he yells, far louder than me. “Simone, are you in there?” He grabs the door and pushes it. It’s locked. He rams his shoulder against it. Demon barks when the lock explodes from the wood.

The door swings open. The room is empty. The window is open. Mom’s gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY

J amie

I rush over to the window, searching the trees. Whoever did this worked cleanly. There are no footprints on the ground or signs of a vehicle. They'd picked the lock on the window, opened it quietly, and slinked in. Then perhaps they injected Simone to stop her from screaming.

Lena walks right up to me, grabs my shirt, and pulls me close to her. "You have to find her. You have to! I don't know what to do. I wish there were something I could *do*." She shoves me, but it's more like she doesn't know what to do with her hands. "Do you think she saw us... without us knowing? Then she left?"

"I'm not sure," I say. "I was distracted."

She glares at me. Then, her gaze focuses on the bedside table. She walks to it quickly, brushing past me. The darkness in me pulses up and roars at me to grab her, pull her close, and kiss her again. Forget it. "What's this? *Sorry, kid, but I had to—*"

I snatch the note from her, reading it quickly. The handwriting is messy and jagged. *Sorry, kid, but I had to take the old lady. I don't want to kill anybody except for you. You know why. You're not better than me. You never were.*

I stumble back and almost fall against the wall, gritting my teeth and shaking my head. Lena gently takes the note from me. "Jack, from the photos? He wants to kill you?"

“There’s no way this was him,” I snarl. “No damn way. He’d be pushing ninety by now. Your mother’s not heavy, fine, but doing all this at *ninety*? Maybe he’s working through somebody if he’s still alive.”

“I don’t understand,” Lena says. “I thought Jack was a father figure to you?”

“He was. He taught me how to shoot and how to survive. We worked together, helping people in the early days. Then Jack started taking borderline jobs, jobs where there was no clear right or wrong. He’d vandalize an ex-wife’s house for the ex-husband, stuff like that. I begged him to stop. He told me he’d always been a bad, bad man. It was in his roots. Later, I learned he’d committed two murders in his twenties.”

I clench my fists, remembering the pain that slammed into me when I read the file. Lena gently places her hand on my arm. “There’s a phone number on the back.” She shows me the note. “It must be him or whoever this is.”

“I tried to find him,” I say, “after we split, but he was always good at hiding. I hoped he rode off into the sunset and gave up this work. What if I was wrong? Maybe he’s some rich, bitter millionaire now, playing sick games.”

Lena presses the note into my hand. I look down at the cell phone number.

“I don’t understand how he’d know about this place. The car didn’t have a tracker on.”

“What if they followed us?” Lena asks. “Is it possible?”

“I would’ve spotted them,” I growl.

“But is it *possible*?” she says. “You were distracted.”

I sigh and nod. She’s right. That’s part of what will make her such an amazing wife. She’ll call me out when I need it. “Maybe with a small drone. You could hang back and keep your distance. It would take two people: one to drive and one to pilot the drone. Keep the drone low. It would be difficult to fly, but yeah, it’s possible.”

I groan and pop my neck from side to side. “We should’ve gone straight to the bunker.”

“There’s a bunker?”

I look at her coldly. “Where do you think you’re going when the bullets start flying? I should’ve put you both there right away.”

“You need to call that number,” she says, that familiar pain in her eyes. “Mom can’t keep going through this over and over, this endless suffering. It’s not fair. She doesn’t deserve this.”

“She’ll be safe soon.”

“She *was* safe,” Lena yells, “and then we decided to put ourselves first. I was out there sucking your dick when they were taking her!”

I step forward and gently touch her shoulders. When I pull her into a hug, she sinks into it, but only for a second, maybe less. Then she pushes her hands against me and leans away. “You have to call that number.”

I nod. We’re not going to talk about what happened on the porch. When I followed her into the house, I was going to tell her she’d gotten it wrong. I wasn’t pissed. I was obsessed. I was starving for her to want the same future as I do, but there’s no use telling her that now. If her mom dies, she won’t ever be able to look at me again, let alone spend a life with me.

Dammit, we’re back at step one.

The phone only rings a couple of times. Then Jack picks up, his voice hoarse, crackly, as it would probably be these days if he were alive. Strangely, I feel Imaginary Jack watching me, the man before the switch, the man who never existed to begin with. The man who gave me so much happiness as a kid, before I learned who he was, who he wanted to become.

“Hello, kid,” he says.

I clench my fists, leaning over the table. Lena has her hand on my arm. I didn't know it would be so hard to hear his voice, even if it is a fake. Like Lena said, it's *possible*. We're clearly dealing with an effective operator.

"We need to know that Simone is okay," I growl.

"I'm hurt, kid. I thought you'd want to talk some."

I almost slam my hand against the table. Imaginary Jack is in my mind, hands wrapped around me, whispering. "*It's not your fault, kid. It's not your fault...*"

"Your man did good work. He managed to follow me. That's difficult to do, and he got his captive without making any noise. There's nothing else to discuss except how we get her back."

"My *man* did good work," Jack says, laughing in that throaty way of his. It sounds like it's gotten as bad as it could have in this timeframe. "You don't think I've still got it. You think I'm a weak old man? You think you're better than me?"

"Jack, you'd be eighty-nine now." I just called him *Jack*. I'm making an ass of myself. "Whoever you are."

"You don't think I'm really Jack?" He sounds amused.

"There are other possibilities."

"Oh, kid. You always did think you were more clever than you are. You're such a disappointment."

I almost hit the table again. Dammit, this is dragging so much stuff up. "Let us hear Simone."

If this is a fake voice, Simone's could be, too, but I doubt it. Creating a fake voice requires hours of audio from the subject. That's why so many podcasters are prime targets. It's easy to fake them. Jack could've arranged that before he died if he cared enough to, but would he? Why? To prove he's better than me? Maybe I don't want to believe that Jack would go this far.

"H-hello?" Simone says.

“Mom,” Lena almost yells, tears in her eyes, her voice choked.
“I can’t believe it’s happening again. Mom, I’m so sorry.”

“Ask her only something she would know,” I say quietly.

“Uh, Mom, do you remember when we went to the zoo, and I fell over, crying, because I was laughing so hard?”

“Y-yes.”

“What animal was it, Mom?”

“A giraffe.”

Lena looks at me, nodding, a question in her eyes.

“Let’s get down to business,” Jack grunts.

“I could do the same with you, Jack,” I snarl.

“What? Ask me about zoos?”

“I could ask you about the fishing trip where I lost my shoe. Remember that? Remember what you said?”

“I’m an old man,” he grumbles. “I can’t remember much these days.”

“Yeah, sure you are,” I snap. “Whatever this is, it has nothing to do with Simone. You’ve made your point. Name a time and a place.”

“You don’t want to believe it’s me,” Jack says with a throaty laugh. “You want to believe the old Jack exists. The one who held you and told you it would all be okay. The one who played daddy for you because you were so damn pathetic and clingy. I did my part. I sacrificed for you, kid.”

This type of pain is new to me. It hits me square in the chest. I’ve spent so long locking this crap away, this part of him, anyway. “You pretended to be a good man for a little while.”

“I did a damn good job, too,” Jack grunts. “Look at you. I’ve seen *The Answer*; Jamie. I’ve seen all of it. I *am* the fucking answer. Did you really think something like that could exist to *help* people?”

He laughs cruelly. I hate thinking about it, but it reminds me of how he sometimes laughed when making an off-color joke.

Just his sense of humor, Mom used to say. It's just how he is—his comments about a woman's skirt on a warm summer's day.

"You wouldn't understand, Jack," I say. "You killed two women. You murdered them in their own home."

Across from me, Lena flinches. I take her hand. She doesn't fight me this time. She holds on tightly, looking at me desperately. I want to say *I won't let him hurt your mom*, but I said that before, and I let this happen.

"Aye, aye," Jack says, sighing wearily. "This life isn't an easy one by any means. We all have to make tough choices."

"You could've chosen to leave them alone, goddamn it." I finally slam my hand on the table, and Jack laughs. "Don't fucking laugh at me."

He laughs again. I'm supposed to be in control and thinking clearly, but I can't. Whoever this is, they're going to pay. If it really is Jack, I will beat the bastard to death for making my woman suffer. For making those women suffer. For not being the person he pretended to be.

"I'm at your oh-so-fancy garage, Jamie. The one disguised as a big metal tomb. Be here within the hour, or I execute the slut. Listen to her, Jamie. Listen to the slut. Tell him, slut. Tell them the truth."

Lena is on her feet, her hands clasped to her face, her eyes red. Demon looks up at her, growling in confusion. He looks around and yawns.

After a moment, Simone speaks. "I'm a terrible mother. I should've d-d-died instead of your dad, Lena. It sh-sh-should've been me."

"You're making her say this!" Lena yells.

"Ooh, hello, lady."

"Don't say a goddamn word to her," I snap, battering the table. "Not a fucking word!"

Lena cringes away from me. Even Demon steps back. I'm breathing so hard. Spit flies everywhere, rage consuming me. I'd kill him if he were here. "You sound oddly protective, kid.

I didn't take you for a romantic. Maybe I'll treat her to the Jack special, eh? One hour. Ticktock."

"You mother—"

He hangs up the phone. I grab something and throw it. Then I break something else. When I regain my senses, I've got my fist buried in the wall like a jackass, wasting time. My head is a red haze. When I turn, Lena is crouched in front of Demon, her hands spread protectively across him.

My mother bear and her instincts. I raise my hands, bloody, covered in small splinters. "I'm sorry, Lena."

She stands, rushes to me, and touches my hands. "We have to go. Right now. We can't let him—"

"You and Demon are staying in the bunker."

She shakes her head and pulls away from me. "We have to go *now*."

"No. No fucking way. I'm not risking you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Lena

I hammer my fists against his back as he carries me across the clearing. He's thrown me over his shoulder like I weigh nothing, his back impossibly hard against my fists. I try to squirm away from him. He sinks his hands deeper into my hips, but not in the way I like.

"Jamie!" I yell. "I can't let you leave me here."

"I'm not risking you," he says flatly, the same thing he's said repeatedly in that calm, matter-of-fact tone. He's doing it again, taking me, holding me against my will.

"That's not your choice to make."

Suddenly, he puts me down but keeps his hands on my hips. He's breathing so hard. He wrecked half the kitchen and completely caved in one of the pillars. He looks ready for more violence. He pulls me close and kisses me like it might be the last time. I gasp, holding on, sinking into it for one heartbeat too long.

"You can't—"

"You're staying here. That's not a question. The only question is, how much time are you going to make me waste?" He leans down and kisses me again. "You're going to be the mother to my children, Lena. You and I... We're going to be a family. We're going to have it all. Together. We're going to do right by our children. That's why you have to stay. *That's why.*"

I'm crying. He's speaking earnestly, but this can't be the moment it could have been. I wish he'd said this before Mom was missing. Now, I can't leave her out there. Jack killed two women before. Even old men can be evil. "What if I say I don't feel the same? What if I don't want kids with you? Will you let me come *then*?"

He looks wounded, but then this cold look comes over him. He's in business mode. Soldier mode. Killer mode. "No," he grunts, then picks me up again, marching across the clearing. "I'll set the bunker to unlock automatically in twenty-four hours. If I'm not back by then, go into the house. Open the false bottom in the jewelry box in the master bedroom."

"Wait, Jamie—"

"*Listen*," he roars, his whole body trembling. "Where is the false bottom?"

"In the jewelry box."

"Where?"

"The master bedroom."

"There's a phone in there. It has a friend's number. Russel. Explain what happened to me. I would if I had time, but I have to go."

"Please, just let me come..."

He leans down, holding me all the while, and then pulls on something heavy and metal. He grunts, his shoulder digging into me.

"It's okay. You can put me down."

"Don't do anything stupid, Lena."

"It's fine."

He slowly puts me down, and I do something stupid. I turn and run, but it's like Demon tries to stop me. Maybe it's just poor timing. He yelps and dashes in my way. I trip and grunt, seeing stars.

Jamie quickly rushes to me. I wave a hand at him. "I'm staying right here. Just open the bunker. We're wasting time."

“I’ll be back soon with your mother.” He wrenches open a metal shaft. “Give me your hand. It’s slippery down here.”

I sit up, rubbing my head. He studies me with concern, lacing those deep blue eyes, but he’s staying focused, too. He sees me as a task. *Kidnap her. Imprison her.* Or he’d call it keeping me safe. Either way, he’s not going to argue.

Standing, I take his hand.

“In an hour,” he says, gently touching my shoulder. “Just one hour.”

“Why do you have to lock it, then?”

“Because they might search the area.”

And he doesn’t trust me not to run after him or run after Mom. We walk down the slick steps, deeper and deeper underground.

“I meant it,” he says, looking at a metal door lit with an electric light just above it. “I want a family with you. I need it. I felt it the first time I saw you standing in the doorway with that shy, tough look on your face. I wanted a family with you *then.*”

“R-really?” I whisper. *No time, no time.*

“More than anything.”

I lick my lips. Wrong, again. *Wrong.* “I felt the same. I wanted you from day one.”

He groans, kisses me, and pulls me close. Then he pushes me away. “I need to enter the key code and set the timer. Then you can take Demon inside.”

I gesture to the dog, and he awkwardly wedges around Jamie. He has his head held high as if this is all beneath him.

“There’s a toilet, a bin for waste. Canned foods. It won’t be fun, but—”

“Just an hour,” I say, stroking Demon. “I get it. One hour, and you’ll be back with Mom.”

Then we can start our happily ever after, I almost say, but I don’t want to tempt fate. We’re almost at the end of all the

craziness now. I know we are. We have to be.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SEVERAL HOURS LATER

J amie

My head is foggy, face pressed up against cold metal. I'm drifting in and out of consciousness, trying to make sense of the last few hours, leaving my woman in the bunker, and running away with a heavy heart through the forest.

I saw the garage and then *thud*. Something caught me right in the back. It felt like a pellet, not a bullet. Rubber maybe. It bruised my body. I spun, and several more caught me. I remember a glimpse of several armed men, all wearing masks.

Peeling my eyes open, I see we're in the back of what must be a van, the walls metal. "J-Jamie?" Simone whispers from beside me, her voice small. "Are you awake?"

"Yeah." My voice is hoarse, and I haven't been asleep, exactly. It's more like they've dosed me up with something. "Did they inject me when they put me in here?"

"Yes. You were going crazy."

I vaguely remember thrashing around as four men grappled me toward the van. I threw one against it, thinking I might have a chance. I headbutted another so hard his black mask showed the crimson blood, but there were too many.

"Fuck," I whisper, banging my head against the van wall, trying to think. There were... I think. I think hard. My head hurts, dammit. There were seven men or maybe eight. This goes beyond anything I understand. This can't be Jack. It's too

elaborate. I've heard rumors about billionaire sadists who arrange complicated schemes like this. Could it be them, maybe?

"Fuck," I say again, hitting my head against the wall again.

I was supposed to return with Simone. Then Simone would explain that we had never had a relationship. Then we'd live happily ever after. Hopefully, those men didn't comb the lake house or find the trapdoor. If they missed it, Lena has a chance.

I clench my fists, thinking of what they'd do to her if they found her. Yet if I'd brought her with me, she'd be in this van with us now. It's a lose goddamn lose. If she were here, I'd never be able to forgive myself either, goddamn it.

When I hit my head against the van again, it stops. I groggily climb to my knees, preparing to spring at the door. Every muscle is primed, but they're clever. As soon as they open it, bright lights glare at me, and men roar, "*We're armed! We're armed!*"

I put my hands up. One is taller, the other's a little wider, but they both wear balaclavas, dark combat fatigues. The taller one holds out a cell phone. "How are you doing, Jamie?" supposed *Jack* says in that gravelly voice. "I've got a proposition for you."

"Go ahead," I snap.

"My men have been searching your premises since we nabbed you. We've found a trapdoor that leads to another door of reinforced steel. Real fancy work."

I open and close my hand, thinking of Lena.

"It would take some time to knock it down, but it could be done. I'm assuming the girl's in there? And the mutt?"

I swallow. He doesn't need me to answer.

"Ah," Jack says. "Hardly worth the extra effort, honestly, but I don't do anything for free. So, here is my deal. Convince Simone here to beat you viciously. I'm talking a real whooping. I'm talking, hell, you might not wake up until

we're back in the city. You do that, and I'll leave the door alone. I swear."

"Even Jack wouldn't do this," I growl. "This is sick."

"I knew Jack," *Jack* goes on, dropping the pretense. His voice becomes higher in pitch, younger, cocky. "He was just one of many people who helped me throughout the years. He talked about you. He was proud of what he did with you. He said it was the only good thing he ever did in his life."

I turn to Simone. "This is beyond us, Simone. These people are fucked. You have to do it. For Lena."

"Ah, yes!" His youthful voice gets excited. "Do it, Simone! He's a *bad, bad* man, as Jack used to say. Beat him bloody."

"You have no choice," I tell her.

She narrows her eyes at me in the harsh light. She looks devastated. "What if they're lying?"

"I don't want to waste the time or resources on her," the man yells over the phone. "But like I said, I don't do anything for free."

"I've met sadists before, kid," I say, sounding just like Jack used to with me. "You're nothing special."

"Oh, if only you knew. I'm extremely unique, but no, you're trying to bait me."

"A tech billionaire," I say bluntly. "The voice tech. The fact you probably found me through *The Answer*."

The man snaps, "She has *ten* seconds to hit you, or I give the order. We'll get through that door. Don't worry. The longer it takes, the angrier my men will be. With her. With your mutt. Is that what you want?"

"Simone," I say urgently.

"I can't."

"You have to. *Now*."

She lets out a cry. "Please, I can't! I've never hit anybody before! Make him hit me!"

“I slept with Lena,” I yell as the seconds tick down in my mind.

“Wh-what?”

“I slept with your daughter.”

She launches herself at me. Her fist catches me in the chin. One of the masked men must be recording. The man on the phone laughs hysterically.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE NEXT DAY

Lena

Demon whines, sitting at the metal door of the small stone-built room. This is the antechamber to the main part of the bunker, not much bigger, with some canned food, a toilet, and a sealed scentless bin for waste.

My instincts scream at me to find my man. No, find *Mom*. However, I can't stop thinking about Jamie running into the forest, a bullet catching him. What happened to him?

The doors start to buzz and hum, sliding aside. I'm covered in sweat. I feel stale and gross, but it doesn't matter. Nothing does. I have to go upstairs. Get the phone. Whatever happened, Jamie needs backup. Please let him be okay. And Mom. Jesus Christ. Just open already!

As the metal panels slide aside, I run for the stairs. It's dark. I almost slip. Slowing myself down, I force my breath to do the same. Jamie said he wanted a future together. I said it back. We meant it. I know I did. I know *he* did, but maybe neither Mom nor Jamie has a future now or a present—just nothing.

The trapdoor sticks momentarily, making me think I will be trapped here, but then it gives. I gasp in the fresh air. I've been going nuts down there, alone, holding tightly onto Demon. At least he chose one specific post to pee on. Demon pushes up behind me, running into the growing darkness.

“Demon!” I snap. He turns and pads over to me, whining. I can hear the pain in the whine. He wants his daddy badly. I know the feeling. “Come, boy. Come on.”

I lead him toward the house, moving quickly, turning on the lights, and entering the main bedroom. The jewelry box is in the top drawer. I take out the phone and turn it on while biting my lip and drumming my foot. My thoughts are a slideshow of all the vicious things happening to Mom and Jamie. I can't take it.

There's one number on the phone. I call it. Nothing. A dead line. The call won't go through, but there's a full signal, even all the way out here. I dial a random number with my old area code. The phone starts to ring. Dammit. I try the contact again. There's nothing. This was my only lifeline, my entire plan, as I sat in the bunker, getting more scared, more paranoid.

Demon grunts at me from the doorway. It's like he's telling me to get my act together. He's right. We need to search the house. Jamie left something behind. Perhaps a clue or...

Oh, okay. Maybe this can work. Jamie has left his keys on the table, a big ring of them. Perhaps one of them is the key to the garage where he left his car out in the forest. I think I can find it. No, I *know* I can find it, but I must move fast before I lose the light. I feel lightheaded and ill, but it's just the worry.

There's no time for that. Get to the car and Jamie's apartment, assuming the key to the private elevator shaft is there. I can't leave a bullet-ridden car on the street, can I? Then what? Maybe I should call the cops, but there *isn't time*. They'll have to start an investigation, but I don't know anything useful.

I keep searching the house. There's nothing: just clothes, canned goods, and furniture. I walk onto the porch and scan it—nothing. No, there's something wedged between two of the floorboards. It's a business card. There's no address, physical or email, no name, just two words.

The Answer.

It offers me nothing, but maybe it's a clue. Perhaps this has something to do with the website.

It's early morning when I return to the city, gnawing my shirt sleeve as I drive. Jamie has extra gas in the trunk. The only time I stop is to feed Demon handfuls of the food I took before I left. Just enough to get home. My belly rumbles, but I don't care.

The time helps me—four a.m. Nobody's around as I bring the car up at the rear of the building, remembering my reaction to the small garage door the first time we came here. I thought Jamie might be behind all this. I really thought he would hurt me.

However, I was wrong. He's the good guy. I don't care if he's done some bad things. He's going to be the father of my children. He's going to protect us. That *is* going to happen. He and Mom *are* going to be okay. I have to believe that.

Demon grumbles as he climbs into the elevator next to me. I have to try several keys, but then we're in, gliding up. The last time we rode the elevator returns to me. The pressure in his pants, wondering if it could be true.

Once we're inside, I rush across the apartment. Before we left, Jamie said we should leave our cell phones here turned off. As I grab mine from the counter, it occurs to me I could've called the police, anyway, but I always assumed my savior was right there in front of me. He just happened to be my kidnapper, too.

I open the drawer, expecting to find Jamie's laptop, but it's not there, dammit.

A quick search of the apartment, and I'm in his room. It's so *bare* in here. It's more like a barracks than a room. I almost expect to find a photo of him and Jack. He kept all those pictures, even after knowing what Jack did. I saw the confusion and pain in Jamie. It must've been hell trying to make the real him fit with his *idea* of what he was.

His laptop is under his bed. I guess he thought he'd be in here if I came snooping. Maybe he wanted me to so he could punish me again.

I focus, open the laptop, and play Jamie's voice recording. Once I'm in, I open *The Answer*. I've got a feeling. Why would there be a business card? Jack must've dropped it or one of his men. When I ran my thumb across it earlier, I felt a raised section, like a magnetic strip or something or a ticket. That's my hunch.

My first instinct was to think that's crazy, but *all* of this is crazy. What's one more thing added to the list?

The website loads. There's no login screen anymore. Instead, there's a message. *This effort has always been in vain. There are no heroes. There are no fairytales. Join the fun at the meat market if you have a valid ticket. Those who know, know. Those without tickets will be executed, either upon arrival or, if inconvenient, at a later date.*

Then there's a smile emoji. I rub my forehead—the *meat market*. That doesn't sound good, but I was right about the ticket and the magnetic strip. There's an address at the bottom of the post, a butcher. I should call the cops and let them handle it, but what will I say? I could show them the website.

All of this would take *time*. I need to go there now. I don't care how tired I am. I don't care how scared. I need to save Mom and Jamie. Quickly, I close the window. I can't let myself wonder if I'm doing the right thing. It's time to act.

As I stand, I call Joan from my cell phone. I know she won't hear it. She wears earplugs at night. She never gets late calls. If she answers, I'll hang up. She might try to stop me, but she doesn't. It goes to voicemail. I tell her about the shootout at the fair. I tell her where I'm going. I tell her about *The Answer*. I tell her everything. "If you don't hear from me by morning, call the cops, Joan. Play them this message."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

J amie

“I’m sorry,” Simone whispers from across the cell.

We’re in complete darkness. Her voice is small, laced with fear. We’ve been here for hours. They only let us out to use the one reeking toilet at the end of a grim hallway. There are cells all along the hallway. I can hear people moaning and retching. We’ve slipped into hell.

“You didn’t hurt me,” I tell her. “I was putting on a show. I’ve taken harder hits in the gym.”

“You were bleeding.”

She says it in the past tense. She can’t see if I still am, but I’m not. My head has cleared of their drugs. Even the hunger pangs can’t distract me. I need to be ready for whatever happens. Ready to fight. Ready to tear these bastards apart limb from goddamn limb.

“You cut my cheek—a glancing blow. Trust me. I’m fine.” I grit my teeth, wondering what Lena is doing, praying she’s safe. I’d kill to hold her.

“Why do you think they’re taking people out of their cells?” Simone asks quietly.

“No idea, but it’s not good.”

She pauses. We’ve hardly spoken since being thrown in here together. Mostly, she’s been sleeping or trying to, anyway. She

must be exhausted because she falls asleep fast, but then she'll wake with a scream. Or she'll start praying under her breath, almost angrily.

"What you said... about Lena. Was that so that I'd do what that sicko wanted?"

I shake my head. She can't see. That's good. I shouldn't give this away without Lena's permission. The truth is, I might never get another chance to be honest.

"We haven't," I pause, "done that, but we've been intimate."

"Since when?" Simone asks, her voice quiet, more curious than angry. Or maybe she's just too tired.

"Since she called me and told me you were missing. Honestly, I was attracted to her before that. Back when I was helping you with the wallet."

I hear her swallow. "Why didn't you do anything?"

"I knew your story. Your husband. What you'd been through. I didn't want to complicate your lives, and, well, look where we are. I bring problems. My life does, but I'm ready to leave this life behind for Lena."

"It's that serious?" Simone asks.

"For me, it is," I say passionately. "It has been from the start." I touch my temple and feel the small cut Simone made when she struck me. "There's nothing more serious than us. I told Lena before I left. I want—need—her to be my woman and to have a family with her. She said she wanted it, too."

Simone snuffles in the dark. "Maybe she was scared."

"She meant it. I know she did."

"If that's true..." Simone gets choked up and then goes on determinedly. "Then I wish you'd stayed with her. I wish you'd left me. If you love her, then I wish you'd never *left*."

"I couldn't let them have you," I say. "Lena needs her mother. Our children are going to need their grandmother."

She lets the tears come. I sit with my knees to my chest, gripping my shins, full of tension and fight, but with nothing

to aim it at. “I think I’ve gone a little crazy, Jamie,” she says after a pause. “That’s why I couldn’t face it when you said we’d never been in a relationship. I had to believe we *had* been in one. I couldn’t go back. If I went back, I’d be the useless lump I’d been before, letting my daughter lead the way.”

“I’m sorry,” I say quietly. “I don’t understand.”

She laughs shakily. “I can’t explain but don’t worry. I’m not attracted to you. Things aren’t going to get awkward in *that* way.”

“You’re talking like you’ve already given us your blessing,” I say, daring to smile, even in this depressing place.

I’m sure I can feel her smiling, too. I’m not sure how that works, but it’s true. It’s a sad smile. Just like mine. “It’s funny, the perspective you get when you think it might be the end. If Lena really said she wants a future with you, why not? Why shouldn’t you?”

“We should talk about this after,” I tell her. “You’re tired, dehydrated, hungry, and traumatized. You don’t have to make any promises.”

I can’t let myself take anything she says to heart. I can’t let myself have that hope. We could die in here. Hell, Lena might already be... Yet I can’t help but think of the future, holding her hands beneath the altar, teaching our children anything that interests them. Anything they want to learn. Anything they want to be. With Lena’s love, they’ll turn out well. Perfect.

“You *do* love her,” Simone says.

“Yeah.” I croak. “More than anything. More than I can understand. It’s been tearing her up, sneaking around behind your back, and...”

“And her thinking all those stories I made up were true. Thinking we were together.”

I sigh. “Yeah, and that.”

“I’ll need to tell her the truth. God help me. I’ll need to tell myself the truth. I’m not making any sense to you, am I? I

want to pray, but I can't pray. That's the contradiction in this whole thing. I'm a joke, a joke..."

"You can't beat yourself up," I tell her.

"I *failed* my daughter for years. We were living in hell."

"*You* brought her out of it. You found The Answer. You found me."

"Then I brought her right back *into* hell because I got drunk and acted like an idiot."

"People make mistakes," I growl. "Maybe you've made more than you'd like, but you can't do a damn thing about it now. All you can do is to be the best mother possible when you get out of here. After that, be the best *grandmother* possible. Just think of that, Simone."

She's crying again. I'm getting choked up, too. It's all this sitting around, not doing anything, not taking *action*. The last time I pounded on the door, the guard threatened to throw in tear gas. What then?

"You'll have a grandchild, a little boy or girl. They're going to be so happy to meet you. You're going to be in a great position when they get here. You'll be healthy, motivated, and happy. Your and Lena's relationship will be stronger than ever. You'll see."

Simone whimpers when, from the far end of the cellblock, somebody lets out a scream of pain. I've heard different kinds of yells, shouts, and screams in my life, and this is agony, pure and simple. Simone starts crying again.

I crawl across the cell and reach out. "Where are you?"

"H-here."

I find her hand and hold it gently. "I love your daughter," I tell her. "More than life itself. One day, Simone, as strange as it might be, you'll be my mother-in-law. I'm going to protect you."

"Th-thank you," she whispers.

“Think of the future. Think of happier days.” The screaming gets louder. “Think about your little grandson or granddaughter.”

Simone squeezes my hand tightly. At least she admitted we’d never been in a relationship, not that it will matter if we can’t get out of here alive.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Lena

I pull up outside the butcher's, heart thudding, wondering what my plan is. The place is called *Cuts*, and the front looks closed. I drive around the back, wondering if this is all pointless. Maybe Mom and Jamie are out in the forest. No, my mind needs to shut up. I can't imagine that darkness.

There's a light—a basement light, leading to a door. I swallow. The street is quiet. The city will wake up soon. It's eerie as I climb from the car and walk across the parking lot. I expect somebody to jump out any second.

Walking down the basement steps, I remember walking into the warehouse as a teenager. I remember all the muggings, the insults, the bullying. I remember the fights. I got sucker punched once, knocked out. I'm *that* woman. I'm *that* Lena. The suburbs haven't softened me. Love hasn't softened me. I meant what I told my man. I have to be strong, too.

I knock on the metal door, cold against my fist. There's a panel in it. It slides aside. A man laughs gruffly. "Lost, little lady?"

I need to pretend I know why I'm here. I know what this *is*. Whatever else is true about these people, they value money. Maybe it's all they value. I'm dressed cheaply, but wealthy people often do. It's the attitude that sells it.

Taking the ticket from my pocket, I hold it up and wave it as if I'm above all this. I act like Demon so often does, nose

upturned. If I die out here, what happens to him? No, they'll check Jamie's apartment. The message on Joan's machine will lead them there.

"I'm here to see the meat," I tell him. "I hope you have some prime cuts available. I've got something very specific in mind."

"Give that here," the man says suspiciously.

I hand the card through the slot. He slams it shut, leaving me to wait. I don't fidget or show any signs of awkwardness. There's a chance that he's watching me right now. Maybe there's a camera somewhere. I stand up straight, borderline bored.

The slot opens. "Apologies, miss. You're not our usual clientele."

"My desires are my own," I say, playing some haughty sadist. "So..."

"Yes, yes."

He opens the metal door, gesturing into a small room resembling a storage closet. The man wears a balaclava, only his eyes showing. He sits on a metal chair and folds one leg over the other. "Are you looking for anything in particular?"

He's got blood on his fingertips. I think I hear yelling through the wall, but it's muffled. Soundproofing?

I swallow and hope he can't see the disgust. "I'd like a man and a woman," I tell him, idly walking around the room, picking up a cleaning product, pretending to read the label, and setting it down. "An older man and woman, preferably. I want them to stand in for my parents, you see."

He narrows his eyes in the balaclava. Suddenly, I think I've got it all wrong, but what else would *meat* refer to, in this evil context, except people? Then I realize his eyes are narrowed because he's smiling. He laughs lightly. "I see. I guess you could call this therapy, right?"

"Something like that." I smile thinly. "I'd like them together, if possible."

“Think you’ll need any help?” The man stands, gesturing to the corner of the room. “I assume you know the rules. Once we dish them up, you have to carve them up, and you’re in luck. We’ve got a couple just in. In fact, one of them is some bigshot on *The Answer*. Have you ever heard of him? People talk about him like he’s some legend. Just think. A little lady like you is going to kill him.”

I turn, glare at the man, and raise my hand. I want to slap him. *Kill Jamie?* The idea alone is insanity. I’d never hurt him. The man takes a step back. “I’m sorry, miss. I didn’t mean to offend.”

I have to save this. He can’t see I care. “Just open the door, please. I want to get this started.”

Once we dish them up, you have to carve them up.

As he opens a small door, fear coils around me. Fear tries to choke me, make me turn back, and run for the door. Wait, I should. Shouldn’t I? Now I know it’s legit. I should get out of here and *make* the cops listen. Jamie and Mom are alive. He just said it—a legend of *The Answer*. It has to be him, but for how long?

He gestures down a dark corridor. The air is stale. The screaming becomes louder.

I touch my pocket. “Dammit, I’ve forgotten my vape. I’m a vicious nicotine addict. Don’t judge me. Would you wait while I get it?”

The man shakes his head and points down the corridor. “You can get it after. You know the rules, miss. Until the big man has video evidence, you can’t leave. Call it insurance.”

I almost ask him, *Wait, somebody’s recording this sick stuff?* I should already know that, and he just said I can’t leave. I’m a prisoner again. I long for Jamie’s apartment, the door creaking at night, my man standing in the semidarkness. It was so much easier when I was *his* prisoner.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

J amie

“What are you going to do to us?” Simone says as the masked man handcuffs her hands behind her back. The other man stands on the other side of the room, his gun at his side. The floor is wet from whatever happened in here before the screaming stopped. Now, it’s silent, except for Simone’s crying. “Talk to me!”

I subtly test the cuffs. They’ve only cuffed my hands. I’m leaning against the wall, making myself seem much weaker than I actually feel. The man with the gun has a mocking glint in his eyes. The other man leaves the room.

I test the cuffs again, feeling the metal strain against my wrists, but it would be too obvious if I put any *real* effort in. These are high-grade cuffs. Thick, but I feel the strain. The primal impulse to get back to my woman gives me extra strength.

“Don’t do that,” I snap when Simone starts staring at the ground, the slickness, the evidence of what happened here before. Her crying gets worse. “Close your eyes, Simone. Go somewhere else.”

A minute or so later, the door whines open. Another masked man walks in. “Take a smoke, L—”

“Don’t use my name,” the man with the gun snaps.

“Ah, yeah. My bad. Take a smoke, man. The next one’s a little lady all on her lonesome.”

“Think she’ll do it?”

“Who knows? If not, it’s a quick *bang-bang-bang* for all three.” He mimes, firing a gun.

“Amen to that. Easy work.”

They bump knuckles, and then the gunman leaves the room. The other man takes a pistol from his hip, glancing at us. He shakes his head almost sadly, passing the gun from one hand to the other. I watch him carefully, still pretending to lean against the wall, behaving like I’m broken. My body is covered in bruises from the rubber bullets. My face is cut up from what they made Simone do.

But I’m ready. The trick now is waiting for a moment and using it to complete efficiency. Being as cold and brutal as I have to be so I can return to my woman. That’s the only thing that matters now. Focus. Breathe.

“Here you are, miss,” a voice says outside the cell. “Just what you were looking for. *The answer*, eh? Ha!”

The door whines open. Simone gasps from beside me. “L-L...”

She’s about to say Lena’s name, but then Lena steps forward, raising her voice. She’s using the affectations of a trust fund kid. It somehow sells her plain clothes and her unwashed hair. She seems like some crazy aristocratic lady. “Shut the *fuck* up, bitch,” she screams. “You don’t speak to me.”

Somebody closes the door from the outside. What is this man thinking? He’s alone in here with me. He thinks I’m that busted up.

Lena takes a few steps toward us. I can see through the performance she’s putting on. I can see the pain deep in her eyes as she looks at me and her mom. Somehow, she made it here. She’s so damn impressive. I love her. I almost say it. Instead, I cringe away like she’s the big bad wolfess.

“You know the rules,” the man says. “If you don’t do them, I do you. Simple.”

Lena turns to him. I almost lose it when she gives him a wide-eyed, seductive look. She bites her lip just like she does when I’m claiming her. It nearly pushes me right to the edge. No other man deserves that look. Never, but I know what she’s doing.

“Are you always this bossy?” Her chest is rising and falling in a hypnotic way. She’s not wearing a bra.

Fuck, the man’s looking at her nipples. His mask shifts. Is the freak licking his lips? “When I have to be,” he grunts. “All right, then. Let’s get on with it.” He raises the gun to Lena’s head.

Simone gasps. “Lena!”

The man looks at Simone and looks back to Lena. “Wait, you two *know* each other?”

“Don’t you touch her,” Simone screams wildly.

The man laughs coldly, swings the gun around, and aims it at Simone. He’s about to say something else, something mocking. His eyes get a sadistic glint, but Lena does something extremely reckless and brave. She jumps at the man and grabs his wrist, wrenching on him, then brings her mouth down and bites down on his forearm so hard he screams.

“Bitch!” He spins on her as the gun drops to the floor.

I spring from the wall. This is going to hurt. I don’t give a damn. With my hands behind my back, I throw my bulk against the man. I hit him with my body, my chest crashing into his face, sending him smashing against the wall. His head flies backward, and his skull cracks. I’ve been doing this long enough to know he’s dead before he hits the floor.

“Jamie,” Lena screams. The door to the cell swings open.

“What the—”

Time slows as I watch my woman raise the gun. The man in the doorway raises his. Lena pulls the trigger. The recoil knocks the weapon out of her hand, but she’s done her work.

She's hit the man right in his face. He collapses against the wall. She stares in horror at what she's done, gasping.

"No time for that," I roar, kneeling beside her. "The keys, Lena. The cuffs. They're coming. *Now.*"

She looks up, spaced out momentarily, then crawls across the cell. I move with her, holding my hands in place. I can hear men at the end of the hallway. They're approaching cautiously. Their footsteps are impossibly loud to me. The adrenaline, the fact they'll execute my woman if they get in here...

Lena fumbles with the keys and turns the lock. It clicks open just as the first man enters the cell with an assault rifle raised. I swing my hand around, the one with the cuff still attached, and pick up the gun. He shoots and misses. Fuck. That was lucky. I smoke him in the head, then grab his rifle, not thinking. I'm just in the moment.

The other man is on the other side of the door. I hear him. No, the other side of the *wall*. Stepping back, I raise the rifle and fire into the wall, starting low. I hear him grunt. It must knock his knees. I tear the wall apart, grab the pistol, and peek around the door. He's moaning, staring up at me. He would've killed the future mother of my children and my mother-in-law. He would've stolen the future from us. I put a bullet in his head. Turning to the women, I find Lena holding onto Simone, clinging tightly.

"I'm securing this location. You've got a new story now. You met Antonio at the fair. They fought, just like before. Then, the men who killed Antonio brought you here. You don't know what it is. You know nothing about it. If you mention *the answer*, they might find out."

Lena kisses her mom on the cheek, then stands. She's trembling all over. She gently touches my shoulder, bruised by a rubber bullet. "Where are you going?"

"I'll be watching," I tell her.

"What about..." She gestures at the bodies, but she won't look at them. I hope she doesn't. I hope she never has to have those gruesome sights scarring her mind.

“You don’t know anything. There was a gunfight. You’ll both be in our cell when they arrive.” I almost laugh grimly, but it’d throw off civilians. *Our cell* sounds so strange. “Okay? When you’re home, I’ll come to you.”

Lena grabs my hand when I turn away. She’s probably too flooded with adrenaline to think about the fact her mom is right there, staring at us. She doesn’t know what her mother and I discussed. “Jamie—”

I lean down and kiss her. I can’t stop myself. I know it’s wrong, but that’s the story of me and Lena. Wrong, but right. Yes, but no. Now and forever. She returns the kiss and holds my hand tighter. Simone is purposefully looking at the wall. Lena swallows and glances at her mother.

I press the gun into Lena’s hand. “Wait here.”

The basement is bigger than I would’ve guessed in the dark, with several cells along it. I won’t free the prisoners. The police can do that. They’ll bring medical assistance, too. I open the slots in the cell, shining my flashlight into each one. No dead people or people who look close to dead. Just hollow-eyed prisoners. I probably look just like them.

Once it’s all clear, I lead Lena and Simone to the cell. It breaks my heart, closing my woman into the darkness, but it’s the only way.

“I love you,” she whispers as I close the door. Or, at least, I think she did. I’m not sure if she’s talking to me or her mom. I’m about to leave when Lena yells for me. My blood runs cold. Is there a guard in there I somehow missed?

“Jamie,” she says.

“Yeah?”

“I left a message on my neighbor’s machine explaining everything and telling her to call the cops if she didn’t hear from me.”

Good precaution. “Give me her address,” I say. I’ll have to pick the lock and erase the message. Even if her alarm goes off, I’ll still have enough time to do it, but only once I know the cops are here.

Lena gives me the address. I walk down the corridor and up the stairs. The doors are opened from where the other guards must've come running when they heard shooting. Looking around, I see a payphone, jog to it, and dial *911*. Then I hide in a nearby alleyway, waiting as the *SWAT* van pulls up. After, I disappear into the night.

I need to find another pay phone, call in a favor, and catch a ride. Get home and figure out how to end this crap so I begin my life with Lena.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Lena

“The cop car’s still outside,” I tell Jamie over the phone.

“I know those officers,” Jamie replies. “They’re good people. They won’t let anything happen to you, but as an extra precaution, you have two paid security operatives watching the premises, too. The police might hesitate. These won’t. If anybody tries to hurt you, they’re dead.”

I swallow, looking up and down the street. The sun is almost setting. It’s been a wild day since the police arrived, going to the hospital, and repeating our story several times.

“I don’t see them,” I whisper.

“That’s good,” Jamie says. “You’re not supposed to, but they’re there.”

“Where are *you*?” I ask.

That’s all I wanted to know as the police processed me, Mom, and the other captives. All I cared about was getting my hands on Jamie again. I’ve showered twice since the basement, since that man walked in, and I... *He was going to kill us*. My wrist still hurts from the recoil of the gun.

“Following up on some leads,” Jamie replies. “The lease of the butcher leads to a shell company. There are a few listed owners, two of which are in the city. One of them is going to

tell me who the fuck arranged this. I have to get to them before the police do.”

“Why?”

Jamie’s tone goes dark. I can’t believe he’s still going after what he’s been through. Mom was on an IV for much of today to replace her fluids. She’s got a bandage around her arm from where one of the men must’ve grabbed her too hard. “The cops won’t cross the lines that need to be crossed,” Jamie snarls. “These men have to talk, but the cops won’t make them. They have limits. I don’t.”

I swallow, glancing over at Mom. She’s sitting on the couch, staring numbly at the TV. She saw me kiss Jamie. I didn’t even think. My ears were still ringing from the gunshot. I could smell the stink of the gunpowder. I just wanted to melt into him. “I want to see you,” I say selfishly.

“Soon. Tonight. It might be late. Keep your phone on.”

I wonder if he heard what I said in the darkness before he closed the door. *I love you*. With the fear pumping through me and the darkness consuming us, it felt like the last time I might see him. It felt like I had to say it right then.

Hanging up, I look over at Mom again. “Uh, Jamie might come by later.”

I wonder if she’s completely slipped into another mental state. Maybe I should call one of the numbers the cops gave us when we demanded to go home. It has therapists and mental health specialists listed.

Mom slowly turns to me and nods. “He told me in the cell. He told me you two were together. He said you were going to have a family together.”

I swallow. Suddenly, it’s like the tough shell I wear breaks apart. Hearing Mom talk about a family lets the emotion pound into me of staying in the bunker with Demon and wondering if they were dead. The frantic drive home. The nerves as I walked into that evil place.

Then, the gunshot. I’m shaking. I’ve had panic attacks before, but this is the worst. My vision gets hazy. Mom sits beside me,

her arm wrapped around my shoulder. “Count your breaths with me, Lena. Come on. Count them.”

Slowly, I focus on her voice and instructions. I feel worn out, almost hollow, when it’s done. I hug her, careful to be gentle. I know she’s in pain.

“Jamie did that for me,” she whispers. “After Antonio Romero... I was panicking, and he helped me get through it.”

I hold her tighter, knowing this isn’t the right time to ask this. Yet after all the fighting, the near death, the *right time* seems like a silly concept. The right time has to be *now* because who knows what tomorrow will bring?

“Are you attracted to him, Mom?” I ask quietly. “Is that why...” *You lied*. “You said that stuff about the dates?”

Mom laughs quietly. “I’m not attracted to him, dear. No.”

“Then—”

“I just... Lena, I’m puzzling some stuff out. I need time to pray. I need time to understand. I need time to ask myself some very tough questions.”

“Like what?”

“Like...” She clutches onto me tightly. “Is it worth going crazy again if it means I stop lying to my daughter?”

“Mom, I don’t under—”

“Please,” she says sharply. “Please, not now. I can still hear those police officers’ voices. I can still smell the gun smoke. I can still hear the screams.”

“Oh, Mom.”

She breaks down, crying passionately. I can’t help but cry with her. This must be so much harder for her. She’s been through it twice and doesn’t have a future with Jamie to cling to. I hold that tightly. I remind myself that, no matter how bad this gets, we have a future. We have each other.

“I lied to you,” Mom says, leaning back, wiping her tears. “I lied in the ugliest way. Lena, I made up a whole different

world about me and Jamie. He told me what you said about wanting a family.”

“It’s true,” I whisper. “Mom, I’m sorry. I wanted him even when I thought you were together. I wanted him the first time I saw him. I *hated* that you were together, or I thought you were. I get it, Mom, okay? I get why you lied. You wanted to protect me fr—”

Mom stands abruptly. It’s doubly shocking considering how frail she seems as if she’s willing to tolerate the pain from the sudden movement if it means ending this. “It’s not what you think,” she says. “I-I’m going to take a nap. Is that okay, Lena?”

“You don’t have to ask me, Mom.”

“A nap,” she repeats to herself, head ducked, not looking at me. “Everything seems better after a nap.”

I smile, heart aching. Dad used to say that to me when I was little, if I was throwing a tantrum or acting grouchy. I sit in the living room, staring at the TV screen at the commercials. My eyes feel heavy, too, but I can’t sleep while thinking about Jamie out there, alone, hurt, still trying to get to the heart of this.

Thirty minutes later, the doorbell rings. It’s Joan. She’s holding a glass dish of lasagna with a kitchen towel, her lips trembling as she steps forward. “L-Lena. Poor thing. Are you hungry?”

Jamie must’ve deleted the message on her phone somehow. She’s looking at me like I’m a complete victim who’s been locked up for days. That’s what the world has to believe. Nobody can ever know I fought back. Nobody can ever know I killed a man.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

J amie

I park in the street several spots behind Lena's, my body still sore, my eyes heavy. It's ten p.m. I've been awake for what feels like days, running on sheer adrenaline. I walk over to the ladder which leads to the roof of the electronics store, knocking on it three times.

"Yep?" a man calls from the top.

The land is a natural slope, meaning the men can scope the street without alerting the cops. "Any movement?"

"Nothing," he replies. "And nothing from the mailbox camera. Only visitor has been her neighbor."

"Good," I say, nodding. "Stay on the camera. Call me if there's any concern."

"Will do."

I climb the fence that leads to a small field, then a residential street, then another one. I keep moving, stalking through gardens. I'd rather the cops didn't see me visiting Lena after what happened. It might arouse Ramirez's suspicion if she heard about it.

Finally, I'm in the yard. I crouch in the dark, taking out a burner cell to call Lena. She answers almost right away, breathless. "Jamie?"

"I'm in the yard."

“I’m coming. Wait there.”

I almost laugh. *Wait there*. As if there’s anywhere else I’d want to be. I should’ve been with her all day, but I had to do my work. Now, I’ve given Russel the details I managed to get out of the first man I visited. The names. The connections. I only had to hit the silver spoon prick three times before he started blabbing.

“*I’m sorry, man. I’m so damn sorry.*” Russel sounded almost in tears when I told him Lena might’ve tried calling him. “*The phone was dead, dammit.*”

“*Human error,*” I told him. “*Don’t sweat it.*”

“*I could’ve gotten you killed, man.*”

We’ve both saved each other’s asses too many times for that sort of talk, and he knows it.

When the back door opens, any other thoughts clear from my mind. All I can see is my woman, a silhouette in the semidarkness with her form outlined even clearer in clothes that fit her. She steps forward. I emerge from the shadows into the light from the house, wrap my arms around her, and hold her softly. I don’t give in to my full instincts yet. I know the paid security is watching.

Leading her inside, I close the curtains and pull her up against me. She collapses against my chest, her hands clawing at my sides. She holds onto me tightly. She never wants to let go. She never *has* to let go.

“I missed you so much,” she sobs into my chest. “In the bunker... after... I thought you were dead.”

“I couldn’t leave you,” I say fiercely, leaning down and kissing her. Hard. Passion burns through me as I press down on her lower back, pushing our bodies as close as possible. “I’m never going to leave you, even if it means kidnapping you, remember?”

She laughs. It’s like she’s letting go of all the darkness. Not forever. That’s not how life works. “When I was in the bunker, I was thinking honestly, am I *always* going to be his prisoner?”

I smirk, letting the pain go, too, for now at least. She doesn't seem worried that we're holding each other downstairs. Simone could catch us any moment, but "*catch*" is the wrong word. She already knows about us.

"Lena, did your mom..."

She nods, looking up at me with her strong, vibrant eyes. The same eyes our children are going to have. I want them to be as much like her as possible. I want her to be in every single part of them. "She told me. She knows."

"I had to tell her," I say passionately. "I didn't know—"

Lena stands on her tiptoes, pressing her lips against mine. She holds me tightly. Her hands tighten on my back, her fingernails digging in. I can feel her passion, her need. We kiss, and then she leans back with a shaky smile: part fear and part pure relief.

"I know why you had to do it. I would have, too, in that place." She gently raises her hand, touching the skin near my cut with a Band-Aid now. "Does it hurt?" She releases her hold on me. "And your body, Jamie, I'm sorry. I saw all those bruises."

I snarl, grab her hip, own her. I pull her against me and let her feel how solid I am. I let her feel the desire. "I could be on fire, Lena, and I'd still want you. Nothing could make it stop. You're my woman."

She nods, then looks away.

"What is it?" I ask, touching her chin as gently as a bad man can, turning her to face me.

"It's Mom," Lena whispers. "She's still hiding something, but I can't push her. At least I know you were never together now. I know you told me, but..."

"You didn't want to doubt your mom. I get that, Lena. I never wanted to doubt my dad or Jack. I wanted to believe they'd always do the right thing, but I see it now. *You're* the right thing. Our family is the right thing."

“Who would’ve thought this started with a kidnapping, huh?” She smiles, pulls on my shirt, and collapses against me. We kiss, and then she pushes herself away. “It’s so quiet, and Mom’s in the house.”

“I’m dog-tired,” I tell her. “Demon has been walked and fed. He’ll be okay until morning as long as I leave early. I just want to hold you. I just want to feel you next to me.”

“Do you think you can...” she trails off, raising an eyebrow. “You know?”

“Control myself?” I claim her hip and press her against me, feeling her body, curves, and perfection. “It’ll be hard, but I’ve been awake for a long time. I know my horny virgin will moan when I claim her. I know you’ll *scream* when I drive into you, every single inch.”

She’s nodding slowly, but I can see the panic in my woman still. It’s bouncing around, a war inside of her. She killed a man today—her first one. She’s been through so much. She deserves a protector, not just a savage or a bad man.

I pull her to me, gently this time, softly trailing my fingers through her hair. I inhale her scent and savor her warmth.

“I feel like I’m going to wake up,” she whispers into my chest. “It’ll be the day before Mom left for the trip. None of this would’ve happened, but...”

“But then we wouldn’t be here. Together.”

“Does that make me awful?”

I kiss the top of her head. “If it does, then I’m the same. I can’t imagine life before you. I can’t even relate to the man I was.”

She takes my hand and leads me into the living room. I stand in the shadows, peering around the pillar. “The curtains, Lena.”

“Oh, yeah.”

She closes them.

“Keep the lights low,” I go on, sitting on the far side of the couch, out of view of the window. She sits next to me. I hold

her hand tightly and feel her pulse shimmering up her arm.

“What did you mean before? Why can’t you relate to the man you were?”

“I felt nothing,” I say. “I think that’s why I held onto the idea of Jack. Hell, Lena, I’d even imagine he was talking to me sometimes. Not the Jack he became, not the man who was happy to do evil shit to earn a buck. Not the killer. The man in the forest who showed me how to clean a rifle. Or on the boat, showing me a knot.”

“Maybe he was a good man in those moments,” she says tentatively.

“No,” I reply, leaning back against the cushions. “There’s no coming back from the things he did.”

“What about what *I* did?”

I turn to her and almost raise my voice. I almost yell my next words, but I get myself under control, lean close, and kiss her cheek. “You protected our child,” I growl, laying my hand on her belly.

“Uh, Jamie, I think we’ve missed a step.”

I smirk and kiss her again. “You’re the most important person, Lena. You’ve got that curvy, perfect body, those wide hips, made for carrying our child. They’re going to grow inside you. When you smoked that bastard, you protected yourself and, therefore, our future child. You saved your mother’s life. You probably saved mine, too. He would’ve started firing. *Never* regret it.”

She places her hand on my chest. I’m borderline beast mode again. She rubs gently until I sit back, hugging her closer, my eyes getting heavy. “I dreamed of being in your arms,” she whispers. “Waiting in the bunker. Before, when I thought you were with Mom, I always dreamed about it.”

“Me too,” I say, closing my eyes, relaxation washing over me as I sink against the cushions, my woman next to me. It’s a primal feeling as if we can finally stop running. We’re fireside now. We’re home. “I thought you’d laugh if I said anything. You’re less than half my age.”

“Pfft.” She blows out air. “What does that mean, after what we’ve been through together? After what we *felt*? I don’t care about my age. I don’t care what people say or think. I know you’re right for me.”

“And I know you’re *perfect* for me.” I rest my cheek on the top of her head. “You still need to answer my question. What do you want to do with your life?” She laughs, and I go on gruffly, “There’s nothing funny about it. You have a choice now. You never have to work another day in your life if you don’t want to, or you can pursue any career you want.”

She swallows. “That’s a big offer. A big commitment.”

I smile, sliding my hand down her body, playfully tickling her side. She laughs so cutely. “A big commitment? We’re going to have a family together. It doesn’t get much bigger than that.”

“Well, I honestly don’t know.” She laughs again, but less pessimistically this time. There’s relief in her tone. “I’ve never thought about it. I want to do something that gives me time with the children. It’s like they’re already here. I already love them. I’m a virgin, and I love my kids,” she giggles. “Am I just totally nuts?”

I laugh, sinking deeper into the couch. “If you are, I am too. I love them, too, Lena. I wish they were here already, but it’ll mean less you-know-what.” I slide my hand across her belly, rubbing gently.

She shivers and touches my hand. “Jamie, we...”

“I know,” I tell her. “I’m half asleep already. It’s perfect, just being here with you, but soon.”

“What about *The Answer*?” she asks. “What about that awful place?”

I sigh darkly. “I had a hunch it was a tech billionaire who’d somehow hacked the site. Turns out I was right. I’ve got Russel on the case, making the connection between the mark and butcher. It’ll raise some questions.”

“Will people learn who you are?” she swallows.

“Some already know. Once this is over...” I swallow. “The smart thing to do would be to burn my identity. Move across the country, maybe to Cali, like when I was a kid. I’d have to become a different man. A regular man. No military background. No stock trades.”

“Could you do that?” she asks quietly.

“Yes,” I reply. “I’ve had contingencies in place for years, but I’d only do it if you came with me. I can’t leave you.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t say you’d just *take* me anyway, Mr. Kidnapper,” she teases.

I tickle her side again, drifting in and out of sleep, close to the edge of unconsciousness. Sleep has always been just a necessity for me. I lie down, close my eyes, and recharge my batteries. Falling asleep with Lena is like slowly falling into a warm, calm place. “I was being nice. I’m taking you. I just need a few weeks to build a custom house out west with reinforced steel doors.”

“You don’t need to take me prisoner this time,” she whispers. “I’m not going anywhere.”

We sit together for a long time. My eyes fall closed, then open. I’m not sure if I sleep or if she does. It’s enough just to be here with her.

“I think I have an idea,” she whispers, her voice as dreamy as I feel.

“Hmm?” I reply.

“I’ll start a charity. I’ll help teenagers whose parents have, you know, checked out like Mom did. I’ll help them so they can be kids a little longer.”

I turn, kiss her head, and inhale her scent, addicted all the way through. “There’s nobody who’d be better at that than you.”

She cuddles closer. She’s lying on the couch now. I’ve put my foot on the coffee table without even realizing it, stretching out. We should go upstairs, but we’re both too comfortable here. “Will Demon be okay?” she asks.

“He’s a tough pup,” I tell her. “Plus, I’ll be home soon.”

“A pup.” She laughs quietly. “Yeah, right.”

“That’s how I still see him. He was the runt of the litter, believe it or not. He’s four now. I thought it was just going to be him and me for years. Years of not really living. Just working. Just existing. Buying flashy watches to feel like it all means something.”

“You made a difference,” she says firmly. “You helped people.”

“The only people I want to help now are me, you, your mom, and our kids. That’s it. That’s all the family I need.”

She squeezes onto my arm. “Jamie, what if Mom doesn’t agree to move to California?”

I stroke her shoulder. “We have to take this one step at a time. Right now, we’re together. You’re safe. You’re mine. That’s all I care about.”

We don’t say anything else, drifting into a deeper sleep. It’s the most at peace I’ve ever felt in my life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Lena

“Lena...” Jamie is sitting on the end of the bed, the sunlight flooding the room, glistening in the silver streaks in his hair. I can hear the children laughing in the next room. I can feel the love welling inside me. “Lena...”

Opening my eyes, Dream Jamie disappears. I find real Jamie leaning over me. The pale morning sun brightens the room a little, but not much. It’s still mostly dark. “I have to go before it gets too light. Too many questions if the cops see us together, but soon, we won’t have to hide.”

“Not from Mom. Not from the cops.” I sit up sleepily and touch his face, being gentle because he’s hurt. Last night, I kept forgetting, holding him tightly, digging my nails in. He never complained. “It’s going to be bright and warm all the time.”

“That’s fitting.” He smiles, leans in, and kisses me gently. Yesterday, he was exhausted. I could feel his tiredness even as his animal nature flared awake, but now, he groans and presses against me.

I grab his chest, meaning to push him away, but then I pull him closer. I kiss him with more passion.

“Oh, sorry.” We stop, turning to find Mom standing in the doorway. “I couldn’t sleep.” She turns as if to run away. “I’ll, uh, leave you to it.”

“Mom, we weren’t, uh, you know...”

Jamie steps back, adjusting his shirt. I tug at my T-shirt. Mom glances between us awkwardly. Then she walks over to me slowly and places her hands on my shoulders. “You looked so *happy*, Lena. Just now. So happy. After everything... after what you were forced to do. So, so happy. That’s magic. That’s a miracle. A real miracle.” She looks at Jamie. “Always take care of her. Always do right by her.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jamie says. Mom nods and turns to leave. Jamie clears his throat. “I’m leaving now. Anyway, I’d never kick you out of your own living room. Stay in the house. Call me if you change locations, but I prefer you don’t until this is sorted out.”

Jamie walks toward the back door. I follow. We stand alone in the low light coming through the kitchen window, holding hands like we will beneath the altar.

“When will I see you again?” I ask.

“Tonight,” he replies. “I wish I could be here with you all day. I wish I could spend every damn second with you. You’re the only woman I want. The only one I ever need. I own you. You’re *mine*. That’s why I took you. I had that goddamn right.”

He’s getting that fierce, possessive growl in his voice, leaning close to me. “I have to finish this. I may have to visit a few people if Russel can’t make the connection. We need evidence.”

“This tech guy, you think he took over *The Answer*? He hacked it?” Every word sounds so surreal. “Just to what, prove a sick point? Prove he could make people do bad things?”

“I’ve heard rumors about this sort of twisted stuff. People with too much cash and too few morals play high-stakes games. The whole thing’s going to come falling down. It’s a shame. We did *good* things, but there’s no avoiding it. It’s been compromised. It’s time to move on.”

I hold on to his shirt. We kiss briefly, but I want it to last forever. I want to hold on to him and never let it end. “Can I

ask Mom about Cali?" I murmur. "I want her there with us."

"It's happening," he says fiercely. "You can ask her. No, you *should* ask her. Depending on how quickly things move, you'll need to be ready. It'll be suspicious if you move right away, but I'll have to disappear. We'll..." He swallows. "We'll be apart for a while. Maybe a couple of weeks. Long enough for you to move without the cops giving a damn."

"Would they care anyway?" I ask.

"It depends. They might have more questions. They might find the timing suspicious, especially this one officer, Ramirez. If Jamie King ceases to exist, and I become a new man, and within days, you decide to move, too, she might connect the dots. It's better not to risk it."

"So tonight could be one of our last nights together." My thoughts return darkly to the bunker, wondering if he would be waiting for me, praying he didn't die in the forest. "For a while."

He nods, leans down, and kisses the edge of my mouth. "If I could, I'd have you at my place."

"But the cops would get suspicious if I just waltzed into your building." I nod. "I want to see you, though. Even if, you know, we have to wait. Is that okay?"

That familiar look flashes across his eyes. He gets it when he's on the verge of snapping into primal mode. It's like he's going to throw me against the wall and start kissing me hard. He's going to spank me. My ass, my belly. He's going to own me.

Then he nods and kisses me again. "I'll see you soon. Don't go *anywhere* without telling me."

He turns, opens the door, slips out, and disappears into the early morning. I return to the living room, sitting next to Mom, glancing at her as she squeezes her hands tightly and prays quietly. It's peaceful, even if I feel like there's a hole in my chest without Jamie, leaning back and listening to her muttering.

"Please, God, give me the strength to tell my daughter the truth, to tell myself the truth..."

I sit up and gently touch her hand. She flinches and looks at me as if she's shocked I'm here. "You can tell me, Mom," I whisper. "Whatever it is."

She blinks, eyes glistening. "You don't know what you're asking."

"Anything," I say. "Nothing could make me love you any less."

"I left you to grow up alone. I failed you. You should hate me."

"But I *don't*," I blurt out. "I love you. I don't blame you. I know you were hit hard by Dad's death. I know it tore you up!"

She suddenly stands and waves a hand. "It wasn't that. It wasn't *just* that. It's more complicated."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

She groans, running a hand through her hair. She shivers, looking at her hand as if she expects it to be covered in blood. "It's... You know about my parents."

"Sure I do, Mom," I say. "I remember Grandad, just a little."

I don't go on. Mom never wanted me to see her parents very much when I was little. Then, they passed within years of each other. From the way Mom sat frozen at the kitchen table, staring off into space, I knew her feelings were complicated.

"They gave me a blessing," Mom whispers, sitting again, then tapping her leg like she has to move or she'll explode. "But it was a curse, too. They gave me God, but I realized something as I got older. God was going to hate me, apparently, so I ignored it. I tried to for years, and then I told your dad, Lena, before he passed. I told him the truth, and he took that flight to see his brother. It was the last thing I told him—the truth."

I wrap my arm around her when she starts sobbing again before she can jump to her feet. She tries to push me away. "Do you understand what I'm saying?" she hisses. "I was living a lie. I lied to your father."

"It's okay, Mom," I whisper.

“No, no, you can’t say that. It can’t just *be okay*. Yell at me. Hate me.”

“No,” I say, louder, firmer. “I don’t give a single fuck if you’re gay. I don’t care if you and Dad had a fight before he got on the plane. It would’ve crashed anyway. I don’t care about *any* of it except our future. Our family.”

“Our family?” Mom whispers.

“Me, you, Jamie. Your grandchild.”

“Jamie mentioned that in the cell,” she whispers. “Hope,” she shudders. “If you have a girl, you should call her Hope.”

“That’s an excellent idea,” I say.

She sits back, closes her eyes, and sighs. “You haven’t asked why I lied about the relationship, Lena. The real reason.”

“I think I get it, Mom,” I say softly, feeling her pain and knowing she’s always had a complicated relationship with reality. It’s fine. She’s never had to be tough. I can be that for both of us. “You had to believe in the story. You’d been doing it all your life, believing in the story of yourself, if that makes sense.”

She sobs, all choked up. “It does. You’re so smart.”

I almost snort and dismiss it. Maybe that’s a bad way of handling a compliment, even if I don’t think my comment makes me smart. Perhaps I do like Jamie suggested and stop putting myself down. I saved Mom. I saved Jamie. I saved myself. I saved the future. *Half* saved, really, since I would’ve been screwed without Jamie, but I don’t have to keep doubting all the damn time.

“And it made you so happy,” I whisper. “Telling that story. Believing in it.”

“Because I thought you’d hate me if you knew the truth.”

“How could you think that? Everything I’ve done...” I’m shaking now, the tears trying to break through. “I did for y-y-you...”

She brushes my cheek with her thumb. I'm letting them fall. I don't let myself cry in front of Mom. "You shouldn't have had to," she says. "Oh, Lena. This isn't me being dramatic. I'm not having an *episode*. I'll admit it. I'm nuts, but not about this. I failed you as a mother."

"Mom—"

"No," she goes on when I can't speak anymore, the sobs choking me. She's crying, too. "It's the truth, but we have a chance to move on honestly as who we really are."

"I'm the woman in love with my Mom's ex," I say, laughing like a crazy woman.

Mom laughs in the same way. We're all nuts—me, Jamie, and Mom. "And I'm a sinner, rotten to the core."

The laughter feels like it cures us, cleans us, and wipes all the grime away.

"Mom, Jamie wants to move to California. He's going to have to start again. Create a new identity, I guess." That familiar, surreal feeling touches me. "When this is over, it will seem like a fairytale." A dark one.

"California?" Mom says.

"A new start," I reply, squeezing her hand. "That's what we all need. A new start. A new life. Nothing is tying us here. No friends. No family. Mom, we've lived a sad life, but it doesn't have to be that way."

"What do *you* want to do?" she asks.

"Move, be with Jamie, and have you near us. I don't want to lose you."

"Then that's what we'll do," she replies. "I'll make up for lost time. You'll see. This isn't like when you were a kid. I'd be okay for a few days, then collapse. I'm here to stay, and I'll never stop being sorry."

CHAPTER THIRTY

J amie

“My forensics guy is infiltrating his computer system, combing the storage,” Russel says down the phone. “He should have enough, Jamie. He’ll be able to show the link between Lionel Strafer and the butcher.”

“Yeah, but he’ll find a way to wriggle out of it,” I growl. “You’re the one who gave me his location. I’ll make him squeal.”

I drive down the street in my unmarked car. I’ll need to replace the windows in my sedan, fix the door, and hide the bullet holes. I grip the steering wheel hard. “*Focus, kid,*” but then Imaginary Jack is gone. It’s my woman instead. It’s Lena. “*You can do this. For us. For the family.*”

“So you could monitor him. Scope it out. Not whatever you’re planning.”

I change lanes, maybe a little too aggressively. “Who says I’m planning anything?”

“You sound like you’re fixing for a fight.”

I change lanes again. “Can you fucking blame me? This prick thinks he’s untouchable. He thinks he’s got us all under his thumb. He thinks he can risk my woman’s life and get away with it.”

“Wait, what?”

“Nothing,” I grunt, coming to a reluctant stop at a red light.

“Jamie, are you talking about Simone?”

“Lena,” I snap.

“Lena?”

“*Lena*,” I almost roar. “I’ve wanted it ever since I saw her. Say it, man. Tell me she’s too young. Call me a creep. I don’t give a damn. I can’t give a damn about anything anymore. I can’t afford to. Just my family.”

“How does she feel?”

“She wants it, too.” Green light. “We’re going to *have* it—a future together. I’ve never wanted anything more. Hell, man. I never knew a man could want anything this badly.”

“I’m happy for you,” Russel says. “I’ve never heard you like this. We used to think you were made of stone back in the teams, but I mean it. This is good. You’re going to love being a dad.”

I swallow, gripped with emotion, knowing he’s right. It was like Lena and I said. We already love our kids. They’re not even here yet, and Lena is still a virgin.

“Hold on, bro...” Russel trails off, the line going to hold. I keep heading toward the sushi bar just off the Financial District, where the billionaire playboy sadistic douchebag is probably dining with a grin on his face, surrounded by his security, no clue I’m about to charge in there and...

And what? I need to think and plan. I can’t forget the look on my woman’s face when she shot the gun, the recoil blowing it from her hand, and the unearned guilt that flashed into her features.

“Turn around,” Russel snaps when he’s back on the line. “You need to get far away from there.”

“What? Why? What’s going down?”

“The FBI has moved in on him. I’ve sent you a video. They must’ve had a case cooking this whole time. If the Feds are on

this, it's only a matter of time before they get the files from *The Answer*. If this tech douche could get our info..."

"The Feds will have it eventually," I say, swallowing. "Jesus, man. I'm sorry. Your family."

"I've got a tropical place in mind. They'll live. We planned for this. We knew this day could come."

"When will you leave?" I ask.

"Realistically, we could have some time. It depends on how quickly Lionel decides to talk. It depends on how quickly it becomes public."

"Don't forget his men," I say, bringing my car to a stop in an alleyway. I'm close to the sushi bar. I can hear sirens in the air. "They know who we are, too."

"Hired guns, brother. They don't give a shit about us. They'd be our friends if we paid them enough."

"Still, we can't risk it. We've got our families to think about."

"You're damn right."

We hang up. Then I watch the video Russel sent me. It was taken on a cell phone and uploaded two minutes ago.

Lionel Strafer is an average-looking man in a plain black T-shirt. He could be anybody. Nobody would ever suspect him of anything if it weren't for his money.

As the Feds escort him to the car, he lifts his head and shouts into the sky. "I am the answer! I am the answer! *I* am the answer!"

I pull out of the alleyway and drive toward my apartment. It's time to initiate the disappearance. Jamie King has to vanish. Then I'll be a new man with a family and wife that I'll never stop loving.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Lena

“You and Mr. King were in a relationship, Miss Harwood?” Officer Ramirez asks, leaning across the coffee table. She looks formidable, the type of woman I hope my daughter becomes. When she asked if she could speak to us, I couldn’t think of a way to make her go away.

Mom glances at me and smiles, almost like we’re in on some secret joke. Their relationship was my biggest fear before. Now, it’s just one more angle to the insanity.

“Is something... funny, Miss Harwood?”

“It’s *Mrs.* Harwood,” Mom says, sitting up, seeming like the woman she was before Dad died. That must’ve been while she was still living her own narrative, a happily married woman. It was always part of her, even if it went away. “And I don’t see how this is appropriate. What does it have to do with anything?”

“It’s a simple question, Mrs. Harwood.”

“I don’t understand the connection to Jamie either,” I say, leaning forward, a confused look on my face.

“You called him the day you went missing,” Ramirez says, narrowing her eyes at me.

“I thought he could help. He was in the military. I was scared of calling the cops. The note said no cops, and then they took

me.” I swallow, thinking of what I did, pulling that trigger, and thinking I’d do it again. I don’t know what that says about me. “They locked us up.” Well, *somebody* did. “They humiliated us.” That was Jamie, but I liked it. Maybe it’s not humiliation if it feels good. “They terrified us.” At the beginning, he did, my man, my savage. “Now you want us to go over and over and over it.”

Ramirez sits back, frowning, shaking her head. “No, Miss Harwood. I didn’t mean... Of course not.”

“Do you know where they kept us, Officer Ramirez?” Mom snaps. “In a cell. No lights. No—”

“I’ve seen the photos,” Ramirez says, quickly standing up. “I didn’t mean to stir any emotions.”

I step forward and narrow my eyes. She’s gone all shift. “You’re not supposed to be here, are you?” I say. “Your bosses. They don’t know you’re here.”

She flashes a dark look at me.

“Of course she’s not,” Mom says, stepping beside me. “After all we’ve been through...”

“I’m just trying to do the right thing,” Ramirez says. “There’s something about that Jamie King. I’ve got a sixth sense about these things.”

“What, you think he’s a bad, bad man?” I say, rolling my eyes. “He’s a flashy stock trader. I was glad when my mom dumped his ass.”

“And *I* was glad to get rid of him.”

Ramirez nods. “I’ll see myself out.”

Mom and I keep staring at her until she’s gone. Then I say, “Sorry, Jamie. Jeez, I didn’t mean that.”

Mom nudges me playfully, still seeming like her old self before Dad got on that plane. Maybe it was partly an act, but she seems younger, full of life. “I think he’ll forgive us. That was quite thrilling. Maybe that’s how we look on the bright side of all this. We’ve had a good thrill.”

Mom seems manic, but not in a desperate way. She seems weirdly hopeful. Maybe it's the trauma and the lack of sleep. Maybe it's the antidepressant I saw her take earlier. Or perhaps it's just hope. Hope for the future. Hope for the daughter she thought of in the dark. Hope for Hope.

"Yeah, Mom," I say. "That's one way to look at it." It's a bland statement, but I don't want to shatter this mood. Luckily, she's not listening, humming as she walks to the window.

My phone vibrates. Not *my* phone, the burner Jamie gave me. *Watch this video*. There's a link. I click it. A regular-looking man walks awkwardly between two FBI agents, shouting at the sky. He's the answer, he says. No, *The Answer*. He was "Jack," then. If he's been arrested, does that mean it's over? Does that mean we can live happily ever after?

Or maybe happily ever after is an impossible concept. It's never going to be *perfect*. People will always have to make sacrifices, but when I saw Jamie, I knew we were destined to have something special. Maybe we wouldn't get it. Perhaps life or Mom would get in the way, but the connection was there. We'll fight. We'll never stop trying. Together.

Jamie sends me another text. *I'll be with you when the sun sets. I'm making arrangements. This is my last night. Put this phone in the box I gave you.*

A shiver runs down my body when I think about Jamie leaving me. He says it will only be for a couple of weeks. Even that close, us leaving at the same time as Jamie disappearing might make Ramirez suspicious, but she'll have other cases. The world will forget us.

I don't want him to go. Would it be wrong to ask Mom to stay somewhere else tonight? No, what am I thinking? I'm not a good daughter sometimes, but I want Jamie to myself. After everything, maybe it's silly how nervous it still makes me—my man, with his manhood so hard and thick.

I bite down. How long can we wait?

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

J amie

I lie behind Lena, my manhood stiff, my heart pounding. She must be able to feel me. Feel how hungry I am. We promised we'd be good. It's so peaceful, lying here in bed in the dark with her, despite the need clawing at me.

"How did Lionel Strafer know Jack?" Lena asks.

"Jack went down a bad road. They must've mixed in the same circles. I'm sure Lionel hired him a few times. I don't care about any of it. All I care about is us."

"We can put it behind us soon," she whispers, shifting against me. Oh, fuck, her ass is rubbing right up against my dick. Tension floods into my shaft, my hand moving automatically to her hip. "Can we?"

I squeeze her hip harder, shifting back and forth, grinding through my pants against her ass. She's wearing shorts that disappear into her big ass, her fleshiness devouring the fabric. "Y-yes," I groan.

"Will they be able to find you?"

"We'll have to be careful. Maybe buy a plot of land in a place nobody cares about."

"*We'll* care about it," she says fiercely, "because we'll be there. Our family." She shifts against me again.

I bite down, letting out a savage breath through my teeth. I'm tugging at her shorts without even meaning to. It's just instinct—animal need to see her round ass and thighs glimmering with her wetness.

“Jamie,” she moans.

“Bite down on the pillow,” I snarl, spanking her ass softly. Still, the flesh-on-flesh sound seems loud in the quiet of the night. Fuck it. I spank her big, beautiful ass again.

Her moan, as usual, is the best part. Her horniness.

“You know you want it.” I kiss down her legs as I pull her shorts down. My dick pulses hard when she grabs a pillow and brings it to her mouth. Her thick legs are already shaking for me.

I pull her shorts and underwear down, toss them away, and growl as I push her legs apart. Her scent is so hot. It triggers deep impulses in me. Her folds glimmer in the low light. Her horny slit winks at me, wet already.

When I growl again, she sits up. She brings her fingers to her lips, her eyes wide in a plea. That's right. We have to be quiet. I kiss up her thigh, tasting her skin, tasting *her*. I almost lose it when I kiss beside her hole, her wetness smearing across my lips.

She shivers in a hot, receptive way when I guide my tongue up her folds to her clit. I lick my woman up and down, tightly holding her thighs. Maybe a little roughly, but she's mine—*mine*. I hold her tighter, growling as I pull her toward me and open my mouth. I devour her, lick fast, faster, then slide my tongue into her. I fuck her with my tongue.

Dammit, I'm stroking my cock. Lost in her taste, my hand grinds up and down my dick as I indulge. She's moaning into the pillow, muffled, but it's like she can't contain it. Precome leaks so hot from my dick. I need her. She's fluttering around my tongue.

Oh, *fuck*. She's creaming in my mouth. From under the pillow, she moans, “F-f-f-fuck. Oh, fuck.” Quiet, like she can't take anymore, but she never wants it to stop. I tongue her harder,

push my lip firmly against her clit. She grinds against my mouth.

When she's done, I slide my tongue out, then lick around her hole. I run my tongue all over her entrance, her clit, her lips. I lap up every last drop of her juice and then take her clit into my mouth. I suck it, push my tongue against it, reach up, and bury my hands in the gorgeous thickness of her belly.

She gasps and puts her hands on my wrists. I think she's going to push me away or try to. Maybe it's weird for her, but then she moans, rubbing her hands atop me like she wants me to indulge. Every part of her is perfect. Every moan. Every curve.

When I stand slowly, she sits up, her breasts bouncing in her top. I silently take off my T-shirt, my pants, my underwear. My cock springs up from my waistband. It's so hard, it almost hurts, the tension roaring at me that there's only one release—my horny young virgin's hole.

“Show me those perfect tits,” I whisper.

She sits up, staring at my dick with wide eyes. She looks so shocked, but her body was made for me. She's going to take every inch. I'm done waiting. When she pulls her shirt over her head, I surge forward onto the bed, climbing atop her, taking her nipple in my mouth.

She runs her hands over my shoulders. “You're so big,” she whispers. “Jamie, be gentle.”

“You're taking every inch,” I snarl. “Deep. All damn night if I want.”

“Yeah,” she moans. “Oh, Jamie. Okay. You're the boss.”

I kiss up her chest and look her deep in the eyes. “I'm always going to be your boss. I'm your goddamn kidnapper, and you'll always be my bad, bad girl.”

“I am,” she moans, nodding, her lips trembling, “but only for you.”

I reach down, bringing my rock-hard tip to her hole. Her warm wetness kisses my end as I smooth my dick up and down,

almost slipping inside her. She whimpers each time, eyes locked on mine.

“You’re going to take every fucking inch,” I moan, pushing in slowly, her walls gripping me so tight. My seed bursts to my end like it wants to get the job done but fuck no. The pleasure on her face is too fierce. She’s burning up with lust. She claws her hands down my back, then lets go, like she wants to be gentle.

I moan low, struggling not to yell. “Don’t be gentle with me,” I snap. “I want to feel how badly you want this.”

She bites down, suppressing a moan as she squeezes onto my arms, her fingernails digging into the bruises the rubber bullets made, but I can’t feel that. All I can feel is her hot pussy. The deeper I get into her sweet slit, the more addicted I am, the more certain.

She lets my arms go and grabs the sheets. I lean up so I can look between our bodies. I’ve left a sheen of sweat over her tits, her belly, making her shapeliness glisten for me. My dick pulses, her walls squeezing. She moans through clenched teeth, her eyes closed.

“Look at me,” I growl.

She snaps her eyes open and stares at me like she did the day I kidnapped her when she thought I was the big bad wolf. When she thought I was going to hurt her, but never would.

I push in the rest of the way, almost shouting when her tight hole grips my shaft. She breathes hard through clenched teeth.

“Does it hurt?” I say softly.

“N-no.”

“Tell the truth. Always. With me.”

She nods slowly, but her eyes go from side to side. It’s that just-Lena confused expression I’ve noticed a few times. “Not much. Just... Yeah, stay there with me.”

She moans gently as I shift back and forth just a little, claiming the deepest part of her, the most intimate part. “This is the only dick you’ll ever feel,” I whisper, leaning down,

laying my body against hers again, pushing in intimately.
“The. Only. One.”

“Just you,” she whispers urgently as I begin pumping my hips, sliding in and out of her slick, wet pussy.

I move quicker, kissing her shoulder, then biting. I can’t help it. I’m turning into an animal as she moans in my ear. It’s how she moans when I make her come with my hand and tongue. The pain is gone. I know it.

“It feels so good,” she says like she’s surprised.

I lean back again. I want to remember her reaction. I want this moment forever. “I love you.” I slide out. “I love you.” I push in, deep and hard, the mattress whining. “I love you so damn much.”

“I love you too.” Her whisper sounds torn like she’s struggling not to scream. “So, so much.”

I lean down, kiss her cheek, find her lips. I think she might push me away, not wanting to taste herself, but she can’t. She’s my woman. She’ll take every damn thing I give her.

Our tongues find each other desperately. I’ve been searching for this my entire life without realizing it—searching for the ability to feel fused with another person. I was right to hold off. I was right to take my dad as a warning. Waiting for Lena was the best thing I ever did.

I lean up again, pushing deeper, pounding her with my dick. Looking between our bodies, I groan as I see white cream pulsing down my length. She’s seeping juices for me, her virgin pussy soaked. I stare into her eyes as they roll back, watching as she comes.

Seed rushes up my shaft and pushes against my end. I almost explode, but then I stop and hold myself deep for a moment. I’m not done with my woman yet. After reining myself in, I start thrusting again, slower, just as deep. I savor every inch of her warm heat.

She claws at my arms, nodding like she’s begging me to come. She’s begging me to empty myself inside her. I shake my head

slowly. “I’m fucking you from behind. I need to spank your ass again. Make you red. Mark you.”

“J-Jamie,” she moans as I slide out of her. “We have to be quiet.”

I nod as I lean up, grab her hips, and lift her. She turns, getting onto all fours. I almost explode all over her big, round, creamy ass. She looks at me over her shoulder, just like that first time. I spank her ass, the sound loud in the night. Just like the wet sound of my cock slipping into her from behind.

She stares at me over her shoulder, her lips trembling. She’s trying to hold back a scream. It’s sexier than if she was screaming. I look down at her ass, bouncing up and down against my abs. I spank her again, lightly, not too loud. I spank her ass until she blossoms red for me.

I fuck her harder and lean over. I’m a fucking animal. I have to hammer her *hard*. She reaches back and pushes her fingernails against my naked chest, her body twisted around. I grab her shoulder and her hip and own her body. I slam into her, over and over, the bed whining. Her ass claps against me. My dick is on fire.

“Oh, oh,” she moans quietly. “F-f-f-*fuck*.”

She’s creaming again. Come streaks down my cock. Each time I thrust in, I spread it up toward her asshole. I reach down. I’m a full beast now. I spread the come over her ass, fingering around her hole, slowing my thrusts.

“Jamie,” she whispers.

“I own every part of you.” My voice is low, dark as I slip my finger into her ass, just an inch, just enough for her to know. “Every... part...”

I slide my dick deep into her pussy as I finger her release into her asshole. I push deeper. Her moans turn into that frantic hollow gasping she had at the cabin.

“Please come in me,” she moans. “Please.”

I fuck her faster, finger her asshole, lost in my possession of her. If it weren’t for her mom being in the house, I’d fuck her

hard again, hammer her tight hole, but that was risky. I'm so close. Her asshole is tight around my finger. Her pussy is tighter around my cock.

Groaning, I collapse against her, my seed finally exploding. It's like I black out. The pleasure is too intense. All my life, I've waited for this moment to give myself to the only woman I'll ever want.

I lay my body against her back, panting, slipping my finger out of her ass. We stay like that for a few moments. "I love you," I whisper.

"I love you too. I wish you didn't have to go. Not now."

"Why?" I smirk. "Want to do that again?"

"*Obviously*, but do you think we woke Mom?"

I glance at the door and swallow. "I hope not. We need to be more careful. I know it's my fault, but you drive me wild. I just love you so damn much." I climb off her, reaching for my clothes. "I'm going to clean up. I want to hold you, but let's face it..."

She rolls over, sweaty and beautiful. "I know. We're both kind of gross."

I throw my T-shirt down, laughing, climbing atop and kissing her. She laughs and ki'ses me right back. I can tell she's as drunk as I am—drunk on the love. Rolling over, I pull her into my arms and hold her shoulder. My head feels light. I'm grinning like a damn kid.

"I *really* wish you didn't have to go," she whispers.

"It won't be for long," I tell her. "Then I'll be with you. I'll have a new name. We'll have a new life. You're never going to be alone again. I will look out for you, Lena, every day for the rest of our lives."

"And I'll be there to pick up the slack," she says, kissing my chest.

I smile. "*Save* our asses, you mean..."

"Hey, don't give me that credit or make me *smile* about that."

“Welcome to the life of a cold, hard operator, Lena,” I tell her, nudging her playfully. “It means smiling about the morbid side of life. It’s the truth. You *saved* us when you pulled that trigger, and I know why.”

“Because I had no choice.” She hugs me closer.

“No. You had a choice. You could’ve chosen to freeze or panic, but you have a mother bear in you. You won’t let anybody risk our future.”

“It’s *ours*,” she says passionately. “We fought for it. You bled for it.”

“We’ll get it. I swear. I love you. We’ll get it.”

Her voice is low as she rests her cheek against my chest. “I know we will. I love you too.”

EPILOGUE

THREE WEEKS LATER

Lena

The Californian landscape is yellow, bright, and dusty as far as the eye can see. My heart pumps harder and harder as Mom drives the car up the small paved road, the U-Haul pulling behind us. It's been one hell of a road trip, but now I'm aching to see my man.

The last time I saw him was when he took my virginity on that magic, steamy, taboo night. That night, he reminded me of what it felt like to be kidnapped. To never *want* to escape.

I rest my hand on my belly as Mom takes the turn. I think she can sense my anticipation. He was gone when I woke up that morning. Then, two weeks later, I got a text from an unknown cell number and an address. The case is moving on from us. Lionel Strafer is the focus. We're just two unfortunate women who happened to be there. The cops don't care about us.

The neighborhood sits just past the two small hills. I bite my lip as we drive through the quaint Main Street, past several ranches and galloping horses. I watch them running across the fields, so free, so powerful.

Finally, we pull up at the large house in a long row. Jamie immediately runs from the door. He must've been waiting for us. His hair is entirely silver now as if he's dyed it, and he's grown a thick silver beard, the same color. He's also got a small scar under one eye. He still looks like him but different. Enough to make a person question it.

“Sorry about the getup,” he says, laughing, then shuddering with emotion. I’m doing it too.

We fly to each other. I throw myself into his arms. He catches me, holds me tight, buries his face in my neck, and kisses me. “Marry me,” he whispers urgently in my ear. “I wanted to propose. Dammit, I had a plan, but marry me, Lena. Be my wife. Forever.”

“Y-yes,” I whimper, hardly able to speak, not caring if we’re still on the porch, not caring if Mom or anybody can see. I feel like we’re the only people in the whole universe.

“Don’t worry. I didn’t forget everything.” He kisses my cheek, takes my hand, and leads me up the steps and into the house. He reaches for a table by the door. The interior is quaint, with lots of light and open space.

Kneeling, he smiles up at me. There is so much love in those sharp blue eyes, but I’ll always see the dark glint in there. He’s my man, capable of anything, and I’m his woman who is not bad in a scrape myself.

He opens the ring box, the diamond glistening. My hand is shaking as he slides it on. I’m bubbling up with excitement.

“Have you told him?” Mom says from the doorway, a big grin on her face. She’s been getting stronger day by day. “No? Tell him, girl!”

“Tell me what?” he says, grinning from ear to ear, happier than I ever could’ve imagined seeing him before.

I look into his eyes and step forward. I feel the heat of his body. I remember all the moments that brought us here. All the suspicion. All the pain. All the bloodshed. A tear falls down my cheek. “I’m pregnant.”

His eyes start glimmering, too. His hand moves to my belly. “I love you. I love our baby.”

I lay my hand atop his.

EPILOGUE

SIX YEARS LATER

S imone

I sit on the back porch, bobbing Hope up and down on my knee, watching as Tommy marches across the garden with his stick in his hand, Demon at his side. My three-year-old grandson aims the stick, leaning against the big, protective dog like two warriors riding into some ancient battle.

“I could watch those two all day,” Lena says, smiling as she sits next to me, the sun beaming down on her, making her shine more than she already is. She rests her hand on her belly. Another baby. Another precious bundle of joy.

“Me too, Mommy,” Hope beams, her black hair flowing down her back. It was the color of Jamie’s hair before he dyed it silver, and then it turned naturally silver with age.

He stands across the yard, talking to Tessa, my partner. It took a long time to come to terms with many things, especially the guilt over Lena and her father. I did love her father in my own way, and it hurt to lose him. I’ll never know how my life would have turned out after my confession, but that’s not something I can change, and I’ve learned to accept that. I lost a part of myself when I lost him, but Tessa brought a new light to my world when she came into my life, and I couldn’t be happier. It didn’t happen overnight. There were long conversations with my therapist and Lena about my past, my parents, and my relationship with Lena’s father.

I'm so proud of the relationship I've built with Lena and the strong woman she is with no thanks to me. I watch her, one eye on Tommy and Demon as they march, ready to spring up at a moment's notice. Not that she coddles her children. She's an excellent mother. So capable. So loving. Even after starting her charity and spending a little time in the office, she never forgets the children. Primarily, she works at home. That was important to her—not like me.

“Why so glum, chum?” Lena says, winking at Hope.

Hope giggles, turning and flashing me her heart-filling smile. “Why so *chum, glum*?” I laugh, looking into her eyes, seeing the future, seeing evidence of the repair Lena and I have made. I'll never fully forgive myself for letting go like that and disappearing into myself, but we're here now. We're together.

Jamie says something, making Tessa laugh. It's funny. I always think of him as Jamie, but he's been Jake since we moved here. Jamie King disappeared from his apartment and was never seen again. Jake Fitzgerald has been a martial arts instructor for the last five years, building a franchise. He's respected in the community. The whole family is. Lena reaches over and squeezes my hand. Tommy and Demon make another pass in front of us.

“Look at us, Mom,” Lena whispers, gesturing to the garden, the vibrant flowerbeds, the pool glistening. Hope is laughing on my knee. My partner and my son-in-law are making each other laugh by the grill.

“Remember the old neighborhood?” Lena gets emotional when she's pregnant, and I can see she's close to tears. I hold her hand with even more love, knowing it will never be enough. “Remember the paranoia? Remember how hopeless it seemed?”

“*I'm* hoppy Hope. I jump super high!” Hope springs off my knee, chasing after her brother.

“Of course I remember,” I whisper.

“And remember...” She doesn't have to say it. We rarely talk about that crazy week. “But look at us now.”

I reach over and dab the tears from her eyes. “You’re only two months in, girl. You’ll cry a river before the baby’s born.”

She laughs. “I like how the pregnancy feels. They’re happy tears. They’re always happy tears.”

She turns, spotting Jamie looking at her. They have intimacy like I’ve never seen. With a look or a gesture, they know what the other person means. I’m so happy Lena found a love like this. If anybody deserves it, she does.

EPILOGUE

YEARS LATER

Jake

I kneel beside Hope, resting my hand gently on her shoulder. The forest is quiet around us. The tin cans gleam from various tree branches. Hope reaches down and adjusts her braid, keeping the gun pressed against her shoulder.

“Let me know, Daddy. I’m ready.”

I take my hand from her shoulder, step back, and get the stopwatch ready. “Stay calm. In the moment.”

“I can do it.”

“I know you can, but stay calm.”

“Dad...”

“One, two, three, go!”

She flies into action. I know Lena and the others can hear us from the campsite. Hope is obsessed with her shooting. She moves quickly, hitting each can with a resounding *ping* noise. Almost all of them fall. She turns, air rifle aimed at the ground, grinning. She’s got Lena’s bright, optimistic eyes and the same warm smile.

“What was my time, Dad?”

“Well...” I glance down at the stopwatch. “Twenty-four seconds and counting...”

“Wait.” Her eyes snap open. She turns and sweeps up her gun. She searches the forest, then laughs and fires off a pellet. “Ha, ha, Daddy. Hiding it behind the bottle.”

“You’re a scary lady, kiddo,” I laugh, taking the rifle from her. I clap her softly on the shoulder. “I mean that. You could be one hell of a speed shooter.”

She beams, taking my hand. We walk back to camp together. Hope goes down to the lake with her brothers and sisters. I watch Tommy fly off the small pier, doing a cannonball, and Katy cheering from her grandmother’s arms on the shore.

Lena’s in the tent, stuffing sandwiches into a cooler. I slide in behind her and zip it closed. I turn and take in the sight of my woman, wearing a summer dress that outlines her figure, her curves sexier every single day. She turns and smiles, that familiar flush touching her cheeks.

“Aren’t you going to let me out?” she says, her voice breathy.

I smirk, lean forward, and grab her hip. “You’re mine,” I tell her. “You leave when I say you can.”

THE END

Want more? Check out my latest release Claimed by Mr. Ice [here](#), or subscribe to my newsletter [here](#) to get a free, new, original story and stay up to date.

TOP READS

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- 2) [Kidnapped by My Best friend's Dad](#)
- 3) [Texting My Mom's Ex](#)
- 4) [Hot for My Step-Uncle](#)
- 5) [Crushing on The Billionaire](#)
- 6) [Kidnapped by My Dad's Best Friend](#)
- 7) [Texting The Tattooist](#)
- 8) [The Accidental Text](#)
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Professor Ink>

PROFESSOR INK

CHAPTER ONE

Ellie

I shouldn't feel like it's the first day of high school as I stand outside the lecture hall. I hold my books, feeling like a dork while trying to seem completely relaxed. Everybody around me is talking in small clusters, or that's what it looks like.

Reminding myself I'm not a kid anymore, I force my gaze to scan the large entrance hall. There are around forty people in here. *Most* of them are already talking to people, but a few, like me, are hovering on the edges. Maybe they feel the same gnawing, whispering dread at the prospect of putting themselves out there.

None of them can know about *the incident*, as I've come to think of it. The evil, crazy thing that happened to me. Or maybe I caused it. I don't know. I've never been able to decide whether I should take some of the blame for myself.

A woman catches my eye and smiles with the same shakiness I recognize. It's like I can *feel* the shape of her smile on my lips and all the uncertainty that comes with it.

I'd call that artsy-fartsy pretentious bull crap, but this is English Lit. Somehow, I think artsy-fartsy, pretentious bull crap flies here. That's a private joke just for me. There's no way I'd say it out loud and offend somebody before the academic year even begins.

The woman is blond, tall, and on the leaner side. It's like somebody has drawn a picture of my exact opposite. She

shoulders her book bag, a green satchel with pins dotted all over it, and walks over to me.

“Uh, hey,” I say, annoyed at myself for the *uh*.

She raises her voice over the surrounding chatter. “I was standing over there thinking, well, here it is, my first year at college, and I’m alone, a real loser. Then I saw you looking. I thought, hey, maybe we can be losers together.”

She smiles tightly, then goes on, “That was a joke. My uncle said I should try to make a joke. Too blunt, right?”

I laugh, hoping I put her at ease a little. “Not too blunt at all. It’s nice to talk to somebody.”

“I’m way too blunt sometimes.”

I shake my head. “Seriously, it’s fine. I’m Ellie.”

She sticks her hand out. She has jittery energy, almost bobbing on the spot. I wonder if it’s her anxiety bubbling up in her, whereas mine folds inwards, disappears inside, and buries itself.

“I’m Chloe.”

We shake hands, and she leans against the wall beside me. “Have you heard about Max Stellar? *Professor* Stellar, I should say.”

“The man who’s keeping us waiting?” I say, glancing at the clock.

She grins. “That eager to get started, are you?”

“Honestly, yeah. I’ve been building this up in my head all summer. The first class and all the ways it could go wrong.”

“Jeez, sounds like being in my head. We really are two peas in a pod, Ellie.”

I laugh when she playfully nudges my shoulder, feeling lucky she walked over, lucky this conversation feels so easy. It’s far more effortless than my first conversations with people usually are.

“Have you heard, though?” she goes on. “He’s a real hunk, apparently. I’ve never been much of a Casanovia. You know, the female version of Casanova.”

“Did you just make that up?”

She beams. “Maybe, but the point is, be on your guard. Supposedly, he makes people *swoon*.”

I’m about to say I don’t believe her. I’m about to say it doesn’t matter because I’m here to learn and nothing else. I had too much drama before when everything went wrong, and all the bull crap stacked up and fell on my head.

Then I see it: women—and some men—swooning over Professor Stellar. I don’t see *him* at first, just the effect he’s having. Several women nudge their friends and nod over at him, blushing like they’re ashamed of how hot he is.

“I’m going to screw him by the end of the year,” I hear a woman say. Then she and her friend laugh loudly. She has a cheerleader look about her. Maybe she’s right. Maybe she will.

I turn, following their gazes, and then I know none of them can ever touch him. None of them get to stroke their hands up his large, muscular arms. His tattoos are just about visible beneath his white shirt. His broad chest and the lines in his abs are visible too. Or is that my imagination, my hunger?

He’s got black hair with flecks of silver, swept to the side and kept there with some product. His dark ink flashes through his shirt when he strides through the path of the overhead light.

He pauses. I swear, for a second, nobody else exists. He’s looking *right* at me. He’s staring into my soul like he wants a piece. I can hardly believe he’s doing this in front of everybody, just staring. I don’t understand why. He just looks at me, like he’s locked in place, and then quickly walks toward the door.

“Do you know him?” Chloe asks.

“No,” I murmur, my heart pounding too hard for no reason.

“He was really eyeing you up.”

“He wasn’t,” I say, blatantly lying, even to myself.

“Let’s get started, ladies and gentlemen,” Professor Stellar calls across the room.

He pushes the door open and walks toward the lectern like he has a vendetta against it. Chloe and I file in, my instincts guiding me toward the back of the class. That way, I can shrink into my seat, slump down, and try not to think about those clear, blue eyes staring *into* me. Then Chloe takes my arm and leads me to the front.

“I want to hear everything,” she says.

“Okay. Fine. Cool.”

My mouth is too dry, considering I drank about ten thousand gallons of water this morning. My lips stick together. When I move my tongue over them, Professor Stellar looks at me again. He towers over the lectern. When he grabs it, I’m sure I can hear the wood straining. His inked forearms are almost bulging out of his shirt.

“Let’s get settled down,” he says, his voice booming even when he doesn’t raise it.

There’s no mic. It’s just how he speaks, with confidence and power.

Finally, everybody is quiet. Professor Stellar leans against the lectern, looking over the classroom. I get the sense he looks at every student except me, but that’s probably just paranoia.

“What is love?” he says. “And, please, nobody say, *baby, don’t hurt me.*”

A few of us laugh—those who recognize the song he’s referring to. There’s something almost hypnotic about him when he speaks, keeping my gaze fixed firmly. I can sense Chloe glancing at *me* as if she can tell the effect he’s having.

Everything is getting hot. My body tingles, and my thighs ache. I push them together, ignoring the deeper ache, the shiver moving through me.

“That’s a question we must ask ourselves when studying the Shakespearean sonnets,” he says. “The nature and the shape of love. ‘My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun.’ That’s not a

compliment, but... Well, let me ask you—those who did the reading—what does *that* say about love?”

In typical first-class-of-the-year fashion, everybody looks around the classroom. There’s an atmosphere of not wanting to answer, a vague sense of judgment coming along with it, and the fear of *being a nerd*.

Max smiles, but his blue eyes stay cold. Or maybe that’s more imagining. “Anybody? There are no wrong answers. Well, some, but I’ll let you all believe you’re perfect for a few weeks.”

I laugh... way too loud, it turns out. Everybody turns to me for a moment. Ah, crap.

Max’s smile changes shape. It becomes something of a smirk. Is he making fun of me?

“Do you have any ideas...” he trails off, looking directly at me.

“Ellie,” I say, filling it in for him.

“Ellie?”

I swallow, my throat feeling raw. Talking in front of forty people is not a small thing, especially when I still have those high school holdups clinging to me. But high school is over, and it’s time to move on and be the person I want to be.

“The sun is unattainable,” I say softly.

Max nods. “Yes...”

“Especially to Shakespeare. He knew so little about it, historically speaking. It’s this impossible, magical thing. It can’t be possessed or controlled. Shakespeare is specifically saying his love is *real*. It’s so real that it has *nothing* to do with the fake, the impossible. It’s the complete opposite.”

I lick my lips. My heartbeat has picked up even more. It’s like my body thinks I’m running flat out from a mugger.

“Excellent,” Max says, voice quiet, eyes locked on me.

[>One-click Professor Ink<](#)

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[Book 7: Professor](#)

[Book 8: Burned](#)

[Book 9: Worldly](#)

[Book 10: Pistol](#)

[Book 11: Policed](#)

[Book 12: Driven](#)

[Book 13: Lucky 13](#)

[Book 14: Lumberjacked](#)

[Book 15: Protector](#)

[Book 16: Carpenter](#)

[Book 17: Italian Stallion](#)

[Book 18: Gardener](#)

[Book 19: Budapest Billionaire's Virgin](#)

[Book 20: Billionaire's Babysitter](#)

[Book 21: Cocky CFO](#)

[Book 22: Fireman's Filthy 4th](#)

[Book 23: Mechanic](#)

[Book 24: SEAL's Secret](#)

[Book 25: Police, Pooch, and Smooch](#)

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[Book 28: Bitcoin Billionaire's Babysitter](#)

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[Book 30: Cowboy's Christmas Carol](#)

[Book 31: Police Officer's Princess](#)

[Book 32: Statham](#)

[Book 33: Bodyguard](#)

[Book 34: Greek God](#)

[Book 35: Billionaire Single Dad's Babysitter](#)

[Book 36: Mountain Man](#)

[Book 37: SEAL's Justice](#)
[Book 38: Royal Romance](#)
[Book 39: Doctor Mountain Man's Special Delivery](#)
[Book 40: Crocodile Dan D](#)
[Book 41: Mountain Man's Secret Baby](#)
[Book 42: Doctor Bad Boy's Secret Baby](#)
[Book 43: Cop's Babysitter](#)
[Book 44: Nanny for the Cop Next Door](#)
[Book 45: Small Town SEAL's Saving Grace](#)
[Book 46: Cop's Fake Fiancée](#)
[Book 47: Billionaire's Nanny](#)
[Book 48: Cowboy's Babysitter](#)
[Book 49: Steamy](#)
[Book 50: Brother's Best Friend](#)
[Book 51: Possessive Professor](#)
[Book 52: Firefighter's Babysitter](#)
[Book 53: Soldier's Secret Baby](#)
[Book 54: Ward's Independence Day](#)
[Book 55: Doctor Next Door](#)
[Book 56: Possessive Policeman](#)
[Book 57: Coached by the MMA Fighter](#)
[Book 58: Boss's Babysitter](#)
[Book 59: Virgin in New York](#)
[Book 60: Rock Star's Baby](#)
[Book 61: Possessive Protector](#)
[Book 62: Possessive Australian](#)
[Book 63: Best Friend's Brother](#)
[Book 64: Possessive Cowboy](#)
[Book 65: Summer Romanced](#)
[Book 66: Possessive Prince](#)
[Book 67: Lovers's Enemy](#)
[Book 68: Cop's Best Friend](#)
[Book 69: Possessive Firefighter](#)
[Book 70: Football Next Door](#)
[Book 71: Doctor December](#)
[Book 72: Possessive Canadian](#)
[Book 73: Blue Collar Billionaire](#)
[Book 74: Possessive K-9 Cop](#)

[Book 75: Possessive Brazilian](#)
[Book 76: Hockey Obsession](#)
[Book 77: Possessive Boston Irish American MMA Fighter](#)
[Book 78: Halloween Next Door](#)
[Book 79: Possessive Russian](#)
[Book 80: Baseball Mine](#)
[Book 81: Cop's Caribbean Captive](#)
[Book 82: Instalove Island](#)
[Book 83: Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 84: Thanksgiving with Dad's Boss](#)
[Book 85: Possessive Italian Neighbor](#)
[Book 86: Possessive Portuguese](#)
[Book 87: Possessive Christmas Cop](#)
[Book 88: Russian's Obsession](#)
[Book 89: Possessive Doctor's Christmas](#)
[Book 90: Possessive Parisian Pilot](#)
[Book 91: U.K. Boxing Day](#)
[Book 92: Jealous Russian Stalker](#)
[Book 93: Italian Mountain Man](#)
[Book 94: Aggressive Russian](#)
[Book 95: Possessive Valentine](#)
[Book 96: Possessive Hunter](#)
[Book 97: Dad's Russian Mafia Friend](#)
[Book 98: Russian Teacher](#)
[Book 99: Australian Obsession](#)
[Book 100: Russian Next Door](#)
[Book 101: Dad's Irish Friend](#)
[Book 102: Nanny for the Russian Mafia](#)
[Book 103: Best Friend's Dad](#)
[Book 104: Basketball Babymaker](#)
[Book 105: Possessive Veterinarian](#)
[Book 106: Brother's Fireman Friend](#)
[Book 107: Brother's Canadian Cowboy Friend](#)
[Book 108: Summer Vacation with Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 109: Dad's Italian Mafia Friend](#)
[Book 110: Dad's Irish Mafia Friend](#)
[Book 111: Dad's Football Friend](#)
[Book 112: Possessing His Dancing Queen](#)

[Book 113: Brother's Cop Friend](#)
[Book 114: Halloween With Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 115: Claimed By Her Boss](#)
[Book 116: Possessive Rider](#)
[Book 117: Dad's Ex-Biker Buddy](#)
[Book 118: Possessive Undercover Cop](#)
[Book 119: Falling For Her Boss](#)
[Book 120: Claiming His Fashionista](#)
[Book 121: More Than Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 122: Thanksgiving With Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 123: Bossy Italian](#)
[Book 124: Christmas With Dad's Mafia Friend](#)
[Book 125: Maid For The Italian Mafia](#)
[Book 126: Nutcracker](#)
[Book 127: Cowboy Cerrone](#)
[Book 128: Chef's Kiss](#)
[Book 129: Claimed By The Russian](#)
[Book 130: Bought By The Italian Mafia](#)
[Book 131: Hot Nerd](#)
[Book 132: Dad's Italian Mafia Boss](#)
[Book 133: Mine](#)
[Book 134: Taken By The Thief](#)
[Book 135: Curves Ahead](#)
[Book 136: Her Mafia Valentine](#)
[Book 137: Doctor Valentine](#)
[Book 138: Maid For The Irish Mafia](#)
[Book 139: Winning Her Curves](#)
[Book 140: Dad's Cartel Best Friend](#)
[Book 141: Dad's Greek Mafia Friend](#)
[Book 142: Lawyer's Obsession](#)
[Book 143: Attending Her Curves](#)
[Book 144: Maid for the Russian Mafia](#)
[Book 145: Priest](#)
[Book 146: Claimed By Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 147: His Curvy Office Obsession](#)
[Book 148: Easter with Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 149: Veterinarian's Obsession](#)
[Book 150: Curves For Her Older Boss](#)

[Book 151: Mob Lawyer's Curves](#)
[Book 152: Maid For The Doctor Next Door](#)
[Book 153: Possessive Forest Ranger](#)
[Book 154: Nurse For The Russian Mafia](#)
[Book 155: Dad's Fireman Friend](#)
[Book 156: Russian Mountain Man](#)
[Book 157: Possessive Italian Doctor](#)
[Book 158: Dad's EMT Best Friend](#)
[Book 159: Claimed By The Publisher](#)
[Book 160: Mr. CEO](#)
[Book 161: His Curvy Castaway Obsession](#)
[Book 162: Claiming His Reunion Obsession](#)
[Book 163: Claimed By Dad's College Friend](#)
[Book 164: Dad's Detective Best Friend](#)
[Book 165: Attending The Russian Mafia](#)
[Book 166: Dad's Biker Best Friend](#)
[Book 167: My Dad's Russian Mafia Friend](#)
[Book 168: Possessive Landlord](#)
[Book 169: Gardener For The Mafia](#)
[Book 170: Possessive Fighter](#)
[Book 171: Claiming Her Sweet Curves](#)
[Book 172: Possessive Camp Counselor](#)
[Book 173: Claimed By Dad's Italian Best Friend](#)
[Book 174: Possessive Neighbor](#)
[Book 175: 4th of July With Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 176: Claimed By Her Enemy](#)
[Book 177: Bodyguard's Obsession](#)
[Book 178: Falling For The Player](#)
[Book 179: Possessive Alpha Cop](#)
[Book 180: Her CEO](#)
[Book 181: Falling For Her Dad's Boss](#)
[Book 182: MMA Fighter's Obsession](#)
[Book 183: Possessive Lawyer](#)
[Book 184: Claimed by the British Rockstar](#)
[Book 185: Summer Obsession](#)
[Book 186: Paris with Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 187: Claimed by the Possessive Fireman](#)
[Book 188: Possessive Trucker](#)

[Book 189: Falling for Dad's Enemy](#)
[Book 190: His Undercover Maid](#)
[Book 191: Her Innocent CEO](#)
[Book 192: Bratva Boss's Babysitter](#)
[Book 193: Sold to the Bratva Boss](#)
[Book 194: My Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 195: His Cabin Obsession](#)
[Book 196: Driver's Obsession](#)
[Book 197: His Unexpected Love](#)
[Book 198: London with Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 199: Hot Neighbor](#)
[Book 200: Maid for the Hollywood Heartthrob](#)
[Book 201: The CEO and the Wedding Planner](#)
[Book 202: Claimed by the Italian](#)
[Book 203: Dad's CEO Boss](#)
[Book 204: The Mob and His Messenger](#)
[Book 205: Rome with Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 206: Haunted by Her Curves](#)
[Book 207: Her Vampire](#)
[Book 208: Bidding for Her Curves](#)
[Book 209: Claiming His Student](#)
[Book 210: CEO's Dog Trainer Obsession](#)
[Book 211: Pool Girl](#)
[Book 212: Possessive Writer](#)
[Book 213: Maid for the Mafia Informant](#)
[Book 214: Thankful for Him](#)
[Book 215: Madrid with Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 216: My Best Friend's Dad](#)
[Book 217: Taming Her Beast](#)
[Book 218: All I Want For Christmas is You](#)
[Book 219: Falling for His Captive](#)
[Book 220: My Christmas Carol](#)
[Book 221: Preacher's Daughter](#)
[Book 222: Her Hitman](#)
[Book 223: Claimed by Her Best Friend's Dad](#)
[Book 224: My Roommate's Dad](#)
[Book 225: His To Claim](#)
[Book 226: Matchmaker Backfire](#)

[Book 227: Saved by the Hitman](#)
[Book 228: Valentine's with My Best Friend's Dad](#)
[Book 229: Lost and Found](#)
[Book 230: Electing For Her Curves](#)
[Book 231: Barcelona with Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 232: Claiming His Forever](#)
[Book 233: Hearts On Campus](#)
[Book 234: Intern for My Best Friend's Dad](#)
[Book 235: Paris with the Billionaire](#)
[Book 236: Open Heart \(Dr. Love\)](#)
[Book 237: Meet Me In Monaco](#)
[Book 238: Maid for the Hitman](#)
[Book 239: My Best Friend's Navy SEAL Dad](#)
[Book 240: Groomed For Love](#)
[Book 241: Model for the Mob](#)
[Book 242: Vegas with Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 243: Goldie Locks](#)
[Book 244: Driving the Mob](#)
[Book 245: Hollywood Hearts](#)
[Book 246: Caring for the Bratva](#)
[Book 247: Dr. Good](#)
[Book 248: Curves, He Wrote](#)
[Book 249: Picture Perfect Love](#)
[Book 250: Ranger Ben](#)
[Book 251: His Princess](#)
[Book 252: Down Under With Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 253: Falling For Dad's College Rival](#)
[Book 254: Dear Soldier](#)
[Book 255: His Shooting Star](#)
[Book 256: Malta with My Best Friend's Dad](#)
[Book 257: Not My Neighbor](#)
[Book 258: Trapped with My Best Friend's Dad](#)
[Book 259: Love in London](#)
[Book 260: Crashing into Love](#)
[Book 261: My Protector](#)
[Book 262: The Inheritance Clause](#)
[Book 263: Claimed by the Hollywood Heartthrob](#)
[Book 264: Never the Bride](#)

[Book 265: Dear Mr. Author](#)
[Book 266: Lessons From My Best Friend's Dad](#)
[Book 267: Fit For Me](#)
[Book 268: Loving Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 269: His Little Stowaway](#)
[Book 270: Date for the Boss](#)
[Book 271: Dear Mr. Hunk](#)
[Book 272: The Dare](#)
[Book 273: Gamer Love](#)
[Book 274: Unexpected Love](#)
[Book 275: Not My Romance](#)
[Book 276: My Ex's Dad](#)
[Book 277: Claimed By The Best Man](#)
[Book 278: Wrong Car, Right Guy](#)
[Book 279: The Accidental Text](#)
[Book 280: His Next Trick](#)
[Book 281: My Dad's Rival](#)
[Book 282: Rock My Love](#)
[Book 283: Inked By My Best Friend's Dad](#)
[Book 284: My Heart](#)
[Book 285: Mr. Judge](#)
[Book 286: Developing Her Curves](#)
[Book 287: The Love Boat](#)
[Book 288: My Sister's Man](#)
[Book 289: Falling For My Dad's Friend](#)
[Book 290: Tell Me Everything](#)
[Book 291: No Complaints](#)
[Book 292: Miss Taken Identity](#)
[Book 293: Texting the CEO](#)
[Book 294: Inn Love](#)
[Book 295: Taking Care of the Mobster](#)
[Book 296: Creamed](#)
[Book 297: My Brother's Best Man](#)
[Book 298: Loan Shark Love](#)
[Book 299: The Forbidden Man](#)
[Book 300: Burning For Him](#)
[Book 301: Texting My Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 302: The Man in The Painting](#)

[Book 303: Falling for the Photographer](#)
[Book 304: Crushing on My Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 305: Taming the Playboy](#)
[Book 306: High Roller](#)
[Book 307: Sleepover with My Best Friend's Dad's](#)
[Book 308: Wrong Place, Perfect Time](#)
[Book 309: Tempting to Touch](#)
[Book 310: Her Scent](#)
[Book 311: Dirty Talk with My Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 312: Loving the Scot](#)
[Book 313: Becoming His Cowgirl](#)
[Book 314: Forgetting Christmas](#)
[Book 315: Puppy Madness](#)
[Book 316: He Loves Me Lots](#)
[Book 317: Crushing On My Brother's Best Friend](#)
[Book 318: Claimed By The Detective](#)
[Book 319: Playing For Keeps](#)
[Book 320: Claimed By The Killer](#)
[Book 321: Falling for My Mom's Boss](#)
[Book 322: Kidnapped By My Dad's Best Friend](#)
[Book 323: The Australian's Obsession](#)
[Book 324: Hot For My Step-Uncle](#)
[Book 325: My Forbidden Crush](#)
[Book 326: Crushing on The Billionaire](#)
[Book 327: Kidnapped by My Best Friend's Dad](#)
[Book 328: The English Billionaire's Obsession](#)
[Book 329: Stealing the Bratva Bride](#)
[Book 330: Falling for My Dad's Killer](#)
[Book 331: Claimed by Mr. Ice](#)
[Book 332: Kidnapped By My Mom's Ex](#)

BRATVA BEAR SHIFTERS

[Book 1: Dad's Russian Mafia Bear Best Friend](#)

[Book 2: Babysitter For Dad'd Russian Mafia Bear Friend](#)

[Book 3: Dad's Bratva Bear Friend](#)

LAIRDS & LADIES

[Book 1: Possessive Highlander](#)

[Book 2: Taken By The Highlander](#)

[Book 3: Highlander Alpha](#)

RUSSIAN UNDERWORLD

[Book 1: Brooklyn Bratva](#)

[Book 2: British Bratva](#)

[Book 3: Bratva Billionaire](#)

[Book 4: Bratva Babysitter](#)

[Book 5: Bratva Boss](#)

IRISH WOLF SHIFTERS

[Book 1: Dad's Irish Wold Shifter Friend](#)

[Book 2: Claimed By The Irish Wolf Shifter](#)

[Book 3: Claimed By The Enemy](#)

INKED BY LOVE

[Book 1: Inked by My Best Friend's Dad](#)

[Book 2: Inked by the Mafia Man](#)

[Book 3: Inked For Life](#)

[Book 4: Inked by My Sister's Ex](#)

[Book 5: Marked By Ink](#)

[Book 6: Inking The Billionaire](#)

[Book 7: Inking the Solider](#)

[Book 8: Inking My Crush](#)

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[Book 1: The Accidental Text](#)

[Book 2: Texting The CEO](#)

[Book 3: Texting My Dad's Best Friend](#)

[Book 4: Texting My Dad's Best Man](#)

[Book 5: Texting My Hot Tutor](#)

[Book 6: Texting Mr. Hollywood](#)

[Book 7: Texting The Tattooist](#)

[Book 8: Texting My Mom's Ex](#)

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